PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 398 (Part 1)

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-THIRD PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FIFTY-FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 2002–03

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20 January 2003

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-THIRD PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 13 JUNE 2001]

FIFTY-FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES VOLUME 398

FIFTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2002–2003

House of Commons

Monday 20 January 2003

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Court-Based Drug Workers

1. **Linda Perham** (Ilford, North): What support his Department provides for court-based drug workers. [91422]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): All police forces in England and Wales have arrest referral schemes, some of which include court-based schemes. We are providing up to £6 million in matched funding for the police towards the costs.

The Government's new comprehensive programme of criminal justice interventions, which was outlined in the updated drug strategy, includes the enhancement of existing arrest referral schemes. Police forces and drug action teams will be encouraged to extend coverage to the courts as well as to custody suites. Funding to support that will be announced shortly.

Linda Perham: I thank the Minister for that reply. Is he aware that Redbridge magistrates court was the first London court to appoint a court-based drug worker? He has engaged with 150 offenders in each of the last three years and has seen more than half of them move into detox, rehab or treatment. Funding for the scheme also comes from the Redbridge drug action team. Can my hon. Friend assure us that such initiatives will be continued to help break the link between drugs and crime?

Mr. Ainsworth: We intend not only to continue but to enhance such schemes and improve their ability to get offenders into drug treatment. That approach is in marked contrast to that of the Conservatives, who would not go ahead with those enhancements but would instead spend the money on residential rehabilitation, whether or not it was appropriate.

Bob Spink (Castle Point): Is the Minister aware of the strong link between drugs and the use of alcohol on the streets by under-age persons? Why, therefore, did the Government last year remove the power of the police to take unopened bottles and cans of alcohol away from young people on the streets? When will the Government perform a humiliating climbdown and reverse that change so that the police can once again have that power?

Mr. Speaker: Order. That is far too wide of the question before us.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): My hon. Friend the Minister made a positive statement, but where drug action teams are in place, could we remove frustration by ensuring that there will be more detox centres and that when people appear before the courts they go straight into such centres? There would thus be less crime on the streets.

Mr. Ainsworth: Dealing with drug addiction is not straightforward. Different treatments are provided for different people in different circumstances. I hope that my hon. Friend agrees that that should continue. Detox is appropriate immediately for some people, but only after a period of time for others. One needs to establish contact with people and to settle them, if they are especially chaotic, before even moving towards detoxification. Getting people into treatment in the first place has a dramatic effect on the rates of crime committed by drug addicts.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): But does the Minister not recognise that there is a huge difference between Ministers' rhetoric about this matter and the reality of what happens on the ground? As his hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) and others, including the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) in his earlier question, have stressed, there needs to be not only contact between addicts and drug workers or treatment centres but intensive rehabilitation.

The Government's problem is that they are sending all the wrong signals. Drug-addicted burglars are being told that they will not be sent to prison, and drug addicts with a serious problem who are responsible for such crimes are not being given the rehabilitation that they need. The Government's policy is failing, yet all the Minister has said today is "jam tomorrow"—too little, too late.

Mr. Ainsworth: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman will challenge the fact that drug treatment has been growing at about 8 per cent. a year. It is not merely a case of throwing money at the problem; we have to train people and give them skills because they simply do not exist. Why not? I suggest that it is, to some extent, because the Conservatives wholly ignored the problem for so long. We had to bring in the first drug strategy—in 1998. Our enhancements will improve it. We are building on the work that has already been done in order to tackle a very real problem. There are no simplistic solutions, such as getting a few people into residential rehabilitation and abandoning the rest, as the Conservatives, in effect, suggest.

Police (Sussex)

2. **Mr. Nigel Waterson** (Eastbourne): What proposals he has to increase police numbers in Sussex. [91423]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Hilary Benn): The Sussex police force was allocated 206 recruits from the crime fighting fund for the three years to March 2003.

The provisional grant settlement for 2003–04 provides Sussex with an additional £90,000 from the crime fighting fund for further additional officers. We estimate that that will allow an increase of up to a further 16 officers by the end of 2003–04.

Mr. Waterson: Is the Minister aware that those figures are dwarfed by the £9.6 million loss that the Sussex police authority calculates will arise from the grant distribution changes? Is he also aware that the chief constable of Sussex has made it clear that even the modest of target of getting back to the number of police officers in Sussex in 1997 is being jeopardised by the Government's policies? Why are the Government giving with one hand and taking away with the other?

Hilary Benn: I do not accept that that is the case. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman welcomes the fact that the total force strength in Sussex is 4,400 officers and support staff, compared with 3,935 in 1992—the year in which the hon. Gentleman was first elected to the House. That is an increase of 12 per cent. This year, in line with all authorities, the force is getting a budget increase of 3 per cent. plus an additional £5.86 million from the crimefighting fund, £90,000 for new recruits, £550,000 for policing rural areas, £180,000 for community support officers and £735,000 to help with the cost of recruitment.

Mr. Waterson: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. That answer was so unsatisfactory that I intend to raise the matter on the Adjournment of the House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Because of that point of order, I must go on to the next Question.

Refugee Resettlement

3. **Laura Moffatt** (Crawley): If he will make a statement on his plans to develop a refugee resettlement programme with the UNHCR. [91424]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. David Blunkett): From the spring, we will begin a new programme, organised with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which will screen applicants for asylum in regions of the world where people are experiencing the threat of death or torture. We will initially take 500 refugees, rising to a larger number as we develop the programme—thereby preventing people having to present through the use of smugglers, traffickers and organised criminals.

Laura Moffatt: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the present system allows those with some money in refugee camps to take advantage of smugglers and ignores the fact that people with no money are left in desperate situations? Does he further agree that it is wrong to cause disturbances in our communities and constituencies by linking terrorism with such programmes, attacking the Government and jumping on the bandwagon—which creates an enormous problem in all our communities?

Mr. Blunkett: I well understand the genuine worries and concerns that exist in many communities with regard to the terrorist threat, together with the concerns raised in the media about whether our screening process for persons entering this country—whether or not they are asylum seekers—is adequate. Screening people outside this country through the new UN programme and the moving of border controls from the Kent coast to France—and to Belgium and Holland in future—will secure our borders, protect our population and, I hope, assist in meeting genuine concerns while damping down the danger of the asylum issue being whipped up—which can do no good to race relations in this country.

Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Does the Home Secretary agree that as we honour our international obligations to accept and deal with asylum seekers, paradoxically it is easier to deal with any who might be concerned with terrorism because of our right to refuse people with that background entry into this country—and to send them out of the country if they are a threat to national security under the Geneva convention and the treaties? To make sure that we continue to generate more light than heat, as I know the Home Secretary wants to do, will he look again at the proposal that I and others have made for a European refugee agency, to take decisions independently of government but most importantly, to make sure that responsibility is shared across the European Union in a proportionately fair manner for the refugees that come to us?

Mr. Blunkett: I am concerned to have a system that works, and the establishment of a European agency may not be the right way of achieving one. However, I am totally committed to European co-operation, burden sharing and a system that makes like-for-like comparisons. I am particularly keen to develop, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, a system outside this country—such as the new UN programme and border and security controls on the French, Belgian and Dutch coasts—that prevents traffickers getting people into this country and precludes persons from claiming asylum once they have reached our shores. However, it behoves us all to remember the difficulty that both Houses encountered in getting through new measures that allow us to turn around and remove from the country persons with a clearly unfounded claim. I hope that anyone who raised objections in whatever form to sending people back to their country of origin will not in this House or in what they write and speak about publicly commit the sin of having said one thing when we were legislating and quite another on the back of media campaigns.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): On refugees, will my right hon. Friend undertake a root and branch investigation into how the Coniston hotel in my constituency was selected by the National Asylum Support Service as a reception centre, not least given that it was only acquired today but is due to open next Monday?

Mr. Blunkett: My hon. Friend the Minister for Citizenship and Immigration has made it clear today that the procedure and process by which this matter was handled was unsatisfactory and that she has undertaken immediately to put in place a review. She is examining the contractual arrangements and why the letter sent by the local authority chief executive on 3 October last was not replied to. All those matters display an incompetence about which our Administration are doing something, as I have explained in the House before, but, with the new director general of the immigration and nationality directorate, we require a step change in the way that that directorate relates to local communities, responds to local Members of Parliament and displays its competence in dealing with these sensitive issues.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): As the Government are to admit refugees under the new United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees gateway system—I have absolutely no objection to that—will the Home Secretary ensure that no refugee should come from any of the 44 countries of the Council of Europe? I say that for the simple reason that those countries subscribe to the European Court of Human Rights and, if they transgress any human right, the Government ought to take that up, through the ECHR, with the country concerned.

Mr. Blunkett: We took the power in the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 to ensure that we could list the countries that we believe to be safe. Initially, for those seeking access to the European Union from next year, I am prepared to widen that list, and I hope that I will have the support of whole House in doing so. I am deeply mindful of those who have signed up to the European convention on human rights being committed to human rights and being prepared to display their own commitment to them. I want to make it clear, however, that no EU country has derogated or withdrawn from article 3, because none could, nor has any country denounced the ECHR by leaving it altogether, and those newspapers and those reporters and commentators who have suggested otherwise are simply wrong.

Mr. Jim Marshall (Leicester, South): The whole House hears what the Home Secretary has to say about refugees and asylum seekers—many of us would share those sentiments—but what hope can he give to those asylum seekers in this country who will now find themselves destitute as a consequence of the implementation of section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002?

Mr. Blunkett: My suggestion would be that people in those circumstances have completely failed in their claim, or failed to claim when they first entered the country. In both cases, they have a choice of leaving the country and going back home. If they had been refugees with an immediate and overriding asylum claim, if they had not got an income or other support or if they had not entered the country on an alternative visa or visitor pass, of course they would be dealt with entirely differently, but those who have sustained themselves in another fashion and treated the asylum process as a social security benefits system will get short shrift.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): In the light of the Home Secretary's important and rational responses this afternoon, does he now accept what he seemed reluctant to accept a few days ago—that it is legitimate to raise the links between the terrorist threat and the deficiencies in our immigration and asylum system?

Mr. Blunkett: It is legitimate for people to raise the issue of the screening of those who come into this country and are resident in this country. Therefore, it is right to ensure that the warning index, which flags up the dangers in relation to particular individuals coming in, is strengthened. The other measures—the co-ordinator who started work last Monday on the range of border control services, the shifting of the border to France for immigration and security, and the introduction of technology both at those new borders and at our ports and airports to enable us to screen those coming in—are also right. What is not right is for people constantly to imply, sometimes behind their hands, that there is a major problem with asylum seekers as opposed to a major problem with those who threaten life and limb. Screening all those who pose a potential danger is therefore the issue with which we are dealing. Anyone who pretends that we can find a simple and easy answer, any more than other countries have done, not only deludes themselves and those around them but unnecessarily whips up scares that can do no good in terms of our security measures and every harm to our community and race relations, which are often fragile and could easily tip over into a situation that we could not control.

Mr. Letwin: I think I take that as a modified yes. Does the Home Secretary therefore also accept that it may be time to consider in a calm and rational fashion whether the UK should build on his idea of a UNHCR resettlement programme, which we welcome, and adopt a radically different approach to the handling of the whole refugee question?

Mr. Blunkett: The purpose of the whole Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, which was fought through with considerable difficulty here and in another place, demonstrated that we wanted an end-to-end change in our approach. That is the reason for the change to the French, Belgian and Dutch borders, the setting up of induction and screening centres, the reporting facility, the new ID cards for asylum seekers, the change to the work permit visa system to allow people to come here to work legitimately and to be welcomed in doing so, and the increased screening to which I have referred for all those coming into the country. Until we have an entitlement or ID card for all those in our country we will not have a robust way of determining true identity or right to work. I hope that the House and my colleagues will be prepared to debate that in the months ahead.

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): My right hon. Friend is aware that refugees from Iraq form the largest proportion of asylum seekers in this country. As someone whose constituency has a large Iraqi population, I can tell him that security checks on a number of those applicants take at least a year and are extremely rigorous. Will he assure me that at the same time as cracking down on the minority who abuse the asylum system, he will send a strong message to the community that the vast majority of asylum seekers from Iraq are fleeing terror, not seeking to propagate it?

Mr. Blunkett: Yes, I will. I hope that it takes much less than a year to conduct screening, particularly of those who are on the warning index, which should be done immediately. I take the point in terms of thorough vetting, which is a prolonged and time-consuming process, and cannot just be dismissed by easy, glib headlines about what should and should not be done. I appeal to people—including those who write in our newspapers whose family arrived in this country fleeing persecution because of the open door that we had available at the time, and who have their well-being and freedom as a result—to pause before denying that right to others today.

Rural Policing Fund

4. **Mr. Elfyn Llwyd** (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): How many representations he has received on the allocation of rural funding to police forces in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [91425]

The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety (Mr. John Denham): We received many responses to our consultation on the police funding formula last summer. As a result of that consultation, we decided to retain the rural policing fund, from which police authorities in sparsely populated areas will share £30 million. I have received three representations since we announced that decision.

Mr. Llwyd: I thank the Minister for that reply. However, does not the standstill budget allocated to semi-rural police forces such as that in north Wales ignore the current inflation rate and the fact that there is likely to be a huge increase in fuel costs before long? Along with the hike in insurance premiums recently, that means a real cut in funding. Will he reconsider the budget as it is creating difficulties for semi-rural police forces?

Mr. Denham: There is not a standstill budget in north Wales or anywhere else. There was a 4.6 per cent. increase in funding in north Wales through the police grant, and that is well ahead of inflation and ahead of the average for England and Wales as a whole. The hon. Gentleman's constituency has 137 more police officers today than it did in 1997.

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North): In the context of the Nottinghamshire police force, will my right hon. Friend take this first opportunity to associate himself with the views of Nottinghamshire Members of Parliament from all parties who have expressed their grief and, indeed, anger at the death on duty of a serving officer, PC Ged Walker, last week? It is a matter of great concern to members of the public and to people of all political persuasions in Nottinghamshire that this should be the last incident of this sort. I hope that my right hon. Friend will take this opportunity to put his views on the record.

Mr. Denham: I am very pleased to join my hon. Friend and all Nottinghamshire Members of Parliament in paying tribute to PC Ged Walker, who was killed as a result of the serious head injuries sustained while being dragged along by a stolen car. His death underlines yet again the difficult and dangerous job that we ask our police officers to do for us. Our thoughts go to his family and to his friends.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): I associate the Opposition with the Minister's remarks.

Many forces who apply for, and some who receive, special rural funding moneys are not in the extremities of the British Isles but in the south-east. Is the Minister aware—I know that he is—of the serious problems facing many forces, including rural ones, as a result of their losing qualified and trained officers to the Metropolitan police force because of the higher salaries, travel allowances and so on that it can pay? Is it true that the Minister has recommended to some chief officers that they should use the special priority payments figure of 1 per cent. of payroll to pay some sort of allowance so as to retain officers? If that is the case, will he tell the House whether he has abandoned the idea of special priority payments? If it is not the case, can he tell the House what proposals he has to help to narrow the gap between the terms of employment offered by the Metropolitan police and by the other forces in the south-east who are suffering seriously from officers transferring to the Metropolitan police?

Mr. Denham: The House will understand why officers are being attracted to the Metropolitan police. In the past year and for the first time in many years, the Metropolitan police has been a net importer of police officers. Traditionally, the Met has recruited and exported police officers. One of the major reasons why the expansion in numbers in the Metropolitan police has taken place is its recruitment of additional officers, not least to strengthen its counter-terrorism service, which in practice provides a service across the country as a whole.

There are issues with a number of the south-east forces. I met chief constables and their representatives before Christmas and I am due to meet them again in the next couple of weeks when I expect to receive further proposals from them. There is nothing wrong with using special priority payments to assist with the retention of police officers, and the guidance and criteria published by the Police Negotiating Board made it clear that that was one of the factors to be taken into account.

Heroin-Misusing Offenders

5. **John Mann** (Bassetlaw): What assessment he has made of the likely impact of custody plus and custody minus sentences upon the reoffending levels of heroin-misusing offenders. [91426]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Hilary Benn): The new sentences of custody plus and custody minus have been designed to enable courts to tailor sentencing decisions to the needs of the offender, including applying drugs treatment and rehabilitation requirements as appropriate.

John Mann: Does the Minister agree that a more detailed evaluation of success is possible if carried out on a geographically stable population of drug misusers?

Hilary Benn: I first pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work on this issue, which I know is greatly admired by Members on both sides of the House. I agree that if we are to assess the effectiveness of the vastly increased resources that we are going to put into drug treatment, about which we had a good debate a week ago today, it is important that we do so in all kinds of communities, including those such as my hon. Friend's, whose particular characteristics have given rise to his understandable concern.

Angela Watkinson (Upminster): Given the escalating number of heroin-using offenders, escalating demand for heroin treatment and the fact that the vast majority of heroin addicts started on cannabis, will the Home Secretary reconsider the relaxation of the law on cannabis?

Hilary Benn: No is what I would tell the hon. Lady, for the simple reason that that change has flowed from police practice over many years. Police officers say clearly in their advice to us that they wish to be able to concentrate on dealing with the most dangerous drugs, including heroin, to which she referred.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff, West): Does my hon. Friend concur with the proposition that effective probation services can help to reduce the reoffending rate of heroin users? Will he therefore undertake to investigate the proposed closure of the Lewis road probation service workshops in my constituency, as that service is valued locally?

Hilary Benn: I will gladly look into the details of the case that my hon. Friend has raised. On his general point, he is entirely right that the probation service has an important role to play, and is making a major contribution to the drug treatment and testing orders, which are proving to be successful.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): The Minister will agree that many heroin users commit burglary to fund their addiction. In that context, the Home Secretary said in response to the further final clarification by the Lord Chief Justice on burglary sentences:

> "I am pleased he has clarified that, not least that those who have committed a multiplicity of crimes, including other crimes than burglary, will not simply be let off, nor will they in terms of second or subsequent offences, expect to get, albeit a tough community sentence, but instead to get custody, I think that is the right signal, and I'm very glad to have clarified that."

What did he mean?

Hilary Benn: The Home Secretary meant precisely what the hon. Gentleman has read out. If he is having difficulty understanding my right hon. Friend's words, the position is simply this—my right hon. Friend, the

Lord Chief Justice in his clarification and others have said that repeat offenders who burgle for the first time should expect custody, because the public rightly will not understand or accept that repeat offenders who turn to burglary should expect to be treated in any other way.

Travellers

6. **Colin Burgon** (Elmet): What measures he will take to simplify the procedure for the removal of travellers from unauthorised sites. [91427]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Michael Wills): We are introducing new powers of eviction to allow the police to take firm action against unauthorised encampments where local authorities have made adequate site provision without the preconditions in current legislation.

Colin Burgon: I thank the Minister for his reply. My question arose directly from my experiences of three visits by travellers to Allerton Bywater in my constituency, which caused great concern among local people. When the travellers finally departed, they left the place a tip. Will my hon. Friend make sure that the various organisations responsible for implementing the law are fully aware of their powers and use them effectively?

Mr. Wills: I am aware of the problems that my hon. Friend has had in his constituency, which are shared by many Members on both sides of the House and are precisely why we are introducing those new powers. We will make sure that they are widely publicised and used, because that sort of behaviour is intolerable and it will not be tolerated.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I thank the Minister for his Department's willingness to meet the town clerk of Totton and Eling town council in my constituency who has been co-ordinating efforts to improve procedures for dealing with travellers in our part of Hampshire. As I understand it, the new powers that will be granted to make removal easier are contingent on the provision of sites for travellers by town councils. Will the Minister issue planning guidelines to adjust current restrictions on planning that make it difficult for town and parish councils to supply those sites, given normal restrictions on planning procedures; otherwise, with the best will in the world, councils may want to supply the sites, but be prevented from doing so by the restrictions on planning?

Mr. Wills: We will look at all those aspects, including the planning guidelines, in the light of experience. There are existing powers to deal with such encampments; the problem is that it is difficult to deal with them quickly enough. That is what the new powers will do. We need to provide somewhere for the unauthorised encampments to go; otherwise they will simply take the problem somewhere else. That is why there is the link with local sites. We are providing extra funding. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minster is trying to find—

Dr. Lewis: Planning guidance?

Mr. Wills: I am coming to that in a moment. The hon. Gentleman should be a little patient. We need to provide extra funding. The ODPM, which has responsibility for the matter, is doing that. We are determined to make the problem go away, and we will not rest until it does. I can assure the hon. Gentleman of that.

Street Wardens

7. **Martin Linton** (Battersea): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of street wardens. [91428]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Michael Wills): As my hon. Friend is aware, there are three centrally funded warden schemes. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister retains overall responsibility for them, although many of the issues surrounding them fall to the Home Office as the lead Department. All the schemes are relatively new, so robust evaluations are not yet available. However, the preliminary work that has been done suggests that such schemes can contribute significantly to bringing down levels of crime, reducing antisocial behaviour and reducing fear of crime.

Martin Linton: Is the Minister aware that a Government-funded street warden scheme has already had a dramatic effect on reducing crime in Clapham junction—reducing crime overall by 13 per cent., compared with 4 per cent. borough-wide; reducing street crime by 32 per cent., compared with 20 per cent. borough-wide; reducing car crime by 40 per cent., compared with 7 per cent. borough-wide; and reducing the fear of crime by 60 per cent., according to a Wandsworth council survey, compared with the target given to the scheme of reducing fear of crime by 10 per cent? Given the success of these initial schemes, will the Minister do all he can to increase the number of community support schemes in areas like the London borough of Wandsworth?

Mr. Wills: Yes, I am well aware of the success of the scheme in my hon. Friend's constituency. I am also aware of how hard he has campaigned and lobbied to make sure not only that the scheme is implemented, but that it is adequately funded. As a result, even Wandsworth borough council, which is no political friend of the Government, as the House is aware, recognises how successful the scheme has been. I can assure my hon. Friend that we will do everything we can to make sure that those successes are replicated throughout the country.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Can the Minister make sure that such schemes are extended much more widely in the outer London boroughs, which have a serious problem with vandalism and unruly behaviour on the part of young people? Has he received any report yet from the Metropolitan Commissioner about the success of police community support officers in the central zone?

Mr. Wills: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we will be replicating the schemes. Their success is evident and we will make sure that both they and the community support officers to whom he refers do the job that they are intended to do—to reduce crime, to reduce fear of crime and to reduce antisocial behaviour.

Youth Offending

8. **Dr. Hywel Francis** (Aberavon): What measures he is taking to tackle persistent youth offending. [91429]

The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety (Mr. John Denham): We have introduced a range of measures, which have cut re-conviction rates for young offenders by 14.6 per cent. compared with those for 1997.

Dr. Francis: The Minister will know of the success of Neath and Port Talbot crime and disorder partnership in achieving the first interim antisocial behaviour orders in the whole of Wales. Will he join me in congratulating the partnership on its proactive approach, particularly the local police and the local authority? Will he also consider providing additional funding for youth offending teams, and explore ways in which magistrates can be given all the information that they require as to why antisocial behaviour orders are being applied for, by considering evidence over a 12-month period, rather than over six months, as at present?

Mr. Denham: I certainly congratulate the Neath and Port Talbot crime reduction partnership on making such early use of the new measures that were introduced last summer in the Police Reform Act 2002. There is already clear evidence to show that interim antisocial behaviour orders are enabling people to respond very quickly to problems in local communities.

The six-month rule arises from underlying magistrates legislation rather than the antisocial behaviour order legislation. Let me make two points: first, we have changed the guidance, which should now make it easier and faster to bring ASBO cases to court; and secondly, it is possible to use evidence collected before the six-month period as background information when an ASBO is sought. With those things in mind, I think that antisocial behaviour orders are now much quicker and more flexible and adaptable than before.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): Does the Minister agree that one persistent nuisance from persistent young offenders is graffiti? Why do the courts appear to be making so little use of the powers that Parliament has given them to require offenders to clear up graffiti? Does that reflect the low priority that they and perhaps the Government accord to the problem?

Mr. Denham: That certainly does not take anything away from the priority that the Government accord the problem. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we will publish a White Paper on antisocial behaviour in the very near future, with a view to introducing legislation in this Session.

The response made in the courts varies from one part of the country to another. There is no doubt that where good efforts have been made to involve magistrates and magistrates' clerks in understanding local priorities for tackling antisocial behaviour, we have had much better support from the courts. I urge every crime reduction partnership to ensure that it has included the Court Service fully in understanding the nature of local problems and the measures that are being taken to tackle them.

Lunar House

9. **Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): If he will make a statement on measures he proposes to improve the administration of Lunar House in Croydon. [91430]

The Minister for Citizenship and Immigration (Beverley Hughes): Substantial progress has been made in some areas, and as the Home Secretary said earlier, we expect to see a radical transformation this year in the operation and efficiency of the immigration and nationality directorate. We are pursuing a range of measures including the provision of additional resources and implementation of new processes to tackle backlogs and improve the handling of immigration and asylum applications, as well as correspondence.

Andrew Mackinlay: We are agreed about one thing: it can only get better. Why has it taken so long to address this problem? I have been in the House for 10 years and I know that the experience of all Members of Parliament is that documents are lost, letters are not replied to and decisions are sent to the wrong people. I give the Minister notice that, in six months' time, I shall try to raise the same question again—and there had better be improvements or there will be one hell of a bloody row.

Beverley Hughes: I can tell my hon. Friend that there has been progress. I share his frustration about the time that it is taking to sort out a situation that was in almost catastrophic meltdown when we took over in 1997. I should like to give him some examples, as I am not being complacent about the issue. The time taken to make an initial decision in asylum cases in 1997 was nearly two years. In 75 per cent. of cases, that time is now down to two months. Some 4,800 people were removed having failed in their applications in 1997. The number will be 13,000 this year. There is progress and it is steady. We would like it to be faster, but we clearly have a much more orderly and effective system that we ever had in 1997. I assure him that further measures are in place to improve on that situation and bring about the well managed, routinely organised and administratively efficient system that we undoubtedly need, and I will welcome the opportunity to report to him in future.

Andrew Mackinlay: I apologise for using the vernacular, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): The Minister has just told us that 13,000 people were removed last year because they had made unfounded asylum claims. How many asylum applicants had their applications refused last year and were therefore liable to be removed?

Beverley Hughes: I have not got that figure in my head, but many thousands were refused last year. The hon. Gentleman should take account of the figure that I cited earlier: fewer than 5,000 people were removed in 1997. We have put in place the resources to tackle the undoubted difficulty of removing people. As someone who has been involved with the Home Office and now serves on the Home Affairs Committee, the hon. Gentleman should know the difficulties. We are dealing with them robustly; we have increased the number of removals year by year, and we will continue to do that.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): I am sure that the Minister knows that all too frequently people receive letters from the Home Office that state that they will receive permission to stay in the United Kingdom, or win an asylum appeal, but they are still waiting for the official status letter six months later. In the meantime, they have to survive on no income and are unable to get a job. Why is it impossible to send the official status letter as soon as the decision is made, instead of a letter that states, "You will be getting the official letter"?

Beverley Hughes: I agree with my hon. Friend that it is a matter not simply of the official letter but of ensuring that, at the point of final refusal, people are encouraged and helped to leave; and that if they do not leave, they are forced to do so. We are pursuing all the means that we can to maximise the potential for voluntary removals. When people will not go voluntarily, we must enforce their removal.

Police (Gloucestershire)

10. **Mr. Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury): If he will make a statement on the financial settlement to Gloucestershire constabulary for the forthcoming financial year. [91432]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Michael Wills): My right hon. Friend the Police Minister announced the provisional police funding settlement for English police authorities on 5 December 2002. Gloucestershire police authority is provisionally set to receive a general grant of £57 million—an increase of 3 per cent. Gloucestershire is also provisionally set to receive up to £2.33 million through the crimefighting fund, £780,000 in rural grant, and £190,000 towards the cost of the airwave communications system. Gloucestershire is therefore provisionally set to receive an increase of 3.5 per cent. We expect to announce the final funding settlement on 5 February.

Mr. Robertson: I am grateful to the Minister for that detailed response. However, I had a one-and-a-half hour meeting with the chief constable on Friday and he said that the money for Gloucestershire is sufficient to cover only the increase in pay that has been awarded and the increase in national insurance that the Government have forced on the authority. The chief constable asked me to ask the Minister how on earth he can be expected to finance the extra work in the national policing plan.

Why did the Minister state in a written answer to me on 30 October that he intended

> "to provide sufficient resources to support Gloucestershire . . . in maintaining stable levels of service", [*Official Report*, 30 October 2002; Vol. 391, c. 845W.]

when cuts will have to made in the force unless there is a 55 per cent. increase in the local precept?

Mr. Wills: The hon. Gentleman has missed out a statistic in his full and detailed question. Gloucestershire police are at record numbers. I remind him that in the last five years of Conservative Government, the number of police officers in Gloucestershire declined by 41. Under this Government, there are 50 more police officers than in 1997. The extra money is being spent on more police officers to fight and reduce the fear of crime. The Conservative Government signally failed to do that.

Mr. Parmjit Dhanda (Gloucester): May I reassure my hon. Friend that the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) omitted more than one statistic? On 23 December, £180,000 was announced for providing video interview and rape examination suites in Gloucestershire. Our current police force comprises 1,183 officers, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows. That is far more police than we ever had in Gloucestershire previously. When the Conservative party was in power—

Mr. Speaker: Order. It is not for the Minister to reply to such matters.

Drug Seizures

11. **Mr. Chris Bryant** (Rhondda): How much (a) crack cocaine and (b) heroin have been seized by the police each year since 1997. [91433]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): The most recent data available show that the amount of heroin seized increased threefold and that that of cocaine increased nearly fivefold between 1997 and 2000. In the same period, the amount of crack cocaine seized fell. The updated drug strategy contains specific measures for high crime areas where crack is often a significant part of the problem.

Mr. Bryant: I know that my hon. Friend will be aware of the terrible scourge that heroin represents in constituencies such as my own, in which 28 deaths have been caused by heroin overdoses in the last 18 months.

I know that he will also want to congratulate all the officers involved in Operation Tarian, which has been particularly successful in seizing heroin and crack cocaine in the south Wales valleys over the last six months. Is he aware, however, of the concern being expressed by many local police officers that there is not strong co-operation between the different police forces in south Wales or with the Avon and Somerset police force? Does he agree that co-operation is essential if we are to ensure that drugs do not sweep through from Bristol into the south Wales valleys?

Mr. Ainsworth: My hon. Friend is right to flag up that difficulty. Operation Tarian was funded partly by the Home Office to the tune of £500,000 a year, to provide exactly the cross-border co-operation that is needed between the three police forces in question. When providing that money, we said that it would be essential that those forces should not only co-operate with one another to deal with the very real problem that exists in south and mid-Wales but work closely with police in Avon and Somerset and the west midlands. The middle market, as we call it, into south Wales is often routed through Birmingham or Bristol, and the problem cannot be dealt with in isolation.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): As a matter of interest, has the Minister considered how much money the Treasury would have made out of charging VAT on the heroin and crack cocaine that has been seized, and what value that money could have provided in terms of the treatment of addicts and the reduction of crime?

Mr. Ainsworth: That is not a calculation that I have immediately in my head. The hon. Lady should consider, also as a matter of interest, the size of the public health problem that we might have if we went down the road that she is suggesting. The prevalence of the use of class A drugs is nothing like what it could be if we implemented the policies that she is, in effect, expounding.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): Does my hon. Friend agree that concentrating on cutting off the demand for illicit drugs is far more important than concentrating on their seizure, and that concentrating too much on seizure might have the perverse effect of raising street prices and, consequently, of increasing crime?

Mr. Ainsworth: Both are important. I think that my hon. Friend would recognise that we have tried, in the updated drugs strategy, to rebalance our spending towards harm minimisation and treatment and, therefore, towards demand reduction. We cannot, however, abandon the attack on availability or the attempts to dismantle the groups that bring these substances into the country. Lower prices and more ready availability would surely only lead to a bigger problem. The two issues must go hand in hand: we must attack both availability and demand. The most effective way to do that, as I think my hon. Friend knows, is to get addicts into good treatment, which is why we are emphasising that provision at the moment.

Gun Crime

12. **Mr. George Osborne** (Tatton): What plans he has to introduce targets to reduce gun crime. [91434]

16. **Mr. Richard Bacon** (South Norfolk): If he will make a statement on gun crime. [91439]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. David Blunkett): The immediate target has to be to reduce the year-on-year increase in gun crime associated with organised gang criminality. That is why we have already made changes to the law on minimum penalties for those illegally carrying guns, banned the import of guns that can be converted, changed the law relating to replica guns and the carrying of guns in a public place, and introduced measures relating to the age limit for the purchase and ownership of air weapons. All those measures form part of a jigsaw to tackle the unacceptably high level of organised gun crime in this country.

Mr. Osborne: What the Home Secretary did not say, of course, is that gun crime is already up 90 per cent. under this Government. Does he really think that his jigsaw, which includes yet another departmental taskforce, yet another amnesty and more headline-grabbing attacks on the rap music industry, will seriously trouble hardened criminal gangs that use guns and feed off the crack cocaine trade? If he thinks that his strategy will work, why does he not set a specific target, as he has done in many areas of Home Office policy, on reducing gun crime?

Mr. Blunkett: I have just indicated that the task ahead of us is to reduce the exponential rise, and we have made no bones about the danger and the difficulty that that poses, but the measures that the hon. Gentleman has just attacked were all put forward either by the police or by those deeply associated with the job of reducing gun crime. We have responded, as any sensible Government would, to the suggestions made, including at the round table meeting that I held on 10 January, which was extremely productive and engaged a range of agencies, enterprises and community groups, all of which have a part to play.

Mr. Bacon: Most people will be very dissatisfied with the Home Secretary's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne). Does the right hon. Gentleman realise that when the Government came to power there were about 12,000 firearms offences, that the number is about 22,000 today and that in the past five years the number of offences involving handguns has more than doubled? When is he going to take the problem seriously and stop offering the House of Commons no more than a reduction in the increase in gun offences? We need a decrease for the people of this country.

Mr. Blunkett: Reducing does mean decreasing—at least it does in my dictionary—and I have every intention of ensuring that we do that together, but action on air weapons, conversions and the import of Brocock and similar weapons are all a critical part of the process. The Metropolitan police revealed at the round table meeting that 75 per cent. of the guns that they picked up were conversions, so the measures that we are taking are directly related to the problem, linked as they are to changing the culture in the communities most affected. Sometimes we get the blame for what others do; sometimes others get the blame for what I do. I am afraid that the hon. Member for Tatton is wrong in his presumption that I have blamed rap—although gangs using rap are an entirely different matter.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling): I welcome the measures that the Home Secretary has taken to toughen some gun laws. All of us want guns off our streets, and one way to do that is to enforce those laws and ensure that people who use guns face the full weight of the law. Does he recognise that to prosecute people in the courts we need witnesses to come forward? Will he consider ways to encourage community members to come forward with information and to protect witnesses from the intimidation that they feel, which prevents many from giving the police information that would lead to prosecution?

Mr. Blunkett: That is a critical point, and it was raised at the round table meeting. I can assure my hon. Friend that we will take the necessary steps suggested by community groups, in terms of a substantial strengthening of the protection of victims, the availability of that protection, and encouraging the communities from which people are giving such evidence to be part of the process. That should include the ability to provide information confidentially, providing a hotline that is trusted and understood by those who can give such information, and getting the message across—this has been done in individual instances—that in extremis we can give people a new identity until the issue has been properly dealt with.

Police Community Support Officers

13. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): If he will make a statement on the funding of police community support officers. [91435]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. David Blunkett): In the current financial year, we have allocated £19 million to the development—the pump priming—of community support officers. In the coming year, that will more than double to about £40 million, £3.6 million of which will be allocated to the Greater Manchester police area.

Mr. Brady: I am grateful to the Home Secretary, but he knows that his Department will meet only 50 per cent. of the cost of community support officers in Greater Manchester from 2004. From 2006, none of the cost will be met. Does he expect Greater Manchester police to cut the number of community support officers or the number of regular police officers?

Mr. Blunkett: Just for a moment, I thought that the hon. Gentleman was going to welcome the fact that the first community support officer started work in his constituency this morning. Along with the 160 who will be available next year, that officer will be doing a damn good job in protecting the people of the area. I can announce today that there will be 100 per cent. funding through to April 2004. There will be 75 per cent. funding for 2004–05, and 50 per cent. from 2005–06 for that final year of the spending review. We have made it clear all along—the Opposition have asked us to do so—that we will not have constant and permanent ring-fenced funds, but that we will give kick-start initial funding and then freedom and power to the chief constable and the police authority to do the job at local level. So going local has to involve local decision making.

Firefighters' Dispute

3.30 pm

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. John Prescott): On 16 December, I announced to the House the publication of Sir George Bain's independent report on the future of the fire service. In my statement, I set out the Government's commitment to taking forward the review's recommendations. I also undertook to keep the House informed of further developments.

The House will recall that at the beginning of December, at the Fire Brigades Union's request, both sides in the dispute agreed to return to the negotiating table and enter into a programme of talks at ACAS. On 2 December, the FBU general secretary said:

> "we welcome the intervention of ACAS at this stage of the dispute and hope that all parties involved will grasp this opportunity to find a settlement agreeable to all parties concerned".

He also said that the union would enter into the process constructively and positively. Despite that, and despite the fact that the FBU had asked for the talks at ACAS and those talks had hardly got under way, on 10 January the union announced an additional 24-hour strike, which will start tomorrow at 9 am. That will be followed by two 48-hour strikes starting on 28 January and 1 February, so the story so far this year is one day of talks and a threat of five days of strikes.

Based on the recommendations on pay and modernisation in the Bain report, the fire service employers have offered an 11.3 per cent. pay increase over two years, linked to modernisation. That is a good offer by any standards. The 4 per cent. offered for this year is more than the firefighters would have got under the old formula, and that formula was defended as recently as July 2000, when the FBU general secretary told his members:

> "Our wages remain ahead of other essential public sector workers precisely because we have maintained the formula".

The 4 per cent. on offer is also almost twice the rate of inflation, and is well above the average level of public sector pay settlements.

Given that background, and in the light of the Bain review, I must repeat to the FBU and its members that further strike action will achieve nothing. It will only make it more difficult to settle this dispute. It is damaging and it poses a danger to public safety.

As my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Minister for Local Government and the Regions and I have said again and again, pay and modernisation must go hand in hand. The two sides in this dispute must negotiate on that basis. Bain provides the framework for a deal. It is that simple. That will remain the Government's position regardless of further strike action.

I urge the FBU and its members to join us in building the modernised fire service that the people of this country need and deserve. Firefighters themselves have called for change to improve the service. I say to them, "Let us now get on with the job."

The Government are already implementing the modernisation agenda set out in the Bain review. Since Bain reported, we have made good progress in moving ahead with his recommendations for a better, safer fire service. For example, with the agreement of the House, the Government will repeal section 19 of the Fire Services Act 1947 via the Local Government Bill. That will allow local decisions to be made on the level of fire cover required to ensure the safety of local communities. Later this month, we will issue for consultation revised guidance on a new approach to fire cover, drawn up by Her Majesty's chief inspector of fire services. That will ensure that fire brigades have the right people in the right place at the right time to deal with the real risks posed by fire and other emergencies in today's world.

Next, the fire service inspectorate is being modernised and restructured to fulfil its new responsibilities, as recommended by the Bain report. Its key roles from now on will be to support delivery and to help develop the new generation of fire service professional managers who will run the modernised fire and rescue service.

Finally, Bain recommended a new forum of fire and other emergency service leaders to help us to drive forward the modernisation agenda. As a first step, a meeting with all the UK's chief fire officers will be held later this week.

I will give the House further information in the White Paper, which we will publish later this year. I will also include our detailed response to the recommendations in Bain.

Given the concerns raised by Members about the importance of local consultation when fire service modernisation is being dealt with, let me assure them that nothing proposed in Bain will undermine consultation arrangements with local communities. The Government and employers are getting on with implementing Bain; unfortunately, by contrast, the FBU has continued to oppose Bain's recommendations. It has made exaggerated and misleading statements about the number of job cuts and fire station closures implied by Bain, without engaging seriously in negotiation with the employers.

I met the general secretary of the FBU on 9 January and again this morning. On 9 January, we discussed the Government's plans for modernisation of the fire service. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions has now written to the general secretary setting out a range of issues that will be covered in the forthcoming White Paper. I hope that the FBU will take advantage of this opportunity to contribute to the modernisation agenda. Whether it contributes or not, however, let me say again to the FBU and its members that, if they persist in their programme of industrial action, the Government will fully discharge their own responsibilities.

Our primary responsibility, especially at a time of heightened public concern about terrorism, is to do everything possible to provide the public with the highest level of protection. We have robust and tested contingency plans to provide that emergency cover. We have built on what we have learnt from previous strikes. We now have 177 red appliances to add to the capacity of the green goddesses and the specialist rescue teams, over 90 more than during the last strike.

This morning, the civil contingencies committee met and ran through the military, police and other arrangements for maintaining fire and rescue cover during tomorrow's strike. As I told the House before, however, the military can provide only an emergency service, not a replacement service. During the strike, it is

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vital for people to take all necessary precautions to protect themselves and their families. To underline that, we are launching a further advertising campaign today to remind people of the increased dangers posed by fires during the strike.

The House will recall that before the last strike the FBU leadership signed a UK-wide gold command agreement in which it undertook to ensure that its members were available during the strike to deal with large-scale incidents such as terrorist attacks. To be fully effective, those arrangements had to be confirmed by local agreements at brigade level. During the last strike, local agreements were confirmed by the FBU in only 33 of the 58 fire brigades. Since then the situation has improved—agreements are in place in 53 brigades, and I hope that by tomorrow morning we will have 56 agreements—but even one area without an agreement is one too many.

I raised that again with the FBU general secretary when I met him this morning. He assured me that he was still working to ensure that the arrangements were in place in every fire brigade. Dealing with the consequences of strikes is one thing, but, as I said to the general secretary this morning, there is no need for these strikes at all. The FBU should be at ACAS, in talks with the local authority employers: that is the right way ahead.

I urge the FBU to take the only realistic and responsible approach, and call off the strike. These strikes cannot and will not achieve anything. Get back to the talks at ACAS. Do not put the public at unnecessary risk.

I will keep the House informed of developments.

David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for making his statement, and for giving me prior sight of it. I add our support to his calls for the Fire Brigades Union to call off its irresponsible strike action. I also welcome much of what he had to say about the modernisation of the fire service. I shall return to that in a moment.

Subject to proper scrutiny, we will support the right hon. Gentleman's repeal of section 19 of the 1947 Act. It is also good news that the Government have at last mobilised 177 red fire engines, as we have asked them to on many occasions. That can only be for the greater safety of the public and, of course, that of the armed forces when they are fulfilling their firefighting task. Better late than never.

Nevertheless, given today's reports that the unions are preparing for a dispute that will last at least until the summer, the British people could be excused for feeling that an added sense of urgency is still needed from the Government to ensure that their safety is protected.

Our military are now under extreme pressure, with advance deployments to the Gulf region under way, and a war on terror on our doorsteps. As a result, there are worries about the level of firefighting cover that the military can provide. For example, last week we heard that 16 Air Assault Brigade, including units covering Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent and Dumfries and Galloway, were removed from firefighting cover to be redeployed to the Gulf. When my hon. Friend the shadow defence spokesman asked the Ministry of Defence who was going to take over their firefighting role, it was clear that adequate replacements had not been found, and 16 Air Assault was promptly returned to firefighting duties. Today, we hear from the news media that it will after all be deployed abroad. Therefore, in less than two weeks, 16 Air Assault appears to have been on fire duty, off fire duty, on duty again, and off again, if the news is to be believed. It would have put the grand old Duke of York to shame. Let us have a straight answer from the Deputy Prime Minister. Who will cover for 16 Air Assault at home? Does he have a grip on that critical aspect of protecting public safety?

In November, the Minister with responsibility for the armed forces told the House that it would take

> "five weeks to train crews to the standard of retained firefighters and 12 weeks to that of full-time firefighters"—*[Official Report*, 21 November 2002; Vol. 394, c. 220W.]

Yet, on 11 January, an MOD spokesman said that most troops only needed "about ten hours' training". Who is right and what training regime is the military cover now on—12 weeks, five weeks or 10 hours? Can the Deputy Prime Minister confirm that there will be enough fully trained troops on call to cover for striking firefighters?

With the strike starting tomorrow at 9 am, there is a real concern that Government are trying to do too much with too little. At present, with our troops needed overseas, various expert personnel—the Deputy Prime Minister referred to them—from the Navy and Air Force trained in the use of rescue equipment and breathing apparatus will be needed both at home and abroad. Will he confirm whether that is the case? Will our armed forces operating abroad be expected to risk their lives without those important rescue teams because they are committed to defending the public at home?

It is also clear now that there is an unprecedented level of terrorist threat at home, while it is extremely likely that our military will be deployed to fight a war abroad. Surely, given those very particular circumstances, it is in the public interest for the Government to seek the necessary legal action to ensure that the public are protected against further fire strikes. Under section 240 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992—introduced by a Conservative Government, in case the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) has forgotten—the Deputy Prime Minister has the power to ask the Attorney-General to seek an injunction to stop any action that "wilfully and maliciously" endangers lives. Clearly, lives are now being put at risk. When asked about this before, both the Deputy Prime Minister and the Prime Minister have ducked the question, claiming that it is a matter for the courts. That, of course, is the last stage of the process. The first step is for them to ask the Attorney-General to seek an injunction to stop the strikes, thus ensuring that the decision is put in the hands of a judge. The public interest now requires the Government to act.

In the present circumstances, I am sure that the Deputy Prime Minister understands why the public are concerned about their safety in the event of extended strike action, but beyond that action and the added pressure on our military, there are still questions about how a modernised fire service will look. As I said earlier, we support the reforms proposed by Bain to the fire service but that support is not a blank cheque and one would expect some performance for it. Will the Deputy Prime Minister now tell the House whether he expects the reforms to deliver a halving in death rates, as modernisation brought in New Zealand from similar death rates, or, closer to home, after improvements by Conservative-controlled Kent county council? That is another question that he failed to answer last time when I put it to him.

The Deputy Prime Minister's actions over the coming days will set out his true approach to government. These strikes have already gone on for too long. The FBU should never be allowed to take such action when British citizens face threats, both at home and abroad. The Deputy Prime Minister has a choice: he can either put the people of this country first and seek an injunction to stop this utterly irresponsible strike action, or he can yet again duck the issue and allow this irresponsible union leadership to continue with its dangerous action.

It is now time for the Deputy Prime Minister to get a grip and seek an injunction. It is now time to put the public first and politics last.

The Deputy Prime Minister: If there were ever an example of putting politics first, it is the statement just made by the right hon. Gentleman, which has more to do with the leadership of the Conservative party than with the safety of the public. Anyway, let me officially thank him for his few words of support at the beginning. In the light of all the points that he made, I should point out that the concern of the Government—and, hopefully, of the Opposition—is to maximise the protection of public safety, and to avoid as many days of dispute as possible. Although the armed services have done an excellent job, in general, the House has accepted that its alternative service is not as good as that provided by the regular fire service.

When this dispute began last year, there was the threat of 36 days of dispute, but patient negotiation has reduced that to 10 days. In other words, 26 days have been taken off the strike threat, and I think that the public are grateful for that. It is such judgments about the best way to proceed that we in government have to make.

It is interesting to note that the shadow Attorney-General is not here. He would undoubtedly have assured the right hon. Gentleman that it is not the judgment of Governments as to whether an action is sought in the courts; it is the Attorney-General's judgment. The Attorney-General has the independence to make that judgment, and Governments cannot interfere with that decision. He is required to talk in person to me, in this case, and to make some assessment of the threat to public safety, and of the course that the dispute is taking. That has happened regularly—even in the past few days. At the end of the day, it is the Attorney-General's judgment as to whether he should take an action. That has always been the case: it was true when the Conservatives were in government, and it is true for us. The right hon. Gentleman should consult the shadow Attorney-General, who would give him that assurance, but to be honest, I think that he is already aware of that point. However, it sounds good to be thumping away at the Dispatch Box, saying that legal action is the best way to deal with this issue. A matter of judgment is involved here, and I disagree with the right hon. Gentleman.

On the availability of the armed forces to provide the excellent service that they have already provided, I should point out that most of the quotes that the right hon. Gentleman gave came from the press. I am not as confident as he is about press reports on these matters, but I am quite prepared to take the advice of the armed services, which tell me that the same number of people will be available—experienced and qualified people—to provide this alternative fire service. I accept their judgment and it is proper for me to do so, rather than relying on the evidence of a number of reports in the *Daily Mail*. To that extent, that is absolutely the right thing to do, and it would be irresponsible of me to do otherwise.

I have made it clear in public statements and in statements in this House that there undoubtedly must be a connection between modernisation and pay. There also has to be a review of the fire service's current risk assessment. We have suggested all manner of changes and Bain has made recommendations, some of which we are dealing with. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Kent county council, to which I pay proper tribute. I also pay tribute to the council's Tory leader, who first brought it to my attention that the training and other actions taken by it—which have more to do with intervention, rather than prevention—have provided a better means of reducing the number of incidents. Bain is all about putting greater emphasis on intervention, rather than prevention, and the Government's modernisation proposals are geared towards achieving that.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his statement, and I agree that the latest strikes are unnecessary. The FBU leadership should be back talking with the employers at ACAS, rather than striking. However, can he clear up one confusion as to his own position? He talks about the publication of a White Paper for the fire services—in which Ministers will set out their detailed reactions to Bain—some time before Easter, yet Ministers are asking employers and the FBU leadership to make up their minds on the details of Bain even before the White Paper's publication. Is there not some inconsistency in this regard? Can he tell the House exactly when the Government's detailed position on Bain will be known? Surely that would be helpful for the talks at ACAS.

Will the Deputy Prime Minister say more about the fire cover arrangements for the strikes, particularly, as the Conservative spokesman said, in the context of the latest deployment of armed forces to the Gulf? Will he confirm that some of the troops covering the strike, including the 3rd Parachute Regiment, are currently on training before deployment, and that they must break that training to cover the strikes and will then be sent out to Kuwait immediately after the strike on 28 January? Is that a sensible way either to train our forces before deployment or to cover the fire strikes? Will the Deputy Prime Minister confirm that some of the specialists trained for the breathing apparatus rescue teams and rescue equipment support teams are among those being deployed? Is that gap to be filled by other specialists?

As regards future talks, will the Deputy Prime Minister make it clear again that the Government are willing to provide sufficient transitional funding to assist any settlement that is agreed? Will he ensure that those

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fire authorities that have already modernised, and therefore cannot make the savings available to others, will not be penalised by the way in which that funding is provided? Will he further reassure fire authorities that they will not be left by themselves to negotiate every aspect of Bain modernisation with their local FBU branch? If and when the FBU decides to return to the negotiating table, will the Deputy Prime Minister support the new local employer negotiating team in providing clear guidelines for fire authorities about agreements reached on Bain modernisation?

Will the Deputy Prime Minister acknowledge that the firefighters to whom I have talked accept the need for modernisation and understand that better fire prevention is the surest way to save lives, particularly at night? Will he urgently look into Bain's proposals for greater use of local and even regional pay settlements? Does he agree that those may be one way out of the present cul-de-sac?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words of support. I assure him that the Government accept the broad thrust of the Bain report, as I have stated in the House. We will provide more details about the White Paper, and we will enter into discussions with many of those who will be directly affected by the Bain report. I told the general secretary of the FBU and the employers about the broad framework, and the Government will discuss the Bain proposals with all those who have an active interest in them. It is clear that the broad thrust of that report is accepted. I accept that there are difficulties concerning the implications for different areas, and we will take those into account. We do not want to see areas penalised because of their geography.

Whatever agreement is arrived at, the package has to be self-financing. We have made that clear, and Bain made it clear. The period for the introduction of the pay proposals will be longer than the two years that have been discussed; Bain suggests that three years will be necessary. We recognise that we may have to find more resources in the early stages of the agreement, and I have agreed to that, but the terms and conditions will have to fit into the overall policy that the package is self-financing, albeit over three years.

On the provision of troops, as I said earlier, there may be some change in the deployment, and specialist units may be removed because of the situation regarding Iraq. There is to be a statement about that later, and detailed matters can be pursued then, but I am assured that we have the same number of people with the same amount of specialist training to carry out the fire service obligations.

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): I thank my right hon. Friend for reassuring me that Dumfries and Galloway will be covered during tomorrow's strike. Like him, I do not necessarily always respond to what the national press says. I urge him not to listen to the main Opposition party: the solution to the dispute lies not in the courts but at ACAS, with negotiations involving all sides.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the Bain inquiry and the recommendation for a salary increase of 11.3 per cent. over time. I recently met an FBU officer from my local branch who told me that a 4 per cent. increase will be funded, but there is no guarantee of a 7.3 per cent. rise beyond that because of difficulties concerning the amount that would have to be paid to retained firefighters. Is my right hon. Friend in a position to clarify that point?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his support.

As regards solutions, I agree with my hon. Friend that, when negotiations are going on, it is best not to inflame the situation by advocating all sorts of legal action. However, we all understand the position of the Opposition: they are not interested in a solution, but only in making political capital out of it. The general feeling of the House is that people should be talking and reaching agreement through ACAS. That is the overwhelming view of the House.

The employers offered a 4 per cent. wage increase for the first year, which was referred to in the Bain inquiry. The figure of 11.3 per cent. was made up of the 7.3 per cent. to which my hon. Friend referred and that 4 per cent. increase, and is part of the modernisation proposals on which the firefighters have to enter negotiations. As he pointed out, the 7.3 per cent. is part of the overall pay bill. As he knows, there was considerable discussion in the earlier negotiations about the full-time workers, the retained workers and the whole range of workers who are involved in the fire service. Those matters are for negotiation between the employers and the employees. The funding of the package has now been decided. It was recommended by Bain and accepted by the Government, and the firefighters should now sit down and negotiate.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Has the Deputy Prime Minister formed a view on whether it would be advisable to lock striking firemen out of their fire stations, for example, to enable the Army to use the red engines?

The Deputy Prime Minister: That is another helpful and constructive view from the Opposition. I have already given the House the Government's point of view.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is my right hon. Friend aware that during the past two or three weeks, I have detected in meetings with some FBU people that the argument has shifted just a little towards jobs and is no longer so much on the pay front? Some of my colleagues have been present at meetings where such matters were discussed.

In view of the fact that, over the years, both my right hon. Friend and I have fought to save jobs in our respective industries, does he agree that people should be prepared to discuss and deal with some aspects of Bain, but that we should be very careful over the question of job losses? One of the Government's proudest claims is that we have managed to get more than 1 million people back into work, so it sits uneasily to tell a union, "You'll have to lose some jobs." I hope that we can have a modernisation that is not dissimilar to the one in the House of Commons, where we have modernised everything, there is no night shift and nobody has lost their job.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have a great deal of sympathy with the points made by my hon. Friend, especially that the Government have a tremendous record in increasing the level of employment.

An awful lot has been said about job cuts, but I am sure that my hon. Friend agrees that, overall, we have to take the safety of the public into account when providing the service. That is our first requirement. However, the process does not require job cuts. The controversy about job cuts was addressed by Bain, who said that there was no need for enforced redundancies in the industry. He pointed out that changes to the pension scheme would bring about a considerable amount of retirement by choice as people reached 50 to 53 years of age. That means that change could be brought about without enforced redundancies.

My hon. Friend will know that often in negotiations, the position on redundancy is strict—"You're out"—and that is what people have to accept. In this case, there would be no enforced redundancy, simply negotiations and readjustment. That is unlike the position in my hon. Friend's industry, which faced the threat that thousands would be out of work; indeed, 100,000 workers lost their jobs and 100 pits were closed. There was no choice—they were out. That is not the situation that faces the fire workers.

Mr. Charles Hendry (Wealden): Will the Deputy Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to Alex Kent, a 25-year-old firefighter in Crowborough in my constituency, who lost his life a week ago trying to save the life of his younger brother? None of us can understand the grief of his parents who lost everything—their children and their home—in a few devastating hours.

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one unfortunate aspect of this dispute is that, by forcing people to take entrenched positions, we have lost sight of the fact that firefighters daily put their lives on the line to save the lives of others?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The whole House joins the hon. Gentleman in extending sympathy in the tragic circumstances in which that fire worker died and in acknowledging the risks that firemen face every day. Members of the armed forces face similar risks in such situations. We must not only offer our sympathy but reduce the risk of such tragedies happening in what we all agree is a dangerous profession. The best way of achieving that is to get to a new service, deal with the changes necessary for a modernised service and return to providing one—rather than being in dispute.

Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): Is there is not a fundamental problem with getting ACAS to work when a precondition appears to be signing up to the Bain report—which includes terms that the Deputy Prime Minister would never have accepted as a trade union negotiator? It would appear that the employers and the FBU agree on the need for change to the risk-based assessments upon which shifts, hours and staffing depend, but the shift from property-based to life-based risk has yet to be made. Would it not make more sense for that to be done first, before asking firefighters to sign up to the consequences? The second matter, which is connected, is that before the dispute—

Mr. Speaker: Order. That sounds like more than one question to me.

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend asks me to consider whether I would have accepted preconditions in respect of ACAS discussions. Anyone who is familiar with ACAS procedures knows that the employer states his position and the employees state their position. They do not agree. They go into two different rooms and ACAS shuffles between them. They are at ACAS because they do not agree. Lots of conditions are often laid down by both parties. The FBU's wish not to talk about Bain or reorganisation is a condition. ACAS gets the two parties in different rooms in the hope of finding some way forward and I am sure that the House agrees with that objective.

My hon. Friend is right about risk assessment. In the present circumstances, more importance is placed on property than human life. That approach existed under the old system but we are proposing change. That is called modernisation and I hope that everybody will accept it.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Will the right hon. Gentleman help me to understand the Prime Minister's comment in Prime Minister's questions last week that

> "the decision whether to seek an injunction is taken by the Attorney-General, on the basis of whether such an injunction would succeed or not. It is a decision for him, and not one that I can or should take."—[*Official Report*, 15 January 2003; Vol. 397, c. 680.]

Does that mean that the decision whether or not to seek an injunction will be based on public safety or the likelihood of success? At a time when the Prime Minister is sending our armed forces abroad, possibly to fight a war, are we to believe that the Prime Minister will play no part in deciding whether to seek an injunction to halt the firefighters' strike?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The Prime Minister has made a number of comments and does not solely rest his case on the Attorney-General and whether or not an injunction might succeed. However, the right hon. Gentleman may agree that the Attorney-General might take that matter into account. He must take into account the threat to public safety and order—which he does by making an assessment of the situation, talking to the Ministers involved, then making a judgment. The Prime Minister made it clear that that matter is for the Attorney-General's judgment—not for him or Ministers.

John Cryer (Hornchurch): Following on from the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), when firefighters retire, will they be replaced by new recruits or not? On the back of the loss of hundreds of firefighters' jobs and scores of pumps; station closures over the past 20 years; the Audit Commission's report; and the White Paper published

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three or four years ago, which recommended expanding the service and moving to risk-based assessment, will my right hon. Friend look at expanding the fire service, not cutting it?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Under the present system, retired firefighters have not necessarily been replaced. The FBU makes that precise point to us from time to time. The union is not saying that should not happen but that there should be effective deployment of people in the fire services—and the FBU has been prepared to consider that as part of modernisation. Bain has said that is proper—and that there should be proper risk assessment before arriving at judgments locally on what changes should be made. It is not up to me to make such judgments in local areas but for local authorities to decide the provision of public services. We have endorsed and adopted the Bain proposals and hope that the FBU will now starting talking about them.

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): The Deputy Prime Minister has made very clear this afternoon the Government's commitment to Bain, but is he aware that it is being reported that local authority leaders have written to the FBU and are said to have withdrawn a demand that the union commit itself to the Bain review's recommendations? Can he tell us whether that is indeed the case and, if so, will he allow the employers and unions to negotiate outwith the constraints of Bain, or will he step in to scupper such negotiations?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The local authorities have made it clear, since the Bain inquiry reported, that they expect the negotiations to take place on the basis of the Bain proposals. That is precisely the Government's position; it is the local authorities' position, and it is now being discussed in ACAS.

Jim Sheridan (West Renfrewshire): I share my right hon. Friend's concern that any further strike by firefighters will be extremely damaging, but may I remind him that there was a period of good will during the festive period when disputes were suspended? That suggests that a feeling of good will and maturity is creeping into the dispute, but does he agree that any progress will be undermined by the terrible attacks by some in the national press of the firefighters' leaders and, equally, by the personal attacks by local firefighters on politicians at all levels, but particularly those at local level who have little or no influence in this dispute?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I certainly agree that good will is important—an awful lot of it exists—but it is sometimes undermined by some outrageous statements made by all parties in the dispute, which are often exploited by the press. At the end of the day, though, people should focus their attention on the real issue: providing a good and safe fire service—a modernised fire service—involving all the members of the FBU, who need to sit down and discuss the proposals. The inquiry has produced what I think is a very good solution; we now need to work out exactly how we will implement it.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Does the Deputy Prime Minister understand that the Government have now got themselves into the absurd position of calling up striking firemen as reservists for service in the Gulf, while regular servicemen remain on stand-by here to cover for striking firemen? Has he explained to the Attorney-General that that does not appear to be in the public interest? If he has not done so, will he do so?

The Deputy Prime Minister: To be honest, that could only come from a military mind. That is an anomaly, as the hon. Gentleman properly points out. If it is true—*[Interruption.]* Well, it is a concern, but it is not a matter of great consideration. There may be one or two individuals in the fire brigade who presumably offer to stand by to play a part in such emergencies, and I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman condones that and believes that it is proper for them to do so. Where there are anomalies like that, I am sure that those firefighters' places will be covered by other available people. That arrangement creates a certain anomaly, but it is certainly not on any scale that would require a major policy to deal with it.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): When the Deputy Prime Minister made a statement on this subject back in November does he remember saying, quite rightly, that hoax calls were utterly unacceptable, that they would be dealt with very severely and that there would be exemplary sentences? Is he aware that the Solicitor-General revealed in a written answer to me published on Tuesday 17 December in column 661W of *Hansard* that the number of individuals who were actually charged during the first firemen's strike was just two? What happened?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am advised that there have been more than that and that the sentences have been severe. There have been some exemplary sentences—they have been referred to in debates—but I am prepared to look at that matter again, and I will write to the hon. Gentleman about it.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): The Deputy Prime Minister has been rightly critical of the FBU. Will he today publicly encourage firefighers who are members of that union but share his dissatisfaction with it to resign from the union?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Those are matters for individuals to make decisions about. I have made it clear to the FBU and its members that it is not worth pursuing any further strike, and they must make their judgment on whether they remain in the FBU. It is their right to do that. I am sure that there are different voices and opinions in the FBU itself about the course of action, but it is for the union to make its own decision. That is called a human rights consideration, which I support.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): It is not just working practices, but Government fire regulations that are seriously antiquated. Beyond the repeal of section 19 of the Fire Services Act 1947, do the Government have any plan to accelerate their leisurely timetable to introduce a new fire services Act?

Mr. Prescott: These matters will be addressed in the White Paper, but we have made it clear that we are prepared to act quickly on them. I have tried to indicate to the House the sort of things that we have been doing since the Bain report, which was made less than four weeks ago, and there has been a holiday period, too. The White Paper will make it clear that we intend to act quickly, which is necessary. As I made clear in my statement, whether the FBU agrees to the modernisation or not, it is our job to get on with implementing modernisation, for which the Government have some responsibility, and I encourage the FBU to do the same.

Iraq: Further Contingency Preparations

4.10 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I should like to make a statement on further contingency preparations in relation to Iraq.

It may be helpful to remind the House of the preparations announced previously. On 25 November and 18 December, I described the measures that we were taking to ensure that our forces were prepared and had the training, equipment and support they might need, as well as the consideration that we were giving to the potential requirements for reservists and additional maritime deployments.

In a statement on 7 January, I announced the making of an order enabling the call-out of reservists, and the deployment of maritime forces including 3 Commando Brigade Royal Marines. I explained that it was likely that we would want to make further deployments in the coming weeks to be able to keep military options open, and that we were taking steps to ensure the readiness of units and equipment, and the availability of appropriate chartered shipping and air transport. In a written statement on 14 January, I described the details of continuing preparatory activity, involving the movement and deployment of enabling equipment, including tracked vehicles, exploratory visits and liaison with other military staffs in the region.

When I made a statement on 7 January, a number of hon. Members pressed me to say what other forces the Government intend to make available. In particular, I was invited to set out the nature of any land force that might be deployed. I explained at that time that I could not do so, for the simple reason that no decision had by then been taken.

I am now in a position to be able to tell the House that we have reached a view on the composition and deployment of a land force package to provide military capabilities for potential operations against Iraq. That force will include the headquarters of 1 UK Armoured Division with support from 7 Armoured Brigade, 16 Air Assault Brigade and 102 Logistics Brigade. Its equipment will include 120 Challenger 2 main battle tanks, 150 Warrior armoured personnel carriers, 32 AS 90 self-propelled guns, 18 light guns, and a number of reconnaissance and other vehicles. The total number of personnel involved in this land force will be approximately 26,000. In addition, we are already deploying 3 Commando Brigade, with around 4,000 personnel including their supporting elements.

The House will not expect me to discuss the specific tasks that might be undertaken by our forces in the event of military operations. This is, however, a high-readiness, balanced and flexible force package, bringing together a wide range of capabilities. The chiefs of staff and I are confident that this is the right group of forces for the sort of tasks that may be necessary.

The House will recognise that a force package of this size cannot be deployed without notice. As the written statement on 14 January explained, to keep this option open, we have already started the movement and deployment of enabling assets, including logistics, engineering, signals and command vehicles and equipment. We will now begin to deploy the combat

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equipment and personnel of the formations comprising the land force package. That will involve significant movements from units in both the United Kingdom and Germany before their deployment by sea and air over the days and weeks ahead. Headquarters and support staffs will also deploy to liaise with other military staffs in the region and to take forward planning and preparatory activity.

In the coming weeks, we will also need to call out additional reservists in support of these land forces. The details of our overall reservist requirement are continuing to evolve, and I expect to be able to provide further information on that in due course.

None of the steps that we are taking represents a commitment of British forces to specific military action. These are measures necessary to provide a range of military options that we may require. A decision to employ force has not been taken, nor is such a decision imminent or inevitable. I must also emphasise, however, as all Members will recognise, that the deployment of forces on this scale is no ordinary measure.

While we want Saddam Hussein to disarm voluntarily, it is evident that we will not achieve that unless we continue to present him with a clear and credible threat of force. That is why I have announced these deployments, in support of the diplomatic process to which we remain fully committed. It is not too late for Saddam Hussein to recognise the will of the international community and respect United Nations resolutions. Let us all hope that he does so.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for making a copy of it available in advance.

This is an important moment. When a quarter of the British Army is deployed on a single operation in addition to the 4,000 already deployed in the amphibious taskforce, it is a huge commitment. The Opposition have consistently supported the broad thrust of the Government's policy of diplomacy backed by force against Iraq ever since the Prime Minister first made his position known in the summer. Therefore, the House need be in no doubt that we support this decision.

I spent a week last year with the 2nd Royal Tank Regiment in Germany. Almost a year ago, it was preparing its men and equipment for just such an eventuality. Let there be no doubt about the determination and professionalism of the whole of the British armed forces to carry out whatever tasks are asked of them.

Inevitably, this statement raises a huge number of questions, but I would like the Secretary of State to address just three broad issues concerning preparedness, military planning and the political backing that our troops deserve. First, can he assure the House that he believes that our troops are fully trained and fully equipped for whatever they may be asked to do? For example, how will they be protected from chemical and biological threats? What inoculations are being administered to British troops and what reassurances can we give them that there will be no recurrence of the problem known as Gulf war syndrome?

What protection will our troops have from the missiles that we suspect Saddam still has given that the United Kingdom has no theatre missile defence capability of our own? Are our troops fully equipped to operate with the United States forces, and particularly with US strike aircraft? Electronic identification friend-or-foe equipment is already fitted to US tanks and armour to prevent so-called friendly-fire accidents. Will the Secretary of State consider buying the same off the shelf so that it can be bolted on to British fighting vehicles? Given the problems with the Clansman radio system, will our fighting vehicles have reliable communications?

On training, have any of the troops now being deployed had their front-line training interrupted by the fire dispute and have all units, such as 16 Air Assault Brigade, now been relieved of any firefighting duties so that they can concentrate on their front-line training? In passing, may I support the Secretary of State's view, as reported in the Sunday newspapers, that the additional burden of the fire dispute is simply becoming unacceptable?

Secondly, is there now a clear plan for possible military action? In that plan, who will be the overall British force commander for British land, sea and air forces? Will he be given the same discretion to operate under US command as was given to the British commander in the last Gulf war and to the British commander for combat operations in Afghanistan last year? If there are differences, can the Secretary of State say what they are?

Although the overall objective remains the disarmament of Saddam Hussein, can the Secretary of State clarify what that means in military terms? In particular, if Saddam's regime collapses or if he flees Iraq, what sort of Government does the Secretary of State envisage taking its place? What role will UK forces play in support of that Government? That raises the question of how long he envisages that the UK could maintain this very substantial commitment that he has now announced, particularly if military action is protracted or delayed. Is he satisfied that UK forces have sustainable logistical and medical support?

In formulating any plans, has the Secretary of State had full discussion with his counterpart at the Department for International Development about the eventuality of war, so that there are also plans in place for humanitarian relief and refugee support? When can we expect a statement from the Secretary of State for International Development?

Thirdly, will the Secretary of State agree that those of us who believe in the justness of this cause must continue to make the case for the disarmament of Saddam? War is by no means inevitable but, if we are to ask our troops possibly to risk their lives, they need to be certain that the nation is behind them. I am sure that the House will keep them and their families in our thoughts in the weeks ahead.

Mr. Hoon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his unqualified support. I shall try to deal with his specific questions in turn. If I fail to address one, I am sure that I can deal with it in subsequent correspondence, which I will place in the Library of the House.

As for preparations, I do not doubt that our forces are fully and thoroughly prepared to face this kind of operation. Indeed, the training exercise conducted in similar conditions in Oman just over a year ago was obvious preparation for this kind of deployment. A good number of lessons have been learned from that training exercise and are now to be implemented. Without getting into arguments about Gulf war syndrome, may I tell the House again that a key lesson learned about inoculations is that it is not sensible to inflict on our forces a large number of inoculations simultaneously? Preparation in that respect is much better than it was before the Gulf war, and many of the required injections have already been administered.

As for the missile threat, another question that I have dealt with before, we do not judge that there is an immediate threat to our deployed forces from Saddam Hussein's missiles, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that appropriate action will be taken to deal with the threat as it exists. As for US forces and friendly fire, again a question that I dealt with when I made my last statement, action is in hand to procure the necessary equipment to ensure that the equipment used by our forces is in every way compatible with the equipment that the United States is using. I make exactly the same observation in relation to communications.

As for the hon. Gentleman's second set of questions, I can assure the House that operational planning continues to evolve. It would not be appropriate to deal with his first two questions, but those matters will be dealt with in due course. As for the length of any commitment, I can assure the House that our forces are well prepared for a substantial commitment should that be required, but equally they can be replaced in position should that be necessary in due course, which is why sustainable logistical and medical support is available for them, bearing in mind the fact that it will be a multinational operation. Inevitably, forces deployed from different countries will provide a degree of mutual assistance in areas in which there are operational shortfalls. Certainly, consideration is being given to aftermath issues and the question of humanitarian relief. Obviously, we will design force packages to ensure that we have soldiers in place who can deal with those issues as and when they arise.

As for the third issue raised by the hon. Gentleman—political support from the House—our forces will already be aware of the overwhelming support that they have received from right hon. and hon. Members. The Government have indicated their determination that there should be a further debate and, indeed, ultimately a vote at the right time, but I do not intend to say any more about that than my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has already said.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): May I apologise for the absence of my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch), who is currently in Kuwait visiting the British troops, and thank the Secretary of State for his usual courtesy in providing an advance copy of his statement?

When men and women of our armed forces are deployed overseas, we have a duty to support them, and we send them our best wishes for their swift and safe return. As the Secretary of State said, substantial planning is needed to keep a force of this size properly supplied and in position for quite some time. I welcome his assurance that that will be the case. To ensure that the inspectors have all the time necessary to do their work, that force should be in place and, if necessary, replaced. However, can the Secretary of State provide assurance about the command structure for British troops? Could we realistically opt out in the event that the Government chose not to support a US-led invasion? Are our troops significant and operationally necessary for any operation that takes place on a US-led basis? If the Government decided to opt out, would that cause significant problems for any military invasion?

Lastly, as we have heard plans concerning the Navy and the Army, can the right hon. Gentleman tell us what plans there are in respect of RAF squadrons already in the area? What plans exist to retask the RAF for any offensive operations?

Mr. Hoon: Clearly, it is always a matter for a British Prime Minister, the British Cabinet and ultimately, as I have indicated already, Britain's House of Commons to determine when and if British forces are sent into battle. That is not affected by any announcement that I have made today or any arrangement into which the Government may enter from time to time with any ally or any other multinational force. It is always a matter for a British Prime Minister to decide when a British force engages an enemy. Nevertheless, Britain's contribution to any operations is operationally necessary and I invite the hon. Gentleman to look at the significant contribution that British forces made in and around Afghanistan in the course of operations there. That was a substantial contribution and one which, if military action is necessary, will be repeated in relation to Iraq.

With regard to the Royal Air Force, I have not yet dealt in any detail with its tasking. Those matters are still subject to further discussion, and I will certainly inform the House when and if those decisions have been taken.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): I am deeply concerned that even more of our troops are being deployed. Whenever the Government say that no decision has been taken to join Bush in his war against Iraq, many of us remain deeply sceptical. Given the demonstrations all over the world this weekend, I think that the people of this country do, also. Does the Secretary of State accept that the UN charter as it is currently constituted does not allow for a pre-emptive or offensive strike against another United Nations country that is not threatening anybody? No matter how many resolutions the US bullies and intimidates other countries into supporting, that remains the case. Will the Secretary of State accept that his Government have not made the case for a war against Iraq?

Mr. Hoon: I do not accept my hon. Friend's assertion in conclusion. I assure her that no decision has been taken here, in the United States or anywhere else to use military force against Iraq, but as I indicated, it has been our experience that the credible threat of the use of military force is necessary to coerce Saddam Hussein into accepting the will of the international community.

Since the United Kingdom and other nations have accepted the need for a United Nations process, that process continues. The issue that my hon. Friend raises in relation to the United Nations charter does not arise

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at this stage, although I remind her that the UN charter does allow for self-defence, and pre-emptive action is no more than modern jargon to deal with the ancient right of self-defence. There are other circumstances recognised in international law—for example, the humanitarian action that was taken in Kosovo—that are justified in international law. I do not accept what my hon. Friend said, but I emphasise to right hon. and hon. Members that the Government are determined that there should be a process that rests on international law and carries with it the great support of the British people.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): May I say to the right hon. Gentleman that he should be careful not to invest the Security Council with undue moral authority? The Security Council is but a political institution, and resolutions of the Security Council are but political statements by a political institution. While it is perfectly true that such resolutions are a necessary precondition to war, they cannot make just or moral a war which otherwise is not.

Mr. Hoon: I do not accept that the Security Council would take a decision in relation to the use of military force that was neither just nor moral. As I have indicated to the right hon. and learned Gentleman before, nor do I accept that it would take a decision that was contrary to international law. I believe that it is important that we give the current process the opportunity of reaching its conclusion. I hope that that would be a peaceful conclusion, but it is necessary that we support that process with a credible use of the threat of force.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): This is a formidable force package. If it is to be used in a war, it will be an allied war. Is my right hon. Friend aware whether similar force packages have been announced or are about to be announced by other allied countries?

Mr. Hoon: As I told the House the week before last, the United States has made a request to some 50 countries for a military contribution. I know that a number of countries have already responded positively. Clearly, the United States has already deployed a very considerable force to the Gulf region, and I anticipate that other countries will follow suit in due course.

Patrick Mercer (Newark): The Secretary of State has already indicated that about a quarter of the Army's strength will be in the Gulf and that, for very understandable reasons, its commitment there will be open-ended. He has also commented on the fact that, if necessary, those personnel will be replaced in order to sustain that presence. In that case, will he be kind enough to comment on the wisdom of a suspension of a large part of the Army's recruitment effort this year?

Mr. Hoon: The "suspension", as the hon. Gentleman describes it, is a short-term postponement of a number of young men and women's opportunities to start training. The reason for that is an excellent one, as I am sure he is well aware: recruitment this year has been so successful that it has filled up all the available places, so those who applied rather later in the day will have to wait a short time before their training can begin. That is excellent news for the Army, as the numbers are increasing.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore): May I welcome the continued and steady build-up of troops, which sends what we recognise to be the only message that Saddam Hussein understands? On the basis that alternative end games that can avoid war may be played out, how feasible is it to hold those troops in position in readiness and to redeploy them outside the area, should an alternative solution beyond war be found?

Mr. Hoon: I described the package as balanced and flexible; it will be sufficiently so to allow for perfectly reasonable scenarios that might not, as we would hope, involve the use of military force in the way in which all of us fear may be necessary. We are certainly alive to the results that might occur other than the use of force.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The Secretary of State has now announced the deployment of 29,000 soldiers and commandos, plus the naval element and whatever the Air Force element is. In addition to ongoing operational deployments in Northern Ireland, Kosovo and Bosnia, it cannot possibly be in the public interest that 20,000 further servicemen be kept on stand-by to cover for potentially striking firemen. Has he informed the Attorney-General—and if not, will he do so—that it is not in the public interest that that should remain the case?

Mr. Hoon: I can think of nothing that is more in the public interest than that about 19,000 members of the armed forces should be available to fight fires in the event of a strike.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): In reply to the Opposition spokesman, the Defence Secretary used the phrase "the right time" for a parliamentary debate. Is the right time before or after a commitment of forces? As one who wore the epaulettes of 7 Armoured Brigade for two years, may I ask how he replies to General Cordingley, who is now very critical of what the Government are doing and who commanded in the Gulf last time, and the many others who have asked what the military objective of the operation is?

Finally, given that the American imperative is to keep down the number of bodybags, which means massive bombing before any ground operations, what is the British Government's attitude to massive bombing that will lead to collateral damage, by which we mean thousands of innocent deaths?

Mr. Hoon: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary dealt with the question about the right time for a parliamentary debate. He said that it was obviously before the commitment of any forces, if possible. However, he also said that it was crucial not to signal in advance the timing of any military operation. He therefore accepted the need for some caution on timing. That remains the Government's position.

The military objective is also clear: to uphold the will of the international community, as expressed in a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions.

I emphasise the point in my statement about the need to support the political and diplomatic process with a credible threat of the use of force. That remains the Government's position.

I emphasise to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) that no decisions have been made about any sort of military force. However, any bombing campaign would remain firmly within the bounds of international law.

Hugh Robertson (Faversham and Mid-Kent): May I add my support for the deployment? I am sure that all hon. Members hope that war will be avoided, but it is surely sensible to apply the maximum strategic coercion in support of the United Nations resolution. Can the Secretary of State confirm today to which country or countries the force will deploy? What assessment has been made of the terrorist threat during the deployment phase?

Mr. Hoon: It would not be sensible for me to be as specific as the hon. Gentleman might like on the destination of any part of the force package. However, I assure him that proper steps will be taken to assess the terrorist threat and the appropriate action to deal with it.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): Could my right hon. Friend hazard a guess about the number of weapons of mass destruction that would have to be found before a clear and credible threat of force becomes a force to kill?

Mr. Hoon: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I believe that she has the issue the wrong way around. It is a not question of identifying the number of weapons of mass destruction that would have to be found, but of upholding the clear terms of United Nations Security Council resolution 1441. That gave Saddam Hussein and his regime in Iraq the final opportunity to comply with the international community's wishes. I know that my hon. Friend strongly supports that.

The resolution also gave Saddam Hussein an opportunity to declare existing holdings of weapons of mass destruction. He purported to do that in some 11,000 pages of documentation, which were issued shortly before Christmas. It is unfortunate for the international community that the document did not disclose several significant items, some of which are now being revealed.

Bob Russell (Colchester): May I advise the Secretary of State that I have detected no enthusiasm among Colchester's civilian population for the Government's proposed action in Iraq? There is hardly dancing in the streets. However, if 16 Air Assault Brigade is called upon to go to war, I have every confidence that the population will give its total support.

Have 16 Air Assault Brigade's preparations been diluted and interrupted by participation in firefighting measures?

Mr. Hoon: No one, least of all anyone in the Ministry of Defence, is enthusiastic about the need for military action. I assure all hon. Members that it is a last resort, which must be used only when all other political and diplomatic routes are exhausted. In contrast to the hon. Gentleman, I find strong support for the Government's position. The population of the United Kingdom backs the need to uphold the international community's decisions as expressed in United Nations Security Council resolutions. They recognise that we must deal with the threat that Iraq poses. On the preparatory measures, I am not aware that they have been in any way affected by the need to deploy on Operation Fresco to fight fires. Indeed, we took a decision to allow 16 Air Assault Brigade to withdraw from that operation in stages so that it would have the time fully to prepare for any contingencies in relation to military operations in Iraq.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): As no material breach of resolution 1441 has been presented to the United Nations by the weapons inspectors, does not my right hon. Friend's statement today that the movement of British troops is a contingency and not a commitment ring very hollow indeed? Is not the movement of troops taking place because ground troops will not be able to engage in military action after the end of February or the beginning of March because the weather will become too inclement? Has not a decision to engage in military action indeed been taken?

Mr. Hoon: As the resolution itself makes clear, the question of what is or is not a material breach is a matter for the weapons inspectors, following their report to the Security Council and the discussion in the Security Council that will be required thereafter. That is all set out clearly in resolution 1441. I can therefore assure my hon. Friend, as I assure the House, that no specific decision has been taken about the use of this force, but, unless that force is prepared and made available, we would not be in a position to take military action, should it subsequently be required. As I have said to the House before, the weather is not a factor in this regard.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I would have liked to thank the right hon. Gentleman for providing an advance copy of his statement, but, unfortunately, Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National party were not allowed to have an advance copy. I wonder whether that is an extension of the Prime Minister's pique from last Wednesday. In any event, the Secretary of State has gone out of his way to say that war is not inevitable. Committing 30,000 ground troops, however, smacks of inevitability. Has he taken into account the fact that the International Atomic Energy Agency has said that the inspections might take up to a year? If so, has he made any contingency plans for the replacement of troops, home leave, and so on?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman is quite right about the possible length of the inspections. However, he also needs to note the provision in resolution 1441 that states that the inspectors can return to the Security Council at any stage in the process. In those circumstances, it is obviously necessary for us to have available the military force that could be required to enforce the terms of the resolution. If we did not take the decisions that I have announced today, we would not be in that position. We cannot, therefore, wait for the year that the hon.

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Gentleman's question implies might be necessary, if the inspectors return to the Security Council at an earlier stage to indicate their concerns.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): How much extra pay will our armed forces get in a conflict such as this? After all, they are putting their lives on the line.

Mr. Hoon: Significant allowances are available to our armed forces when they are deployed. It would not be appropriate for me to go into detail about them at this stage, simply because they depend on the length of any deployment and the time spent away from home. Equally, as right hon. and hon. Members will be aware, we are likely in the short term to receive a report from the armed forces pay review body, stating its recommendations on pay increases for the forthcoming financial year.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): In his statement, the Secretary of State made it clear that there would be a requirement for the call-up of reservists to support the deployment, but he could not say how many or when. Is that because the Reserve Forces Act 1996 is deficient in ensuring that reservists' jobs are maintained while they are called up? Secondly, on air deployment, will the Ministry of Defence need to have recourse to civil air assets—in particular, high-volume aeroplanes such as the Antonov—to augment the C-5 Galaxies?

Mr. Hoon: I am not aware of any specific deficiency in the Act, and that certainly was not the reason for my caution in setting out numbers. On the last occasion that I addressed the House, I said that, at that stage, we were looking to issue sufficient notices to involve about 1,500 members of the reserve forces. Obviously, that figure is likely to increase, but it is not likely to increase to the level speculated in the newspapers. I assure the hon. Gentleman, as I assure other Members of the House, that when a more specific figure is available I shall ensure that those details are made known to the House. We have already used certain civilian aircraft for transport purposes, and I anticipate that that will continue when and if it is necessary to deploy those forces to the region.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): As my right hon. Friend knows, other options can be pursued alongside the threat of military force. One of those, for which I have pressed repeatedly in the House over a number of years, is indicting the Iraqi regime for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary say that they want to do that, and more than 200 MPs from both sides of the House of Commons have said that they want to see it done.

Today, I received a letter from the Attorney-General, who, two and a half years later, is still exploring what can be done. He says that his office, along with the police and counsel, are exploring how they can indict members of the regime. As my right hon. Friend knows, they have the evidence—it was given to them two and a half years ago. If we were using that evidence and if we had arrest warrants, people such as Ali Hassan al-Majeed, who are in Damascus at present, could be arrested for killing 100,000 Kurds and for gassing the Kurds at Halabja. Why on earth are the Government not—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. I am sorry to stop the hon. Lady, but that does not relate directly to the statement.

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend has raised that issue with me on a number of occasions, and she lists the other members of the Government whom she has addressed on the same question. We all admire her determination and, indeed, the principle of what she is setting out, but there is obviously a need for further consideration of whether what she recommends is practically possible and whether it would achieve anything. I rather thought that her answer from the Attorney-General was quite encouraging in that sense. What she advocates is sensible, but it obviously requires further practical consideration.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): While the deployment will obviously send out a positive message to our allies and, I hope, a message of determination to the Saddam regime, what message does the Secretary of State imagine it will send to the people of Iraq? Is he satisfied that enough is being spent by the US and UK Governments in telling the people of Iraq the true position and what problems they face? Is he also satisfied that our troops, while protected against the possibility of a missile attack, are satisfactorily protected against biochemical or biological warfare being waged against them in the early stages of their deployment?

Mr. Hoon: Let me make it clear that the Government—and, I anticipate, no other Government—have any quarrel whatever with the people of Iraq. It may be that the only Government with any serious difficulty with the people of Iraq are the Iraqi regime led by Saddam Hussein, who have perpetrated unspeakable horrors on them over many years. Indeed, there is growing evidence to show that the people of Iraq are sick and tired of Saddam Hussein and are ready for a change. That is clearly anticipated by resolution 1441, but it is important that we continue to maintain the pressure on the regime and those who support them without in any way causing unnecessary difficulty for the people of Iraq.

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): All of us in the House recognise the professionalism and dedication of our armed forces, but, given what the Secretary of State called the massive deployment of American forces in the Gulf area and, in particular, the commitment over the weekend of more American divisions—armoured, airborne and infantry—will he tell the House what, specifically, those units add to the capability of the massive force already assembled in the Gulf; or do they simply provide political credibility for that American force?

Mr. Hoon: In the planning of any multinational operation, it is always necessary to identify the contribution that individual countries can best make. It may help my hon. Friend if he considered carefully the contribution that British forces were able to make in military operations in and around Afghanistan, when exactly the same question could have been asked. British forces provided some excellent assistance to American forces in areas where the Americans required that extra assistance. Should military action be necessary in Iraq, the same principle will apply.

Angus Robertson (Moray): Bearing in mind the role that air power plays in modern warfare and the fact that a high proportion of air service personnel are on 10-day stand-by notices, could the Secretary of State give some certainty to those personnel and their families by telling the House when a statement will be made on any air deployment?

Mr. Hoon: I cannot give a specific date. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman appreciates that air power can be deployed at much shorter notice than the force that I have set out to the House today. Certainly, the deployment of air power is under active consideration, including the impact on the Royal Air Force and the decisions that will need to be taken in conjunction with our allies.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that no British troops will be used in an invasion of Iraq unless the weapons inspectors have reported back to the United Nations that a material breach has taken place, and the Security Council, having failed to persuade Saddam Hussein to resolve this matter peacefully, makes a decision about what military action is appropriate?

Mr. Hoon: I can assure the House that the process set out in Security Council resolution 1441 will be followed.

Mr. John Lyons (Strathkelvin and Bearsden): If the UN Security Council decides not to take military action over Iraq, will we accept that decision?

Mr. Hoon: That is a matter for the United Nations Security Council and its individual members. That decision has yet to be taken.

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley): Did the Defence Secretary know that Kofi Annan said that it was the credible threat of force that had forced Saddam Hussein to allow in the weapons inspectors? Did he also hear Tony Benn on the "Today" programme, who, when asked whether he would support the deployment of force if there were a proven material breach and a second UN Security Council resolution, refused to answer three times? Have the critics who find it so easy to criticise the Government suggested to him an alternative way of disarming the murderous dictator?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's observations, not least about what Kofi Annan has said on a number of occasions. What unites all Members of the House is the need for the support of United Nations Security Council resolutions. It is important that all right hon. and hon. Members of the House and any critics outside recognise that, if the United Nations process is to mean anything, its decisions must be upheld and enforced.

Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): President Bush senior stopped the first Gulf war when the killing went above 100,000. Is there to be no limit to the turkey shoot this time? The United Nations has said that there are likely to be some 900,000 refugees in the event of war. What would be the policy of UK and US troops if those refugees were in the way of their push towards central Baghdad?

Mr. Hoon: No decision has been taken on the use of military force. I should make it clear to my hon. Friend that it is necessary to prepare for all contingencies. We cannot assume that military action will be easy and straightforward. We are potentially committing people to difficult and dangerous operations, and we must have regard to their safety and security while respecting the rules of international law that govern such deployments.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West): What proof has the Secretary of State found of collaboration between the Iraqi regime and al-Qaeda?

Mr. Hoon: We are aware of some contact between the Iraqi regime and al-Qaeda over a number of years, but as I have made clear to the House on several occasions, there is no evidence to link the Iraqi regime to the appalling events of 11 September.

Mr. Jenkin: We thank the Secretary of State for the answers he has been able to give, and recognise that there are some that he cannot give. He is, however, aware of the old adage that sweat saves blood, and he has failed to reassure us that none of the units now being deployed on this operation has been withdrawn from Operation Fresco. Can he assure us that none of the units being deployed is likely to be drawn on for firefighting duties?

Mr. Hoon: I said that 16 Air Assault Brigade, for example, would be withdrawn from Operation Fresco in stages. I made that very clear. I assure the hon. Gentleman and the House, however, that it will be properly prepared for any military action, should that subsequently be required.

Points of Order

4.56 pm

Mr. Greg Knight (East Yorkshire): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As you know, Mr. Speaker has often expressed his disapproval when Ministers have made important statements to the press before the House has been notified. In the case of the statement by the Secretary of State for Defence, the House was the last to be told. The statement was widely trailed in the Sunday newspapers and in today's media. This appears to be a recurring pattern with the current Secretary of State.

I do not know whether the leaks are motivated by vanity, or whether they result from incompetence or from a lack of respect for the House: but this is now occurring, if not daily, almost twice weekly. Will you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, convey to Mr. Speaker our anger about the fact that Ministers still seem more obsessed with spinning in the press than with reporting to the House? Will you ask him to look again at the problem, and see what action can be taken to halt this deplorable practice?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to that entirely scurrilous observation from the Opposition Front Bench—

Mr. Knight: It is in *The Sunday Telegraph*.

Mr. Hoon: The right hon. Gentleman refers from a sedentary position to *The Sunday Telegraph*, in which an interview with me appeared. If, rather than making generalised observations that anyone can come to the Dispatch Box and make, he can give specific examples of specific involvement in the practice on the part of Ministers, I assure him that they will be properly investigated. Instead of coming along and making this kind of—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Secretary of State, but this is developing into a debate, and I think I should respond.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I will take the hon. Gentleman's point of order in a moment. I must deal with this one first, unless the hon. Gentleman's is further to it.

The point made by the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight) will be on the record. Mr. Speaker is well aware of the matters to which he has referred, and is deeply concerned about them. I understand that he intends to take them up with the Ministers concerned.

Mr. Dalyell: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. May I raise a matter that extends beyond my interests, about which I have written Mr. Speaker a four-page letter?

On Friday, there appeared on the Order Paper Question 10, in my name, asking the Home Secretary if he would place in the Library unrestricted information about ricin from the laboratory of the Government Chemist. I displayed a legitimate interest in ricin. I asked the Chairman of the Select Committee on Science and Technology—my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson)—about the matter, and we agreed that we would ask about the actions of the laboratory of the Government Chemist. That was accepted by the Table Office, on condition that I was careful about supplementary questions because of sub judice rules. It was deemed a legitimate question. On Friday, I was rung up by the Home Office, by a Miss Anna Michael, to be told somewhat cavalierly that my question had been transferred to the Department of Health. I queried that and asked her to check it. The question was taken off the Order Paper and transferred not to the Department of Health, but to the Ministry of Defence on the ground that the work on ricin was done at Porton Down.

I concede that most of the work is done at Porton Down but I assert that, albeit that the laboratory of the Government Chemist is now privatised, there is constant reaction and relationship between the Home Office and the laboratory of the Government Chemist, which is quite proper. I also assert that certain personnel in the laboratory of the Government Chemist were perfectly properly consulted.

In those circumstances, is it right that a question, Question 10, which would certainly have been reached, is just taken off the Order Paper on the basis, frankly, of decisions by fairly junior civil servants? I ask for your protection in this matter.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I understand completely the points that the hon. Gentleman has made. I am sorry that he lost his place in the list of questions for today but it is a long-standing principle that decisions about the transfer of questions rest with Ministers and are not matters in which the Chair seeks to intervene.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I hope that you can be helpful in this matter. I am sure that you will be. You will have observed over the weekend the many demonstrations, not only in this country but throughout the world, against a possible invasion in Iraq. Tomorrow, there will be lobbying of this House by people who are deeply concerned about a possible invasion and our participation in it. Today, yet again, a Secretary of State refused to say whether we could have a debate in the House and indeed a vote—*[Interruption.]* Well, the Secretary of State certainly evaded the question of whether we go to war against Iraq. Last—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I well understand the points that the hon. Lady is seeking to make. They have already been well aired and are perhaps matters that she could raise at other times in other places. It is certainly not a point of order for the Chair at this time.

Mr. Dalyell: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that I have dealt adequately with that point of order. We must now move on.

Mr. Dalyell: On an entirely different point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Is the hon. Gentleman sure that it is a different point of order? I do not want to deal further with the point of order raised by the hon. Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon).

Mr. Dalyell: It is a different point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The House passed a devolution Bill and part of the understanding of the devolution Bill was that the Scottish Parliament would not discuss matters reserved to Westminster. I understand why the Scottish Parliament had a debate and a substantive vote on Thursday on Iraq but could Mr. Speaker reflect on the issues that are involved in this?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that I have heard sufficient to be able to deal with the point of order that the hon. Gentleman is raising. The matters that are raised, discussed, debated and voted on in the Scottish Parliament are not a matter for the Chair of this House.

Mr. Dalyell: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have dealt with that and I am not going to deal with it any more this afternoon. The hon. Gentleman must resume his seat.

Opposition Day

[3RD ALLOTTED DAY]

Occupational Pensions

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I must tell the House that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

5.4 pm

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): I beg to move,

> That this House expresses its deep concern at current arrangements for winding-up occupational pension schemes, which leave many people receiving much less than expected for their retirement; deplores the lack of action by the Government to address this issue; notes that present workers near to retirement after long service with the employer often receive less than those who retired early after less service; recognises the great urgency of the issue because of the large number of schemes now moving towards wind-up; welcomes the proposals in the National Association of Pension Funds document, Pensions—Plain and Simple, for a possible new schedule of priorities on winding-up a final salary scheme with an insolvent employer; further notes that the Government in its Green Paper, Simplicity, Security and Choice, was prepared to consider such a measure; further notes that there is widespread support in Parliament for such changes; and urges the Government to take early action to address the crisis and speedily to introduce new winding-up priorities which take proper account of the age and length of service of non-retired scheme members.

It may be for the convenience of hon. Members on both sides of the House if I say that we intend to split the time that remains equally, and conclude the first Opposition day debate by about 7.30 pm.

The debate could not be more timely, because we face a wide-ranging crisis in the world of pensions. It is a crisis about the incentives to save, which has led to an estimated gap in savings of £27 billion; it is a crisis of increasing costs to pension funds; it is a crisis of confidence in the Government and employers; and above all, it is a crisis of escalating closures and wind-ups of pension schemes. Even when the wind-ups occur, there is a crisis of unfairness in the way that the assets of pension funds are shared. However, what the Government are offering is yet another Green Paper and yet another consultation. Today, we are asking for urgent action, but in one area alone.

This debate is about particular proposals for reform to achieve the fairer sharing of assets when occupational pension schemes are wound up—proposals that command considerable support in the House. Do we really have to wait perhaps for years, when this change could be made speedily?

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): The hon. Gentleman says that we should not have more debate, and that we should get on with the business of bringing relief to those of our constituents who are being affected adversely by the winding up of their pension schemes. Is he not aware that I have a Bill before the House on the winding up of pension schemes? If the Opposition are so keen, why do they not adopt that Bill and use some of their time to advance it through this House?

Mr. Heald: The right hon. Gentleman is constructive in this area, and I am always very happy to discuss with

[Mr. Heald]

him detailed proposals that will help those throughout this country who are involved in pension schemes. Equally, I hope that he will help us by canvassing the Government's support for what I am proposing today.

Mr. Field *rose—*

Mr. Heald: If the right hon. Gentleman will allow me, I shall outline what we are talking about a little more fully.

The vast majority of problems have arisen where final salary schemes are being wound up and the employer is in liquidation. Of course, there are also cases where solvent employers are winding up, and I shall deal with cases such as Maersk later in my remarks. However, it is in cases involving liquidation and a forced wind-up where the problem is perhaps most acutely felt. The rights of pensioners who are already receiving their pensions, including their right to receive future increases in pensions, are placed above the accrued rights of continuing workers, however long they have been with the employer. So employees who are approaching retirement find that they will receive only a fraction of the pension that they were expecting.

Of course, it is true to say that all future pensions would be paid in full if there were enough money in the scheme, but the pension schemes of insolvent employers are all too often underfunded. The importance of this issue was shown through the recent experience of Allied Steel and Wire, which went into receivership on 10 July last year. Within days, on 18 July, it was announced that the pension schemes for the Cardiff and Sheerness plants were to be wound up. The operation of the priority rules—putting those pensions in payment first—meant that many employees of long service at both Cardiff and Sheerness were told to expect pitifully low levels of pension: 15 or 16 per cent. at Cardiff, and no more than about 50 per cent. at Sheerness.

The plight of ASW's workers has touched the hearts of people throughout the country, particularly following the "Panorama" programme "How Safe is your Pension?", which was aired on 17 November last year.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff, West): As the hon. Gentleman knows, as the MP for Cardiff, West, I am well aware of the issues that he raises. Does he agree that, in addition to examining the rules governing the way in which the pension fund is distributed on wind-up, we should also look at the role of the independent trustee? Do the hon. Gentleman's proposals include putting a cap on the percentage of fees that the independent trustee pays himself on the winding up of pension schemes?

Mr. Heald: I certainly agree that there is concern about that. Reports have shown that substantial fees are being charged by professionals. We should consider that to see whether we can find a way of lowering those costs. What I am trying to do in this short Opposition day debate, however, is to urge the Government to deal quickly and discretely with a small matter, so that the worst excesses of the problem at ASW do not happen again in the coming months while the Government consult at leisure on their Green Paper.

The "Panorama" programme highlighted the experience of John Benson, who described coming home to his wife to tell her that he had lost his job, thinking that his pension was safe, and then about 10 days later having to tell her that in fact he was only to get a tiny part of his pension and that the family were in trouble. He did not understand why he had ended up in that situation.

The Mail on Sunday highlighted the situation of Bernie Tarpar, aged 54, who has 28 years service at Sheerness. He is a technician who hoped to retire at 62, with over 35 years service by then, and to receive about half his salary in pension and have a lump sum with which to visit his family in Australia. He said that he felt bitterly let down. He said:

> "Over the years we have shown great loyalty to our employer, who has rewarded us with good pay. But the winding-up of our pensions leaves us devastated and extremely worried."

I have had letters from hard-pressed ASW victims, as other hon. Members will have done, and I have had the opportunity to talk to several of them. I know that the Minister has met John Hayter, to whom I have spoken. He is 58 and has been in the scheme for 28 years. He expected to retire on half salary, but he has been told that he will get half of that. He said:

> "We have followed the rules all the way along and then bang—it is taken away . . . They never said my pension might not be safe, not once."

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I have a lot of sympathy with the cases that the hon. Gentleman raises. Does he accept, however, as we must all accept, that we are dealing with a pot of money that is inadequate to pay everybody, and unless more money is made available, the flipside of paying more to the people whom he describes, who have suffered badly, is to pay less to retired pensioners? Does he accept that that would create new uncertainty for those who have already retired? Is he saying that if the Conservatives returned to office, everybody drawing an occupational pension from a private company would be at risk of having their pension cut if the firm went into liquidation?

Mr. Heald: I am about to outline what we are proposing. There is an issue of justice. Somebody who has worked for longer than they planned to, perhaps because they have been asked to do so to allow the company to restructure or to move into administration, can receive far less—half their pension or less—than a person who worked for fewer years and retired early. As I shall make clear in a moment, there are cases in which directors seem to have retired in a remarkably prescient way, taking millions of pounds from the scheme ahead of a change. I shall develop my argument, and I am happy for the hon. Gentleman to intervene if he thinks that there is anything unjust about it.

There are other such cases, such as that of British Federal, where the scheme has a shortfall of £2 million. The National Association of Pension Funds warns us that a large number of schemes are moving towards wind-up. In many cases, existing pensioners are safeguarded, as are rises in their pensions, but employees, who may have longer service, may receive half their pension or less. It is often said that the best workers, those who are vitally needed in the company, suffer most. We hear anecdotally that some of those workers are even encouraged not to retire.

Why are pension funds so underfunded? There is no doubt that a key factor is the loss of £5 billion a year, taken from funds by the Chancellor in extra taxes after he scrapped the dividend tax credits. The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants made a point that is not boring, even though I notice that some Labour Members are yawning because they have heard these things so many times before. They will hear them many more times. The association stated:

> "The withdrawal of the tax credit is, in our view, the most important single contributory factor in the problems that currently afflict . . . schemes."

The CBI makes the same point. David Rosser, its Welsh director, said:

> "The Government put us in this mess by taking out, through taxation, £5 billion a year from company pension schemes."

Ken Jackson, a union leader, said the same thing a year ago. The London chambers of commerce have said it.

Mr. Bill Tynan (Hamilton, South) *rose—*

Mr. Heald: Does the hon. Gentleman say it?

Mr. Tynan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Do the Opposition have any plans to restore the tax dividend?

Mr. Heald: The disincentives to save—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer the question".] I shall answer the question. The disincentives to save have been described as massive by many people throughout the pensions world. They are caused by the widespread extension of means-testing. The first thing to do is try to find a way of removing some of the disincentives to save. Employers who might be considering investing in a pension scheme know that employees earning less than £20,000 would receive the same amount through means-tested benefits, so what would be the point of them saving for their employees? There are massive disincentives.

I agree, however, that we need to consider incentives for employers to save in pension schemes. We are actively looking into that—the sad thing is that the Government are not. They have taken £5 billion a year out of the schemes so less money is available, while at the same time they have widened means-testing so that there are massive disincentives to save. A consensus on how to proceed is emerging in the pensions world—on how to simplify the system and provide greater incentives to save and to remove some of the disincentives. But what are the Government doing? They sit by complacently and are not even prepared to discuss the matter.

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley): There is a genuine problem; it is faced by my constituents who work for United Engineering Forgings. No one is more sympathetic to their plight than my right hon. Friend the Minister for Pensions. Would not the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) better serve my constituents and all those affected if he made constructive proposals instead of party political capital?

Mr. Heald: On an Opposition day, the right hon. Gentleman must excuse me for replying to an intervention. After all, he often does so.

We are making constructive proposals—that is exactly what I am doing—but it is right to record why we are in such a mess. It is the Government's fault. They introduced a tax that takes £5 billion a year. They have weakened protection for workers by reducing the minimum funding requirement. Actuaries say that it was the decision to relax MFR by 8 per cent. in March 2002 that led to Maersk's decision to close its pension scheme, a point to which I shall return later.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Heald: I have given way several times and I want to continue with my speech.

There are other reasons why it is more expensive to buy the deferred annuities necessary to secure the liabilities on wind-up. Assumptions about how long people will live have increased and the cost of index-linked gilts has risen as yields have fallen, yet the Government have failed to explain any of that to the public. If interest rates fall, the cost of providing a pension rises. The failure to point out those consequences meant that few if any pension scheme members have been aware of the new-found fragility of their pensions. As a result, they have been unable to take action to deal with the situation. The effect is dramatic. In 1997, the MFR was adequate on wind-up to buy between 80 per cent. of the accrued pension for a 40-year-old still working for a company and as much as 95 per cent. for a 60-year-old. That has now been reduced to less than half.

Even some solvent companies are moving to wind up their pension funds. One deplores their decision. It is one thing if the choice is between the company's future existence or its pension scheme, but in some cases the choice is purely commercial—which the Government have encouraged by their negligence. It is wrong and short-sighted for a company to turn its back on long-standing employees when it is possible to continue its pension fund. Some people say that a pension is just deferred pay, but to many there is an obligation upon an employer to ensure that people who give their working lives to a company are not without the resources needed in their retirement.

Mr. David Watts (St. Helens, North): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the main cause of problems in the pensions industry is the underperformance of the market and the economy? Does he further agree that one of the reasons for deficits is that many companies took long pension contribution holidays, from which they benefited at the time, but are now unwilling to put in the resources needed?

Mr. Heald: That will not do. The Government tell us time and time again how wonderfully the economy is performing, but when pensions are in such a mess as a direct result of the actions of the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the Government blame the economy. Some of the reasons for pensions being in crisis are external to the Government, but the most significant factor, according to experts, is the Chancellor's decision to increase the tax by as much as he did.

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North) *rose—*

Mr. Heald: I will not give way immediately. I want to move on to another important aspect.

[Mr. Heald]

Two ASW directors were allegedly paid packages valued at £2 million from the pension fund in the year prior to wind-up. Whatever the individual circumstances at ASW, there is widespread concern that directors with detailed inside knowledge can choose their moment to retire, while workers who continue in employment—sometimes at the behest of those very directors—may be left with only a fraction of their expected future pensions.

The National Association of Pension Funds' proposals aim at providing better protection for scheme members nearing retirement when an employer goes into liquidation. They also tackle the problem of directors who retire just before wind-up, by treating all members who have retired in the past year in the same way as those nearing retirement. The proposals would give priority to pensioners in payment but only at up to 90 per cent. of the current level, then to those expected to retire in the next 10 years, who would receive a 75 per cent. pension, and then others. While pensioners in payment would receive a little less and those who continue to work in the company less still, such a scheme would be much better, much fairer and much more just.

It may be that the Government have other proposals, but that suggested change would not prejudice any of them as it would apply only to wind-ups after the proposals have been introduced. My hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) has written to the Secretary of State offering our full co-operation in ensuring the prompt passage of legislation to change the priority order. We would like to co-operate with the Government to achieve an early outcome.

The NAPF emphasises the urgency of such reform in its briefing for this debate which states:

> "The NAPF urges the Government to take early action to take the winding-up priorities through new regulations."

The association points out that it is not necessary to wait for the redesign of the MFR replacement and adds:

> "We consider that this issue is urgent because of the large number of schemes now moving to wind-up."

The Government, in their recent Green Paper, have proposed other suggestions for consultation, but none of those ideas would be prejudiced by that. The Government have played a part in creating the crisis, and the measures that we propose for emergency action would save future pension scheme members some of the agony suffered by ASW and other members, whose plight I have been highlighting.

Mr. Frank Field: May I return to the point that I made earlier? I know that Oppositions have never done this in the past, but there is nothing in the Standing Orders of the House that would prevent the Opposition from using some of their Opposition time to introduce their own measures. If this is so important, why does not the hon. Gentleman introduce his proposals or back those that I am putting forward?

Mr. Heald: The right hon. Gentleman makes a fair enough point, but surely I ought to try to persuade the Minister first. The Government have most of the time available to the House, so they can act with dispatch. The trouble is that they will not. They sit around twiddling their thumbs, producing for consultation measures that we have seen time and again before. There have been 26 consultation exercises, as the right hon. Gentleman says—he agrees with me about that. Surely we should get on to the Government and say, as I am doing, that we should act now.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I have listened carefully to what the hon. Gentleman says about changing the priority order, but does he accept that raising the priority of pensioners subordinates the priority of the debt? Banks therefore run an increased risk and the cost of capital will go up, so those companies could be put under even greater pressure, forcing them into liquidation earlier. All that may cause even more problems that the hon. Gentleman seeks to solve.

Mr. Heald: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, but it is not relevant to this proposal, under which the money available to a pension fund should be split up differently, so that working members of the scheme do not end up being so cruelly disadvantaged as they have been in incidents such as that involving ASW. The Government are consulting on another proposal, under which the debt owed by the employer to meet the pension fund liabilities should have a higher priority. That proposal deserves serious consideration, but it is slightly different and the Minister will have heard the points that the hon. Gentleman makes.

The crisis in pensions is wide-ranging. There is a lack of incentive to save, caused by Government action in extending means-tested benefits. At the same time, there is a crisis of increased costs for pension funds, caused by the Chancellor's tax increase on those funds. There is a lack of confidence, with the recent YouGov survey showing that just 4 per cent. of people in Britain trust the Government to keep their word on pensions. It is crisis of escalating closures, which have doubled in the past year according to the NAPF—it is warning of many new wind-ups—but this debate is about the crisis of fairness in wind-up arrangements. We may not be able to solve all the problems immediately, but the Government can act.

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): The hon. Gentleman is pressing the Government to introduce proposals on the differing range of priorities for pension schemes on wind-up. I accept that such measures are urgent, but would it not sow more confusion to introduce some measures now, while waiting to make further changes until after the Government have consulted on their Green Paper? There is nothing inherently superior in the scheme proposed by the NAPF other than perhaps the priority on which the Government are consulting. Indeed, there would be grave concern about the idea of messing around with existing pensioners' benefits.

Mr. Heald: The point is that the NAPF came forward with these ideas and, on this particular subject, stressed the urgency of this reform. It is true that the Government are consulting on this and several other reforms relating to wind-up, which they are entitled to do, as they are of some complexity. This issue, however, is one of injustice: what happened at ASW needs to be tackled.

The Opposition are acting constructively. We are promising full support to the Government on this issue. Our motion deplores the lack of action on the issue. We are trying to spur on the Government on behalf of people in this country who have suffered already, and on behalf of those who will suffer if we do not make this change. We want a commitment to action today. I appeal to all hon. Members who care about this issue—and who have seen what happened in the cases of ASW, British Federal and others—for their support to get the Government to act. Let us urge them to action, with no more delays. We want this change now.

5.31 pm

The Minister for Pensions (Mr. Ian McCartney): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to end and to add instead thereof:

"acknowledges the crucial contribution of the UK tradition of occupational pension provision; welcomes the range of measures in the recent Green Paper to strengthen that tradition and to renew the pensions partnership between employers, employees, the financial services industry and Government; supports, in particular, the promotion of occupational pensions as a means to recruit and to retain good staff through the employer task force and other measures; notes the proposal to give employees the right to be consulted on changes to an employer's pension scheme; further notes the Government's consideration of a range of options to bolster member protection in cases where schemes are wound up, including options for a fairer sharing of assets when schemes close, with more priority for workers closer to retirement or those with more years of contributions; believes that there should be 100 per cent. protection in cases of fraud; supports the appointment of a new proactive regulator to investigate fraud and maladministration; further notes the proposed £150–£200 million administrative savings which will encourage firms to open new schemes and keep existing schemes running; and further welcomes the establishment of the independent Pension Commission to assess how effectively the current voluntarist approach is developing and to make recommendations to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on whether there is a case for moving beyond that approach."

We welcome the opportunity to debate the extremely important issue of security in retirement for working men and women. The Government are already consulting widely about proposals in the Green Paper, "Simplicity, Security and Choice: Working and Saving for Retirement", published on 17 December 2002, on which there was a statement in the House. The Green Paper makes it completely clear that, as a Government, we are alert to and concerned about the difficulties that individuals face when their schemes are wound up, either because their employer becomes insolvent or because their employer decides to wind up their pension scheme voluntarily. As part of the process of developing the Green Paper, as the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) acknowledged, I met a range of employees—and sometimes employees and management—in relation to a variety of schemes, which helped my deliberations in advance of preparing for the Green Paper.

I also welcome the belated acknowledgement by Opposition Members of the need for some form of consensus on pension policy. I am not sure that the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire will promote a general consensus, but there has certainly been a move forward in respect of some items raised today, which is to be welcomed. The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) wrote to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, and I confirm receipt of the letter. I am not sure that it arrived before it reached the press, but we have got it. I thank the hon. Gentleman for providing it, and my right hon. Friend will respond in due course. We welcome the capacity of Members to seek consensus on some of these issues.

Perhaps we will also have an opportunity in this debate to explore issues in relation to security in retirement, which we will deal with in some detail. At the same time, I should like to deal in detail with some of the issues in relation to consensus, as that gives the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire and his colleagues the opportunity to provide some insight as to where they will stand in the debate on the Green Paper.

Mr. Heald: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. McCartney: The hon. Gentleman has not heard what I have to say.

Mr. Heald: This is a two-and-a-half-hour debate about the winding-up arrangements. Is the Minister seriously suggesting that we will not have a full day's debate on the Green Paper?

Mr. McCartney: Do not be so silly. I have made it absolutely clear that I welcome debates in the House. The Government are committed to respond at the end of the consultation process and to provide opportunities for debate. In the context of the Green Paper, we welcome debate in the House with our colleagues and with Opposition Members. We want as much consensus as possible. Difficult as that may be on occasions, that is what drives us forward in terms of the Green Paper, and, I hope, its eventual outcome and the measures that flow from it.

In relation to that consensus, the hon. Member for Havant wrote on 7 March last year to the hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell)—who was a Parliamentary Under-Secretary in the previous Government—asking for proposals to be brought forward that would mean the privatisation of the basic state pension. He said that he had asked for a short note to be prepared on these issues. I have asked both hon. Gentlemen if they are prepared to put that note in the public domain as part of the process. The hon. Member for Havant has not indicated that that will occur, and the hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield, who is a member of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, has said that it is up to the Conservative Front Benchers to decide whether we can have this information. It would be useful if the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire could tell us before the day is out whether his and the Conservative party's review on the funded alternative to the basic state pension is in place. The hon. Member for Havant described in his letter to the hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield the case for that alternative as a

"powerful and compelling one which you and I share".

We have a right to know what Conservative Members mean.

The protection that people receive if their pension scheme is wound up is very important, and the Government understand why recent events have made the members of some pension schemes question whether that protection is adequate. The hon. Member for

[Mr. McCartney]

North-East Hertfordshire quoted from the letter that the hon. Member for Havant wrote last week to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. That letter calls for better protection, in particular through changing the priority order affecting pensioners and scheme members when an insolvent employer is forced to wind up a scheme. The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire is correct in thinking that such a change could be made by secondary legislation—as indeed could certain changes involving wind-ups by solvent employers, and that is an area where scheme members are more clearly being made to suffer by their employers. However, he has chosen not to mention that point in the debate so far.

My right hon. Friend will obviously reply to the letter in due course and he will deal with the issues. The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire and the shadow Secretary of State were leading members of the previous Government and they know how difficult the issues are and why they have arisen. Indeed, the previous Government introduced the current legislation on the minimum funding requirement for scheme funding protection, and they also introduced the current member priority order on wind-up. The problems that my right hon. Friend and I are currently dealing with were created by the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire, but he did not even say that he was involved in the process of establishing arrangements that he now says—and rightly so—are leading to many people being screwed by their employers. He is responsible for that.

Mr. Heald: Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that, if circumstances change, one has to change the rules? Will he comment on the figures that I gave from Maersk that show that, in 1997, the minimum funding requirement would have provided between 80 and 95 per cent. funding for a continuing worker. Now the figure is less than 50 per cent.

Mr. McCartney: The hon. Gentleman fails to answer the question. He refers to fluctuations, but he designed the rules to protect workers. However, they have been totally inadequate and have failed to do that. Therefore, the Government have taken steps to start the process of repairing the hon. Gentleman's chronic mistakes.

I must emphasise that the agenda is currently the subject of widespread consultation. Sensible as it is to soften the current cliff edge of the priority order payments between actual and deferred pensioners, the change that the hon. Gentleman particularly proposes could create losers as well as gainers. We would divide up the same-sized pension fund as before, but in a different way. It might be a fairer way, but it would not give everybody priority treatment. Therefore, we as a Government need to think carefully about the issue and to take account of the views put to us in the consultation process before we act. Throughout the process so far on the minimum fund requirement, we have sought to get consensus from all those involved. That is important on such a complex issue.

The hon. Gentleman condemned the Government's proposals for the minimum fund requirement. *[Interruption.]* Yes, he did—he said that they had been criticised and he criticised them. I know that he has only recently been brought back to the Front Bench from the wilderness but, last May, the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) initiated a debate on the Occupational Pension Schemes (Minimum Funding Requirement and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2002. He said:

> "we welcome this broadly relaxing set of regulations. I hope that that relaxes the Minister and other Labour Members.
>
> I believe in giving credit where it is due. My contacts in the Engineering Employers Federation, with whom I have dealt on a number of industrial relations matters over the years, refer positively to the regulations, saying that MFR interim reforms are a 'shot in the arm' for defined-benefit schemes. They say that the reforms respond to most of their wishes for the interim consultation order and that they are pleased with them."—[*Official Report, First Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation*, 14 May 2002; c. 3.]

The Government have tried to sort out the complex muddle created by the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire and his friends, and we have taken industry with us. Last March, there were a number of changes, including extending the deficit correction periods within which scheme funding must be made good. That was important for employers, as it removed the requirement for annual recertification in schemes that are fully funded on a minimum fund requirement basis. That was important for the security of the fund, introducing stricter conditions when an employer decides to wind up a scheme voluntarily and improving protection for pension scheme members.

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire): The right hon. Gentleman has always taken a close interest in pension issues. I remember that he did so when I was pensions Minister. What points along those lines did he make when those regulations were introduced?

Mr. McCartney: I do not believe that I ever discussed those regulations—*[Interruption.]* I was in fact on the Opposition Front Bench talking about fiddled figures and unemployment. I talked about fat cats when the Tories did not want to introduce the national minimum wage and refused to do anything about youth unemployment. My gaze was therefore on another set of big issues that the Government, thank goodness, have put right.

One thing is quite clear. Even if the Opposition's decisions were well intended, they were an abysmal failure, and it is the present Government's watch to resolve that problem. At the outset, the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire said that he wanted consensus. If he took a bit of responsibility for the problem, I would take the consensus thing a bit more seriously.

We have launched a comprehensive, tiered consultation on the Green Paper proposals.

Mr. Heald: Is the right hon. Gentleman seriously denying that the cost of securing pensions has become far more expensive under his Government as yields have fallen? There is far less money to pay for pensions as the Chancellor has taken £5 billion a year in tax, but the right hon. Gentleman is saying that we should leave things as they are and not change them at all. The decisions that we made in 1997 were made on the basis of the facts available at the time, so should he not make some decisions based on today's facts?

Mr. McCartney: I thought that the hon. Gentleman was going to make an incisive point, but he made the same point during his opening remarks and on previous occasions. The abolition of the dividend tax credit, he said, was part of an overall package of reforms. He failed to answer when asked about that, so may I advise him of what the hon. Member for Havant said when asked whether he would reintroduce the dividend credit at the end of last year? In *The Observer* on 24 November, he said:

> "Actually, I don't think we'll be doing that. Helping pension funds doesn't mean going back to the same system we had before, you know."

Opposition Members may huff and puff, but they have no intention of making changes. However, we have introduced a new system to encourage long-term investment by employers in the British economy. The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire cannot back up his point. Indeed, his party will do nothing about the problem.

There will be a wide-ranging consultation on the Green Paper with employers, industry experts and the unions, who will be asked about the themes of extending working lives, tax and savings, and the new regulatory approach. In addition, my colleagues and I will hold seminars on a number of specific issues in the Green Paper. There will be technical workshops at which officials and pensions experts will discuss in detail specific changes, and there will be regional events in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland at which grassroots views will be sought.

Mr. Webb: Much has been said about consensus. At those workshops, it would be useful on a technical level to engage all the Opposition parties. Is the right hon. Gentleman willing to extend that invitation to us?

Mr. McCartney: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will write to Opposition parties about that, because it is important that we get this right. There is nothing to be gained either intellectually or politically in not involving Opposition parties as far as possible in these complex issues. Having given that commitment, correspondence from my right hon. Friend will be forthcoming.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McCartney: This is the last occasion. I must get on.

Chris Grayling: Will the Minister give the House an assurance that while that process is taking place, he will make representations to the Treasury to ensure that the Inland Revenue does not continue the process of looking at the specific rules that apply to pension funds and pension providers? That has been revealed in the media on a number of occasions in recent weeks, and the suggestion has clearly been that the Revenue is looking for more, rather than fewer, ways to raise money from pension schemes and pension providers.

Mr. McCartney: If the hon. Gentleman has not read the Green Paper, I suggest that he does so. It covers a range of issues of tax simplification, including reducing eight regimes to a single regime. Since the proposals were published on 17 December, they have been welcomed by employers and trade unions alike.

It is important that we hold events involving community organisations at local level. Those will be arranged.

When we came to power, fewer than 2 per cent. of pensions mis-selling cases had been satisfactorily resolved. We immediately sought to accelerate the process by naming and shaming the worst industry performers. By the end of last year, more than 99 per cent. of consumers with mis-selling claims had been compensated. Total compensation has reached £11 billion, and tough disciplinary action against laggard performers has resulted in £11 million of fines. Not a moment was spent by the Conservative party in supporting that activity or protecting pensioners ripped off by the policies of the last Tory Government.

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. McCartney: I am not one to avoid the hon. Gentleman—far from it—

Mr. Heald: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Was it in order for the right hon. Gentleman to criticise me for not speaking about the mis-selling of pensions from the 1980s, when the subject of the debate is winding-up arrangements?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman must leave such matters to the Chair.

Mr. McCartney: I am interested to discover that the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire is so sensitive. I was not speaking just about today. I was speaking about our attempts since 1997 to resolve the debacle. We got no support from the Opposition, even though it was they who created it in the first place.

I shall deal with the wider issues of protection.

Mr. Heald: What about winding up?

Mr. McCartney: I have dealt with that. By the end of my remarks, the hon. Gentleman will find that our proposals for consideration are far more comprehensive than what he has to offer. He raised issues about genuine protections, and I shall deal with those.

The new kind of regulator will be an important step forward. As good as Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority was—it was introduced by the previous Government—in many cases it was not sufficiently proactive and merely reacted to situations. Following the quinquennial review and the Green Paper, we decided to introduce a new regulator that would be risk-focused and flexible, that would target resources on schemes and weaknesses causing the greatest stress to scheme members, and that would produce quality advice and guidance to whistleblowers to help to identify materially significant breaches. We wanted to change its role so that it would be proactive rather than reactive.

[Mr. McCartney]

We will introduce new rights to information and consultation. When changes to pension schemes are proposed, we want to ensure that better information is available so that employees' choices are easier to understand. We are setting up an employers taskforce to actively involve employers and encourage them to highlight the value of the pensions that they provide. We are encouraging all employers to provide better information to help to extend pension provision and take-up by employees.

Mr. Weir: I am interested in what the Minister is saying about information. That may be at the core of the problem. The pensions mis-selling scandal, the Equitable Life debacle and various other matters have seriously undermined the public's belief in pensions. Do the Government have specific proposals to rebuild that faith in the pension system? Without that, we will get nowhere in reforming the system.

Mr. McCartney: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. That is why we established the Penrose inquiry into Equitable Life. The Government will study its report closely. That was also the purpose of the Green Paper. One of the key elements in restoring faith in the pension system is improving the protections offered by the system that we inherited. The fair sharing of assets—

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere) *rose—*

Mr. McCartney: I hope the hon. Gentleman will not mind if I do not give way. Numerous colleagues want to speak. We will have many opportunities to debate these matters, and I have given way six or seven times.

We want to ensure that when a scheme winds up, the assets are divided among scheme members as fairly as possible. I met my hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff, West (Kevin Brennan) and for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) and their constituents who have been affected by the winding up of the Allied Steel and Wire pension scheme. I know that the statutory priority order introduced by the Pensions Act 1995 and associated regulations are inadequate. We deal with that issue in proposals set out in the Green Paper. For the record, it was the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire who was the Minister who introduced the regulations.

In the Green Paper, we are consulting on whether people who are approaching retirement age should be given higher priority when a scheme's assets are distributed on wind-up or whether those who have been members of their pension scheme for a number of years should be given higher priority—a proposal that my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) has been promoting. We are also consulting on whether there should be fairer sharing of assets between those with larger and smaller pensions when a scheme winds up. That might involve setting a cap on the level of pension that those with the highest pensions might receive if limited assets are available in the scheme. That deals with one of the points made about fat cats who try to use short-term gain to get bigger access to the assets of the scheme to the detriment of the workers.

However, we recognise that, while changes to the priority order could mean that some people get more protection, that would be to the cost of others who receive less. We will therefore carefully consider the responses to the consultation. Only then will we decide what changes to implement and when. I am due to meet members of the all-party group on steel to discuss recent developments in pension provision in the steel industry and their concerns about protection of scheme members' rights. I look forward to hearing their views.

The statutory priority order can be modified by secondary legislation and we will consider how best to implement any proposals in that regard. On fairer sharing of assets and amending the priority order of creditors, when pension schemes such as those of Allied Steel and Wire or United Engineering Forgings are wound up because their sponsoring employer becomes insolvent, they are categorised along with unsecured creditors at the bottom of the list of creditors that can make a claim on an insolvent employer's estate. We are considering moving pension schemes up the order of priority for payment, possibly by creating a new a category of creditor that would give pension schemes higher priority than they have at present. That is another recognition of what was said in the discussions that I had before the Green Paper's publication.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that consultation on the Green Paper will inevitably be detailed and will almost certainly prove relatively lengthy—I state that not as a criticism, but simply as an observation of reality—is there any possibility that the right honourable Gentleman will be prepared to consider for the benefit of affected parties the retrospective application of his final proposals?

Mr. McCartney: On retrospection, the honest answer has to be no. However, there are issues about real time. There will be occasions on which wind-ups are not complete, but changes have been made in the wind-up regulations. In such circumstances, a decision has to be made on whether a scheme that has not been fully wound up will be covered by any changes that are made during that time. I am prepared to write to the hon. Gentleman about the matter, as the area is difficult and complex and I do not want to mislead him. I have been firm about the first part of his question and the second is worth looking at. Furthermore, I know that he has raised issues about a particular company. I have a policy to meet hon. Members, from whatever part of the House they come, with regard to issues relating to particular companies. If he wants to avail himself of that policy, I shall be more than happy to concur with his wishes.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. McCartney: No—

Mr. Brazier *rose—*

Mr. McCartney: The hon. Gentleman has an opportunity to make a speech, and I could rightly be criticised for giving way far too much. I have given an absolute commitment to the House to return to the matter and I dealt honestly with the two difficult issues that it involves.

We will also consider issues relating to insolvent employers in terms of insurance and centralised clearing house facilities.

Mr. Gardiner: My right hon. Friend said that the priority order might influence what happens to the benefit of pensioners. Does he accept that while the prioritisation of pensioners over debt may lead banks not to foreclose on them so quickly, the fact that debts are down the pecking order might mean that they foreclose earlier on the companies involved?

Mr. McCartney: I said that we were consulting on a number of measures and I did not go out of my way to indicate a preference as to those proposals. The issue must be considered in the Green Paper and large numbers of employees are rightly asking us to consider it. We will consider whatever recommendations arise on the basis of what is said by stakeholders, and I note what my hon. Friend has said.

We are again asking for consultation on insurance issues and the establishment of different funds far better to protect pensioners. We are improving compensation arrangements where schemes become insolvent because of acts of dishonesty—100 per cent. compensation will be provided in such cases—and looking at ways to improve arrangements in respect of underfunded benefit schemes where there is still a solvent employer. We are also looking to protect scheme members where a Government are seeking to define benefit provision, as we want to ensure that employers who want to make changes adequately consult their employees.

On transfer between private companies, we are bringing forward proposals on transfer of undertaking regulations to protect pensions. I was the Department of Trade and Industry Minister who introduced changes in the relevant European directive to protect pensions in public-to-public and public-to-private transfers for the first time in Britain. That will now be the case in respect of private-to-private transfers. I look forward to changes following the end of discussions on the Green Paper.

On renewal of partnerships, we are doing two very important things in the Green Paper. First, we are establishing the pensions commission to deal with a whole range of issues independently of the Government. Key people are stakeholders and all of them have skills and knowledge. The commission is intended to provide in the short term and the medium to long term a source of information that is independent of the Government and the Opposition, while giving them a capacity to ask questions and seek information about pensions issues. It will give advice about issues such as compulsion. The Government have not closed the door as some might suggest in trying to ensure that both state compulsion through national insurance contributions and the voluntary system can work more effectively. We have said that the matter should be considered closely by members of the commission over the next few years.

We will also introduce an employers taskforce, whose membership will, I hope, be announced soon. Its aim is to provide a bridge enabling employers to work with the Government and trade unions to achieve best practice and innovation and ensure that employees save more for the longer term and that more of them participate in bringing investment into pension schemes.

Lynne Jones: Will the Government also ask the pensions commission to give advice on the interaction between the state pension system and private pensions?

Mr. McCartney: The commission will be working on a programme. First, it will consider statistics on pensions; secondly, it will consider the wider situation. I take note of what my hon. Friend said, as it is important that the commission does effective work. That is exactly the Government's intention in establishing it.

Bob Spink (Castle Point): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. McCartney: No; I want to conclude my speech.

Bob Spink *rose—*

Mr. McCartney: I like the hon. Gentleman dearly and we have spoken over many years. I assure him that next time when I speak in a debate in the House and he is present, I shall give him the first chance at my neck. There is a rash judgment if ever I heard one.

Opposition Members hint and wink about some issues relating to pensioners, giving the impression that they are prepared to consider a consensus. As a consensus and bridge-building politician, I welcome that. *[Laughter.]* I do not know why there is so much laughter about that, as it is absolutely true.

In the spirit of reconciling Conservative policy with consensus, perhaps the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire can give us an insight into the development of his party's policy on pensioners and older people. Only a matter of weeks ago, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, boldly stated in the 29 December edition of *The Sunday Telegraph* that, on behalf of the shadow Cabinet, he was

> "digging through current spending, and had found opportunities for cuts".

He said that those cuts could total 20 per cent. of public spending across the board of Government activity. When numerous Conservative spokespeople confirmed that over the holiday, they made no effort to exempt pensioners from the share of agony that £100 billion of cuts will cause. Why? We want some answers at the end of the debate. If Conservative Members genuinely support those policies, there will no consensus between hon. Members on pensions in the long term.

Let me give some examples of what Conservative policies would mean. The basic state pension would have to decrease by £15.49 for a single pensioner and £24.76 for a pensioner couple. The minimum income guarantee would have to be cut by £20.42 for a single pensioner and £31.16 for couples. That figure could be further reduced. The former Tory leader told the House in 1999 that there was nothing to recommend the minimum income guarantee. It is Conservative policy to eradicate it.

The winter fuel payment would be cut from £200 per pensioner household to £160 or less. The hon. Member for Havant made it clear that he believed that it was a

[Mr. McCartney]

gimmick and implied that a Conservative Government would drop it. In 2001-02, we spent £16 million on cold weather payments; the Conservative party would slash that figure by £3 million. I could go on about pensioner credit, capital allowance, attendance allowance, bereavement lump sum payments, carer's allowance, TV licences, bus fares and the health and social services budget. The Opposition propose cuts for them all.

We require an answer: would the Opposition cut cold weather payments or the home energy efficiency scheme? Would they cut pension credit, which would mean a cut of £400 a year or 20 per cent. across the board? We have invested an additional £2 billion, yet the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire has not told us whether the Conservative party will support the introduction of pension credit in April.

The Opposition would reduce capital allowances by £2,400 from the current £12,000 to £9,600. That would fundamentally undermine the concept of pension credit. They would cut attendance allowance by £11.25 a week. That is a disgrace and I hope that the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier), who winds up the debate, gives an absolute assurance that the proposals that the hon. Member for Havant made before Christmas will be scrapped and put in the bin.

6.2 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): The subject of our debate is important and it is proper that the Conservative Opposition have chosen to use some of their allocated time for it. It is important to individuals who have been affected and the many who will be affected, although they do not yet know it. Their expectations of a comfortable retirement will be utterly devastated and many of us will have to respond to our constituents by telling them that, as matters stand, nothing can be done for them.

We have all heard of the Allied Steel and Wire case. Although the company would prefer not to be a cause celebre, it has become a classic case of what can go wrong under the current regime. The ASW workers told me that many joined the scheme when it was compulsory. The Minister nods and obviously appreciates the point, which has not been brought out in the debate. Joining the scheme was a condition of employment at ASW.

All hon. Members who supported such legislation or would like to reintroduce compulsion must ask whether the public sector has a responsibility that goes beyond simply saying that perhaps workers can contract back in. Since the law of the land meant that they had to join the schemes, and they did not make a misguided financial decision, perhaps the public sector owes them a greater obligation than has so far been acknowledged.

Lynne Jones: The hon. Gentleman is a keen advocate of compulsion in pension contributions, for which the TUC is also campaigning. However, does he agree that, for the reasons he outlined, it would be wrong to make it compulsory for workers to contribute to an employer's scheme if there were no separate state earnings-related scheme that they could choose to join instead?

Mr. Webb: I half agree with the hon. Lady. We are in favour of compulsion, but on top of what? What is the state's role? We support compulsory membership of a private sector scheme for those above specific minimum income levels in addition to an adequate basic universal state pension. All pension provision carries risk. The hon. Lady is understandably wedded to state pension provision. However, the Conservative Government ripped the state earnings-related scheme to shreds. That was a political risk. Anyone who pinned hopes for income in old age to that scheme was severely disappointed. No mechanism is without risk, and we would prefer it to be shared.

We have heard of the ASW case. In my constituency, BAE Systems is a major employer. It projects that, in three years, its pension fund will be £1 billion in deficit. We have heard about a fund that will be £2 million in deficit, but the figure could be £1 billion for BAE Systems in a few years. The Secretary of State for Defence queries whether it is genuinely a British company and is perhaps thereby softening us up for not giving it a contract. There could be a combination of a fund in huge deficit and a company that faces commercial difficulties. The system cannot cope with funds that are vastly under-financed and companies that get into trouble. I was slightly disappointed that the Minister did not go further and outline some of his proposals in the Green Paper that could cope with such a problem.

I want to emphasise the human cost of the problem by mentioning the case of a constituent who came to see me only yesterday, unaware that the House would debate the issue today. She is two years from retirement after working for her employers for more than 20 years. Last June, the pension fund was closed. The company will not wind up the fund because it is solvent and if it wound up the fund, its under-financing would mean charges that would drive it out of business. It is possible to transfer out, but the value of doing that is woefully inadequate.

My constituent was expecting a pension of £22,000 a year. She has been told that the transfer value will buy her a pension of £4,000. She was devastated and asked whether I could do anything. I said that we would debate the subject in the House the following day, that I would bring the circumstances to the Minister's attention and ascertain whether any aspect of the Green Paper or any other proposal could deal with the problem or offer my constituent consolation.

I was tempted to be rude about the Conservative motion but I realised that I helped to draft it. However, I am an academic and could therefore probably do both.

Bob Spink: Does the hon. Gentleman realise that shortfalls in pension schemes were almost unheard of when the Conservative party was in government?

Mr. Webb: Clearly, the state of the stock market puts pressure on funds. It has been performing badly and is a specific cause of underfunding, coupled with the dividend tax credit—a policy that the hon. Gentleman did not propose to reverse.

I began to consider the origins of the motion. At the beginning of December, Conservative Members tabled early-day motion 304, which gave an uncritical welcome to the proposals of the National Association of Pension Funds to change the order of priorities when a scheme winds up. That organisation claims that not only retired members but those within 10 years of retirement should be a priority. I am worried that, under the proposal, people in their late 50s who join a company would go straight to the top of the queue whereas those who worked for it for 30 years since leaving school would be at the bottom and could get nothing.

Distance from retirement is therefore not the only factor that matters. People who are close to retirement cannot do much else, but most of their pension eggs may not be in the current employer's basket. Length of service therefore matters as well as proximity to retirement. I therefore amended early-day motion 304 and advocated introducing

> "new winding-up priorities which take account of both the age and length of service of non-retired members."

I am delighted that the final sentence of the Conservative motion refers to introducing

> "new winding-up priorities which take proper account of the age and length of service of non-retired scheme members."

I anticipated thanks from the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) for my contribution to the motion, but I expect that he ran out of time.

The refined position therefore takes account of people's closeness to retirement, because they will have no time to make other arrangements, and the number of eggs that are in a specific basket. Both aspects matter and should be taken into account.

As the Minister highlighted, Conservative Members cannot be allowed to get away with the start of the motion, which I did not write. It states:

> "this House expresses its deep concern at current arrangements for winding-up . . . schemes, which leave many people receiving much less than expected for their retirement; deplores the lack of action by the Government to address this issue".

The Minister pointed out that the author of those schemes was sitting on the Conservative Front Bench at the moment. He did not mention, however, who the members of the Standing Committee on the Pensions Bill were in 1995. We have spent some time today trying to find that out, and we discovered that those who brought in the framework that we are debating today included the previous leader of the Conservative party, the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), and the present one, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), whose name, unless my eyes deceive me, appears at the top of the Conservative motion. The structure that he is criticising is, therefore, one that he himself introduced. It would be inappropriate, however, to be partisan on an occasion such as this.

One of my concerns about the motion is that it is extremely narrow. In other words, it takes a point at which there is not enough money in a fund, and proposes a very narrow debate on who should get a share of that money, and who comes first in the queue. I intervened earlier on the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire and gently suggested that, if those who were near retirement and with long service received a higher claim, we should all be honest with them. We should be saying to every one of today's retired occupational pensioners that they might receive less pension. In other words, we would be giving new security to a group of people who might, perhaps, have a disastrous cut in their pensions, but we might also be sowing a new insecurity among millions of private sector occupational pensioners who have hitherto always had the first claim on pension funds.

Mr. Brazier: It is, of course, the case that 90 per cent. is the level of underpinning guarantee for those who are on even as protected a form of income as an annuity, under the terms of the protection provided by the different annuity companies, so there is a good precedent for that in relation to pensioners with private sector schemes.

Mr. Webb: I take that point. Indeed, 90 per cent. is not an arbitrary figure. It is a figure that is already used in protection schemes. The point that I am trying to make is that, at a time when there is a crisis of confidence in private sector pensions, we must all bite the bullet together and say to all Britain's 5 million—something of that order; several million, anyway—retired occupational pensioners that they will have a less high priority when the funds are divided up and that they might get less next year than they would have got this year. We should not try to pretend that that is not a consequence of focusing our help on those close to retirement and with long service.

The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire was, regrettably, absolutely silent on how we should ensure that there is enough money in the pot in the first place. By all means, let us have a debate on how to carve up an inadequate fund and give it out more fairly. Of course we should do that, but what can we do to ensure that there is enough money in the first place? The Government are proposing fewer actuarial valuations, as a measure to reduce the regulatory burden on employers who run schemes. That is the goal towards which they are heading. That worries me, because a fund could satisfy the minimum funding requirement at a particular point in time, but things could then go wrong. The stock market could fall, for example, and life expectancies could increase. The fund might then have insufficient money in it before it was wound up. So, at the point at which it was wound up, things could have gone horribly wrong without any corrective action having been taken.

I am not sure whether the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle), will be responding to this debate—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Maria Eagle) *indicated assent.*

Mr. Webb: I am pleased to see that she will be. Will she clarify whether that measure will provide sufficient safeguards? Regular valuations are, one would hope, like an amber light. They are a warning that something needs to be done. If valuations were infrequent, things could go badly wrong and a scheme could be wound up at the wrong time. It would then be frozen, and nothing could be done about it. I hope that the Minister will be able to satisfy me on that point.

We have not talked much about the regulator. My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) raised with the Occupational Pensions Regulatory

[Mr. Webb]

Authority in the Public Accounts Committee whether another Robert Maxwell case could happen. The response of the regulator was, broadly, yes. She was not convinced that there was enough protection in place to prevent that.

Maria Eagle: While the hon. Gentleman is right about that, does he accept that the regulator was saying that a determined fraudster or criminal could get round most of the rules that anybody could devise?

Mr. Webb: That is absolutely true. Indeed, the Maxwell case showed how an imaginative fraudster could get money out of a pension fund. My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury was pointing out, however, that we need to do more to ensure that there is proper scrutiny of funds before things get out of hand. That means prevention rather than cure; it means amber lights, warnings and trigger mechanisms. That is what I am driving at. There needs to be a much more effective system of spotting problems before things go wrong. Today's debate, however, is essentially about how we bail things out when they have gone wrong.

A further key issue is how we ensure that, once we have this pot of money, a bigger proportion of it goes to the pensioners and workers, and a smaller proportion to the financial institutions that wind up the schemes. We have heard of cases in which independent trustees of the company who are put in to wind a scheme up have charged £100 to answer the inquiries of *The Daily Telegraph*. It is outrageous to charge £100 to deal with a media inquiry. The Minister described himself as a socialist the other day. I wonder whether he has ever thought of nationalising this process.

Lynne Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Webb: I will not, because I have nearly used up all the time that I had planned to take.

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland): She is the other one.

Mr. Webb: The other socialist, yes.

There is clearly a serious issue here. Once we have reached the stage at which there is not enough money in the pot, the money must not—for goodness' sake—go to pay the financial people. It must go to the pensioners.

Some schemes take decades to wind up. For example, I have known pension schemes to take 30 years or more to be wound up. That is totally unacceptable. What are the Government doing to make wind-ups a great deal quicker? In our view, scrapping contracting out would make the whole process a good deal easier. What are the Government doing about that?

The scope of the motion is extremely limited. It is about carving up an inadequate pot more fairly. We do not have a problem with that, but that is only a small part of the process. My biggest concern is that the Government have produced yet another Green Paper that will further delay any effective action in relation to the much wider canvas that I have painted.

I shall cite one example of just how slow and indecisive the Government have been. Back in 1993, when the Goode committee was examining these issues, it considered what is called a central discontinuance fund—the idea involves a pot of money that can be dipped into when a fund goes wrong—but decided that that did not represent a viable solution. In September 2000, the Department responsible for social security implemented a consultation to consider a central discontinuance fund. In March 2001, the response to the consultation found that

> "very few were attracted to the idea"

and that the Government would not act as guarantor. There was very little support for the proposal. Then, on page 65 of a Government report published in September 2002, we learn that

> "an alternative approach would be to introduce an insurance scheme, perhaps a central discontinuance fund, providing pensioners and non-pensioners with greater protection"

and that

> "we would welcome views on these options".

So, presumably we are going to hear yet again the same views as those that were put forward in 1993 and those that were given 18 months ago. This will mean more delay while we go back to the same ideas that have already been rejected, and no serious action appropriate to the scale of the problem being taken. There is a huge agenda involved here, of which this motion touches on just a tiny part. Yes, let us share out inadequate pension pots more fairly, but, for goodness' sake, let us act urgently to ensure that those funds have enough money in them to begin with, so that this issue need not arise.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. May I say to the House that, if hon. Members impose on themselves a voluntary limit of about eight minutes, it might be possible for me to call everyone who is seeking to catch my eye.

6.18 pm

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I also wish to add a sense of urgency to today's debate. All hon. Members have been lobbied by steelworkers who have recently lost not merely their jobs and the prospect of a decent pension but, often, their homes as well, in that they will have inadequate income to complete their mortgages. They, and many others among our constituents who have recently been affected by the closure of their pension schemes, are looking to this debate to see what action the Government might introduce in the short term to abate the suffering that they are experiencing.

If the parliamentary answer that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Pensions gave me the other day is accurate, it is clear that, since we came to power in 1997, a large number of our constituents have already been affected by the closure of their pension scheme. It would be a foolish person who thought that the situation was going to become easier over the next few years, rather than the opposite. Of course, one applauds the way in which my right hon. Friend has approached this debate, as well as his enthusiasm for the whole issue of pensions and his keenness for consultation, but I hope that he will take back to his colleagues the fact that the House does not think that consultation alone is going to be adequate. There comes a point at which the consultation has to cease and action has to begin.

The hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), who spoke for the Liberal Democrats, was right to point out that some ideas in the recent Green Paper go back at least to the Goode committee, and many of the others, which are presented as a novelty, were in the 1998 pensions or general welfare reform Green Paper. So, merely to say that one is consulting on them is clearly not adequate, but neither is the Opposition stance.

I suggested to the Conservatives that, if they are serious about the plight of those who find themselves in pension schemes that they were made to join but which they see winding up, they could be the first Opposition in the history of this Parliament to dispense with show debates and demonstrating a great deal of anger about the Government's lack of action, and introduce legislation themselves. In place of a further debate on the serious decline of occupational pensions, might they not consider introducing legislation? If they are interested in introducing legislation on winding-up arrangements, may I describe to them the Bill that my hon. Friends and I have already introduced?

Mr. Brazier: The right hon. Gentleman knows the considerable respect in which he is held by the House and, indeed, by the Opposition. He will recall that in the previous Session we tried to assist him with every possible co-operation on his measure to take housing benefit from unruly, antisocial neighbours, but his colleagues on the Front Bench wrung their hands while the Liberal Democrats talked it out.

Mr. Field: The good thing about today's debate is that, this time, the Liberal Democrats want to support a Bill that goes beyond merely dividing up the sums. In the three minutes that I have left, may I describe to the House the Bill that my hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff, West (Kevin Brennan) and for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) and I have introduced?

First, while we accept the Liberal Democrats' point that the current way of dividing funds is inadequate, there ought to be greater weighting to the contributory years that people put in a scheme rather than to their age. Of course there must be protection for pensioners, but clearly it is not right that those who have been in a scheme for 30, 35 or 40 years are pushed down the list by somebody who may have been in it for only five, but who is retired and so begins to scoop their whole pension entitlement.

So, the Bill's first aim is to have a winding-up formula based on contributory years rather than age. Its second aim is to deal with those legal and professional advisers who milk such schemes. All of us know examples involving our constituents or those of other Members in which the professional fees have taken a fifth of the pension savings. We cannot allow that to continue.

Lynne Jones: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Field: No, no. We all want to get into the debate.

The Bill's third clause says that while we may have proposals to protect funds in the future, some of our constituents have been badly affected already. What are we going to offer them? The Bill proposes that we introduce a gentle levy on orphan funds, which are funds that the insurance companies have built up, sometimes over 200 years, involving people who had policies, but died without claiming. Surely those who, as the hon. Member for Northavon said, were made to join pension schemes should have some stake in those unowned assets, which we should not allow to be of book value in the insurance companies.

Looking to the future, the Bill's fourth clause would introduce an insurance scheme for those who do everything required of the pension scheme to pay their contribution, but find that the funds are not there to pay that entitlement. On that, we need to act collectively, hence the clause. Clause 5 asks the Secretary of State and his colleague the Minister to introduce within a time scale a measure on where we should put the pension debt as against a company's other debts.

Although my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) has left the Chamber, we might say that putting pensioners up the list of debtors would, for example, make the banks close companies more quickly. My view is that, as in the recent closure of the steel fund, the banks make a careful calculation. They had recently lent to the company, and they thought, "If we push it out of business now, we will get all our money back. We don't want to continue to take a risk." In fact, had the banks been pushed down the list, that company might not have been pushed into liquidation.

I make a plea to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Pensions and to the Opposition: there are many issues in the Green Paper and we need detailed discussion, but increasingly, over the next couple of years in the run-up to the general election, many more of our constituents will be affected by the closure of their pension scheme, and we could legislate this year.

Our Bill is coming back to the House in early March, and it would be wonderful if the Government took it over and rewrote part or even lots of it. Let us have fewer crocodile tears from the Opposition. Let them say that they will use their time to give a Second Reading to the Bill, which my hon. Friends have already introduced. Most of the people affected so far come from constituencies represented by Conservative Members, so most of the Bill's supporters are Conservative Members.

6.26 pm

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire): I have a huge regard for the Minister for Pensions and for what he knows and does in relation to pensions, so I hope that he does not take it as a discourtesy when I say that it is a great pity that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) did not remain in his job. Had he done so, we might not be facing some of these problems.

I declare an interest as a member of Equitable Life and as a pensions barrister. I also declare an interest as one of the guilty men who introduced section 73 of the Pensions Act 1995. Experience has shown us that the priorities highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) need fine tuning. That makes the problem sound small, but it has turned into a major one. We all know that it arises from a more fundamental issue than a stock market collapse—the fact that we live longer, join the working population later because we spend longer in education, retire earlier and save less. Possibly the most important issue of all is the post-war baby boom, which we have yet to take account of in funding our pension schemes.

[Mr. James Arbuthnot]

We have a recipe for a catastrophic old age for many people, and the system that we have set up to cope with that potentially catastrophic old age is not at all simple. It is expensive, complicated, intimidating and run by a set of trustees who are largely unpaid and frequently untrained, yet they bear huge responsibility for our future in old age. The Government have introduced some fairly sensible measures in some places to deal with that. The Myners, Pickering and Sandler reports impress me, as do many points in the Green Paper, notably on the simplification of taxation, but the radical nature of the problem brings me back to what the right hon. Member for Birkenhead said: it does not seem to have been addressed by a radical solution. Overall, there is nothing in the Green Paper to start people saving when they would not otherwise do so.

I take as my text a letter that Professor Blake from the Pensions Institute sent to the Select Committee in August. He is a highly respected, independent academic who deals with these issues. He asks about the word "crisis" and says:

> "The word 'crisis' may be an exaggeration, but it is certainly the case that within a few short years what was the envy of Europe, namely a good well-funded private pension system sitting on top of an admittedly poor-in-comparison-with-the-rest-of-Europe basic state pension system, appears to be on the verge of possible disintegration."

The first cause to which he attributes that is the ending of tax relief on UK equity dividends.

The issue of winding up schemes has become extremely urgent. The National Association of Pension Funds confirms in its report that the issue is urgent. What sense of urgency have the Government shown? I am afraid that they have not shown very much. I agree with the right hon. Member for Birkenhead, who stresses the need for urgency.

Two measures are required: the first is difficult, and the second is easy. The difficult one arises out of Professor Blake's letter, in which he considers how we can get out of this mess. He highlights certain relationships and says:

> "higher state pension entitlements reduce the need to save privately for retirement, but have no discernible effect on the timing of the retirement decision
>
> higher occupational (defined benefit) pension entitlements have the effect of increasing private savings, but also of encouraging earlier retirement
>
> higher personal (defined contribution) pension entitlements have the effect of increasing private savings, but also of delaying retirement."

We need to increase private savings and to delay retirement. The evidence given by Professor Blake points to higher defined contribution pension entitlements, as the closure of final salary pension schemes is now commonplace.

There is nothing wrong with money purchase schemes, provided—it is a huge proviso—that companies pay into those schemes the same amount as they were paying into their final salary schemes, or more. A major problem is that companies have tended to pay much less into their money purchase schemes than they were paying into final salary schemes. What does the Green Paper suggest to address the need for higher defined contribution payments? I am afraid that the answer is nothing. Companies that pay more into their schemes encourage individuals who would not otherwise be given to saving to decide to save in a defined contribution pension scheme.

Therefore, the first thing that the Government should do is to give companies major incentives to pay more into their defined contribution schemes. If the Government do not do that, we run the risk, as set out in Professor Blake's letter, of retirement becoming a 20th century concept—something that came in towards the end of the 19th century and went out at the beginning of the 21st. We as a country would find that change devastating.

The second thing that the Government must do is relatively easy. They must accept the urgent need for a change of priorities. The priorities that arose out of section 73 of the Pensions Act may have been right or wrong at the time. If they were wrong, I accept my fair share of responsibility. They are certainly wrong now, and something needs to be done about them. What we require from the Government is not endless consultation, but action this day.

6.34 pm

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North): Occupational pensions have an inherent strength, partly because they have the widest possible membership. We should take account of the fact that the changes in April 1988, which led to 5 million people leaving occupational pension schemes, resulted in £13 billion being paid in compensation because of mis-selling. All that money came out of insurance companies' reserves, so it is not available now to get us through the difficult times that the financial world faces. In the past 15 years, employers have taken about £31 billion in contribution holidays. Had part of that money been put into schemes during those years, many of the difficulties would have been dealt with.

I want to dispel the myth that means-testing by the Government is a disincentive to save. No one in their right mind, whether they are 21, 31, 41 or 51, says to themselves that, as there is a minimum income guarantee of £98 a week, they do not need to save, because that is fine for their retirement. No one in their right mind wants to retire on £98 a week, and no one consciously takes that decision.

Much has been said about the need to protect workers. It is staggering that those words have been used by Conservative Members, but we live and learn. Information and consultation have also been discussed. Frankly, information is fine, but not consultation, because consultation gives no rights to workers. It is the ability of working people and members of a scheme to influence decisions that counts, not the fact that they are consulted when the scheme is in a mess and the company wants to close it. That is no good at all.

We had the Goode report in 1993, a Green Paper in 1998, and now we have the 2002 Green Paper. They all raise the same issues, which have been ducked. This problem has gone on for far too long, and it is time that we grasped the nettle and took action. A vital component of that action must be proper training and support for trustees of pension schemes. At the moment, the position is quite scary. In view of their responsibilities, the training and skills that they are given to manage schemes are appalling. They should have much better support.

Dubious comments have been made about the minimum funding requirement, and I am amazed that no one has mentioned FRS 17. It is not a problem in itself; it is a warning when a fund is out of kilter. The problem is the response that is taken to it. In the past couple of years, it has been used as an excuse for closing down schemes. When a problem has been identified, it should be cured in the shortest possible time, but not necessarily overnight. Better regulation of the response to deficiencies thrown up by those two requirements would be far preferable.

I find it difficult to get into a debate about who has priority when a scheme goes into liquidation—it is like shifting the deckchairs on the Titanic. It is more important to consider what mechanisms can be put in place so that when a scheme unfortunately goes into liquidation there is adequate funding from somewhere, be it Government, a discontinuation fund, an insurance fund or a mutual fund. However, that would not affect what will happen in the next year or two, even if we brought in legislation today. This is a matter for the future.

When schemes go into liquidation, an independent trustee is appointed. That is an introduction to the world of the golden salary. A company in Bradford called Lund Humphries went into liquidation, and an independent trustee was appointed at a fee of £100,000 a year. He was working on the scheme four hours a week on average. It took six years to wind up the scheme, because there was no incentive for him to do so. The longer it went on, the longer he got his £100,000. One of the issues that came up was the length of time it takes the Government to give notification of the minimum pension guarantee. For that scheme, it took 18 months. The Government could provide such information a lot faster. There should be tightly controlled time limits on winding up a scheme once it goes into liquidation. The accountants are ripping people off. Not the pensioner, not the worker but the trustee is the No. 1 priority. He, with his £100,000 a year, must come first.

Many years ago, in 1990 or 1991, the European Court made a judgment that became known as the Coloroll judgment. It decided that pensions were deferred wages. That judgment has never been effected in British legislation, but it would change our landscape dramatically. A pension scheme's assets would become the property of the workers rather than the company. Decisions and power would lie elsewhere, and there might be a rather different response to market conditions.

6.41 pm

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire): If we had any doubts about the seriousness of the issue we are discussing, they have surely been dispelled by the realisation that 25 million of our fellow citizens are members of occupational pension schemes. That includes all the members of public-sector schemes. Over the past five years or so, some 30,000 schemes have had to be wound up. This is indeed a real, live, serious issue, which will sadly continue to affect many of our constituents.

The Government acknowledged the seriousness of the problem when they tried, with legislation introduced in April 2002, to do something about the delay in winding up schemes that many Members have mentioned today. I understand, however, that fewer than 10 per cent. of those running schemes who were required to report the winding up of their schemes to the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority by June 2002—some 4,000—had done so by that date, and considerably fewer schemes had been wound up. More effort must be made to ensure that schemes are wound up speedily.

Members have rightly expressed concern about the costs of winding up schemes. Last October, the BBC's "Money Box" programme estimated that in the past few years about £800 million had been taken unnecessarily from schemes owing to the inefficient use of lawyers and actuaries. It said that trustees should have a duty to shop around and secure the best possible value for scheme members, to prevent the haemorrhage of funds from schemes that are already underfunded.

It is particularly worrying that so many of our fellow citizens do not understand their lack of pension rights. A recent poll showed that 55 per cent. of people assumed that their pensions would be safe, and that their entitlements would be paid in full if their schemes were wound up. It is very worrying that so many of our fellow citizens believe they will be safeguarded when that is not the case. The Government's role is to educate them, so that they can take their own precautions should they choose to do so.

It has been suggested that solvent employers whose schemes need to be wound up should be allowed to pay the accrued benefits owed to scheme members over the remaining working lifetime of those employees. I hope the Government will view that proposal sympathetically. Most of the problems that we have heard about today, however, involve employers who become insolvent when schemes are wound up. That does indeed lead to the worst situations. As many Members have said, it is particularly sickening when directors or senior executives who are privy to information use retirement schemes to secure their own future benefits at what turns out to be the expense of their employees. Their pensions are safeguarded, while employees with deferred pensions suffer as a result of what has been taken from the pot. That is especially unacceptable: we can fairly describe it as another example of the unacceptable face of capitalism. I hope that the Green Paper's proposals to deal with it will be implemented.

It is also vital for us to protect those with long service. People with 30 or 35 years' service face a triple jeopardy: the loss of their jobs, the possible loss of their homes, and the loss of their pension assets. Part of the solution is to remedy some of the unfairness involved in dividing an admittedly inadequate sum, but that is not enough. It could be described as rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic. Given the great unfairness favouring those who enter a scheme just before it is wound up, there must clearly be a readjustment of priorities to favour those with long service. No one has mentioned the other half of the solution, however. I suggest a mutual insurance scheme for occupational pension funds.

The United States has a pension benefit guarantee corporation, which takes a small levy from all occupational pension schemes. The concept of

[Andrew Selous]

insurance is the prudence of the many coming to the aid of the misfortune of the few. It may not always be the perfect solution, but it would go a long way towards remedying the problem here. I speak as, probably, one of the few chartered insurers in the House. I urge the Government to look seriously at the American example. Although the premiums have risen lately, evidence suggests that the arrangement greatly helps those whose schemes have been wound up. We should think about both making current arrangements fairer and adopting an insurance scheme such as the one I have described.

Insurance could be particularly useful in a context that has emerged in my constituency, where General Motors withdrew some £167 million from the AWD pension scheme. That affected many employees in my area. The action was legal at the time and the scheme was apparently solvent when the money was withdrawn, but surprise, surprise: it transpired that the scheme was not adequately funded. The pensioners did not receive their entitlement. The Government should seriously consider giving employers a duty to buy commercial rather than mutual insurance in such instances. Employers who had withdrawn a sum would have to pay it back to scheme members if the sum was later found to be inadequate.

I urge the Government to look at the insurance markets. The London insurance market is one of the most sophisticated in the world, and I think that it can be part of the answer to the problem with which we are grappling.

6.49 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff, West): I welcome the debate. It is a pity that we do not have more time, but I understand that an important debate on herbal products will follow. That shows the Opposition's priorities.

I do not agree with the motion, which is too narrowly drawn. The Opposition think that they have a good story to tell, but no one really believes that. After all, the Opposition introduced Flash Harry into pensions in the first place in the 1980s with the mis-selling scandal. While I accept the Minister's word that he seeks consensus and that the Opposition seek it too, it crossed my mind that the words "Conservative" and "consensus" have one thing in common: they both contain the word "con".

Andrew Selous: That was a cheap jibe.

Kevin Brennan: I will leave that cheap jibe, as the hon. Gentleman calls it, and move on to the issues in question.

The Green Paper is a sensible kick-off point for the debate and the discussion. I thank Ministers, in particular my right hon. Friend the Minister for Pensions, for the meetings held with me, my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) and workers from Allied Steel and Wire during the past few months to discuss ways through the crisis. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) is right when he says that the firm went under because it was so easy for the banks to pull the plug. The firm had a full order book, so potentially it could have been solvent—but pulling the plug was an easy option for the banks because they knew that their money was guaranteed.

Let us remind ourselves of the injustice—that is what it is—that the workers of Allied Steel and Wire have faced. One of them telephoned me just last week. He had worked for the company and its predecessors for 38 years and entered the pension scheme as a condition of his employment. At the time, it was a nationalised industry: workers were employed by the Government when they started their scheme. Let us remember that.

Neither the man who telephoned me nor the workers to whom I have spoken ever dreamed for one minute that their pensions were not safe. They never had a big health warning strapped across them saying, "You are putting your money into a vehicle that, a year or two before you are due to retire, could be worth next to nothing." No one ever gave them that health warning, whatever the complexion of the Government in power.

The issue of independent trustees has been raised. I read with interest recently an article in which Eddie Thomas, director of the independent trustee Law Debenture, said that my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead appeared to assume that the smaller the pension scheme, the cheaper the wind-up. My right hon. Friend had pointed out that it had cost £800,000 to wind up a scheme that was worth just £5 million. Eddie Thomas said:

> "Small funds can involve a lot of work that is disproportionate to their size. I don't think it is generally appreciated how much work there is in winding-up a scheme. We have to recognise that in a winding-up case all the chickens come home to roost."

The animal metaphor that the workers whom I have met have used about independent trustees is not chickens coming home to roost but snouts in the trough. That is exactly what has been involved in some of these cases.

There are some sensible suggestions in the Green Paper about giving greater priority to those workers nearer retirement. We have debated that this evening. There are suggestions that we should reorder the payment of creditors to get rid of the perverse incentives for banks to withdraw, make pensioners preferential creditors, or perhaps give them some new status that would put them higher up the pecking order when pension schemes are wound up.

There have been suggestions, which I strongly support, that we should look again—it does not matter how many times it has been looked at—at setting up a mutual insurance scheme, such as exists in Sweden, or the central discontinuance fund model in the United States of America. I have been told by some people—I have done a bit of economics in my time—that moral hazard is a worry, as I am sure the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) knows. The worry is that pension fund trustees will not seek to get the best out of the pension fund for members because they know that they can be bailed out; it will change their behaviour. Technical and academic debates about moral hazard mean nothing to workers who face the immoral hazard of losing their pension when they are nearing retirement if a company is going bust. I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for Pensions for listening at all those meetings we had. It is good that those issues have become a central plank in the Green Paper and that the Government are taking them forward seriously.

What the Green Paper does not do, perhaps what it cannot do, is what we are trying to do in the Bill that my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead has introduced and that I support: it does not attempt to assist those who are currently affected by wind-ups in insolvency. We have a moral duty to seek every avenue that we can to try to help those workers.

In many cases, the workers we are talking about are the best of British. They have worked through to close to retirement. Often, they have been asked to carry on working and not to take early retirement. They have been loyal, flexible and productive.

At Allied Steel and Wire, workers have had to accept many changes in working practices. They do not have a guaranteed pension fund after 30 years' service, as one would in the fire service. They had to accept radical changes in working practices to keep their jobs. Then they lost their jobs. Fortunately, some of them may get them back, but they have still lost their pensions. They were still conned. They were told by successive Governments to save for retirement and to join their company pension scheme. To them, it is all a swindle. To be frank, if I were in their shoes I would feel the same way, and so would hon. Members. Therefore, we have a moral duty to look at every way to help them and to call on the Government to find a way.

No stone should be left unturned, as the Minister for Pensions said in a previous debate in the House, in looking for solutions. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead has come up with an ingenious Bill that we should look at carefully. About 40,000 individuals may be affected because of the liquidation of their pension schemes in wind-up. To make good the losses, the Bill proposes a distribution of a small amount of the orphan asset funds that are held by insurance companies prior to setting up a permanent system based on the suggestions in the Green Paper.

Pensions are supposed to be about security, not risk. Why should the workers bear the risk when it is the banks and shareholders who are supposed to bear the risks when companies go bust? The Government's objective is dignity and security in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners, to use the Government's own words, so let us look carefully at those proposals and see whether we can help the people who feel that they have been conned.

6.56 pm

Adam Price (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): We have heard a lot of talk about consensus. Perhaps the consensus that dare not speak its name but that is emerging is that successive Governments of all political colours have failed to provide adequate protection for current employees in cases of insolvency. We are almost unique in the industrialised world in lacking any protection for workers in those situations. I think that the Government now accept that if the guiding principle of the Goode committee on pensions law reform was to provide maximum security, the legislation based on it, the minimum funding requirement, has been an unmitigated failure in meeting that objective.

We have heard of the bleak situation facing the workers at Allied Steel and Wire. I spoke to John Benson only this morning. There are plenty of other examples—we have heard of United Engineering Forgings, Albert Fisher and others. Frustratingly, the solution has been lying in the in-tray of Ministers in both the current and previous Administrations. The idea of a statutory safety net for occupational pensions is not particularly new or original. It was the Government Actuary who first proposed a central discontinuance fund in his evidence to the Goode committee 10 years ago. He said in a memorandum to the committee:

> "Because many schemes would find it difficult to secure their liabilities on discontinuance, a mechanism is needed for handing over the liabilities to another vehicle, similar to an ongoing pension fund . . . The answer would appear to be to have a Central Fund . . . The fund would simply act as an administrative arrangement and investment vehicle for running off the liabilities of discontinued pension funds."

If only the Government then or now had listened to the advice of their own Actuary, we would not be in this mess today.

The Government have floated the idea of a mutual insurance system or a central discontinuance fund on a number of occasions. Indeed, they have commissioned research or consulted on those two options on no less than four occasions over the past five and a half years. At the time of the last round of consultation two years ago, the Government claimed that the responses received were overwhelmingly against mutual insurance or a central discontinuance fund.

That strikes me as a little curious and strange to say the least, given the fact that the Trades Union Congress, the Confederation of British Industry, the National Association of Pension Funds and Pensions Management Institute have all been lobbying for the introduction of a central discontinuance fund for the past 10 years. Indeed, when in opposition, the Labour party tabled an amendment, during discussions of what became the Pensions Act 1995, to create a central discontinuance fund. Unfortunately, that was conveniently forgotten when Labour won the election.

It strikes me that the Government cannot have it both ways: they cannot sanction an increasing reliance on private provision without providing adequate protection against the danger of fund collapse. It is no accident that in every country where widespread private provision exists, a central discontinuance fund or a mutual insurance system is an integral component of the pension system. As we have heard, since the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation was set up in America in 1974, the benefits of hundreds of thousands of scheme members have been saved from the failure of their pension funds.

The Government have said that they will look again at these ideas in the Green Paper, but even if they do improve provision and protection for future generations, that will not address the plight of former workers at companies such as ASW, as the hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Kevin Brennan) pointed out. The Minister has again ruled out any prospect of retrospection, but retrospection is precisely what happened in similar situations in the United States when the PBGC was established. More than 200 companies that had gone into liquidation were retrospectively brought under the terms of the relevant legislation.

As has been said, a strong argument exists that the Government have a moral responsibility to the affected workers. Before the recent introduction of the

[Adam Price]

stakeholder pension, legal rules actually prevented people from contributing to a private pension if they were in an employer's scheme. That meant that people had no way of providing any other retirement income for themselves, yet their contributions were not properly protected. The responsibility for that surely lies with the Government. However, if the Government refuse to accept their moral obligations in this regard, they must live up to their legal obligations. Article 8 of the 1980 European Union directive on insolvency rights requires member states to protect pension benefits in situations of insolvency. This provision has never been fully implemented into UK law, and as a result the Government are liable to be sued for compensation. That is the opinion of Denton, Wilde Sapte, the UK's leading insolvency and pensions practice, and of Thompsons, the employment law firm that is acting on behalf of ASW employees, who are members of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation. I understand that last week Thompsons employed a Queen's counsel to take this matter further.

Faced with a lawsuit on behalf of ASW workers who are in the ISTC, the Government must ask themselves whether they are prepared to send Government counsel into the courts to rob redundant steel workers of their entitlements under European law. That would be a new low for the Government. Instead, I hope that they will make it clear that they intend not only to provide real protection for future generations of workers, but—as has been argued—to compensate in full the former workers who have been failed by the inaction of this Government and of previous Governments.

7.3 pm

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): I am told that I must finish by 7.10 pm, so although there is much that I would have liked to say, I will have to curtail my comments. Today's debate reminds me of one that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) and I initiated back in 1994, concerning the Teampace pension fund. The directors of that company, Michael Spiers and Kenneth Shaw, were able to milk dry the pension funds of companies that they took over to such an extent—and to their own benefit—that they decided to wind up the company, leaving the pension scheme £2 million in the red. During that debate, the then Minister—a former Member of Parliament for Tatton—said that that would never have happened if Goode's proposals for minimum solvency requirements had been in place, but as we have learned today, that that was not in fact the case.

I must also place on the record that the then Government were unable to deal with an application for those individuals to be disqualified as company directors because the Department of Trade and Industry did not have the resources to deal with the many claims arising from insolvency schemes. As far as I am aware, those individuals, whose activities verged on the criminal, can still act as company directors to this day—unless they have been caught with their hands in the till elsewhere.

That shows that every time pensions scandals arise, Governments and Members are under pressure to do something about the injustices suffered by our constituents. That remains the case, but the question is whether, ultimately, we can do anything to offer the security that people expect from their pension schemes. It is rather like trying to patch up an old mattress—as soon as one part is dealt with, another spring pops up elsewhere and problems occur. We have heard about some possible solutions, and measures outlined in the Green Paper, those suggested by the National Association of Pension Funds, and those in the Bill of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) may have a contribution to make. However, the ultimate crisis is the underfunding of pension schemes. The fact is that we are not putting away enough money for our pensions—a fact that can be attributed to a combination of demographic changes and the poor performance of the stock market, particularly in this country.

It is disingenuous—indeed, it beggars belief—for the Opposition to suggest that a major factor is the Government's decision to end tax credits. That may have a small effect, but given that more than £400 billion has been wiped off the value of stocks in the FTSE all-share index in the past couple of years, the taking out of the system of a few billion pounds a year through Government measures is not the major point. As the *Financial Times* said in its leader of 27 February

> "The fact is that companies are no longer getting a free ride from the bull market towards paying for ex-employees in their long retirements. Now that pension fund surpluses are disappearing, they want to dump that responsibility. Another few billion a year from the government would not change their minds."

Some of the proposals in the Green Paper, such as the simplification of the tax regime, are welcome. The Government say that that will save a few hundred million pounds in administrative expenses, which is all well and good. There are other proposals such as the re-prioritisation of assets, which is the major burden of the Opposition's argument. However, one does not get insurance for nothing. Under current proposals, if better mutual insurance schemes existed, or if better compensation existed where fraud and dishonesty were involved, the costs would be met by a levy from pension funds. That would actually add to the cost of the pension funds. Although there may be benefits in terms of confidence, the fact is that massive shortfalls in pension funds may well occur.

In putting forward in the Green Paper their exemplifications of what people might expect from pension schemes, the Government assume that the return on investment will be 6.55 per cent., which is 2 per cent. above their predicted rise in earnings over the long term. We do not know whether that is true. There will always be risks in a system that is based on stocks and shares. That is why, as I said earlier, I hope that the pensions commission will consider the interrelationship of the state system and private pensions. There is no virtue in having a set percentage of pensions provided by the state or by the private sector; what is important is the total amount of money that we save for our pensions.

7.10 pm

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): We have had a good debate, despite the fact that the time has been squeezed by two statements. I was particularly struck by the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot), who outlined very clearly just how serious is the crisis facing the pensions industry in this country. He did not seek to lay all the blame at the Government's door, but he made it clear how much worse they have made the situation.

In 1997, the Government inherited an economy in which private pension savings, across the different categories of schemes, were more than those in the rest of the EU put together. Since then, the proportion of people who reach retirement age with a second pension has fallen from 67 per cent. to 59 per cent. The rate of closure of pension funds to new members is accelerating, and 12 million workers have no pension arrangements at all. That is a shameful record.

We chose today to focus specifically on the wind-up of company pension schemes. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) made it clear that that is the most urgent aspect of the entire crisis. I realised how bad the situation was when a constituent of mine who worked for ASW, or Sheerness Steel as we used to call it, came to see me. He was just weeks from retirement, and he told me that after nearly 40 years with the company, he will not know for two or three years what his pension entitlement is, and he may receive less than half of the amount that he was expecting.

We have discussed a number of issues today. First, and central to the crisis and to our motion, is the issue of priority, and we made it clear in our motion how we see that. A number of Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and the hon. Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney), mentioned the important issue of the role of the independent trustee. A survey by Higham Nobbs, which looked at many closures, showed that up to £800 million appears to have been wasted in excessive fees. The conclusion of those industry specialists—that the average wind-up takes far too long and is too expensive—should give us all pause for thought. Other issues mentioned include the priority that a debt to a pension fund should take and the question of insurance, compulsory or not.

Against that background it was very depressing to hear the Minister for Pensions take almost a quarter of the total time allocated for the debate to make a speech in which he largely attacked the Opposition on matters that have nothing to do with this. He can argue quite reasonably that when consultation is going on, he cannot give his views on the particular points in our motion. However, hon. Members on both sides of the House have pointed out that we are in the middle of the Department's 26th consultation on pensions, and many people want this narrow and desperately urgent issue unbundled from the rest.

I shall ask Ministers two questions, and the Under-Secretary may choose to answer them in her speech. First, are the Government willing to consider unbundling the issue of wind-ups from the rest of the package? Secondly, is the Minister for Pensions seriously saying that there can be no retrospection at all? I hope that I misheard him, because this matter may affect many thousands of people. Nobody, least of all Opposition Front Benchers, would argue that measures should apply retrospectively to the time before the Green Paper was published. However, many companies at the margins have read its small print very carefully and asked themselves whether, if they are going to bail out, they should not do so quickly before the provisions bail in. Why cannot the Under-Secretary say that measures will apply retrospectively from tonight, if not from the publication of the Green Paper? Otherwise, the Government are providing a huge incentive for the problem to get worse and for more companies to back out of their commitments before the rules change.

In a typically articulate speech, the hon. Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Adam Price) made a powerful case for insurance and a central discontinuance fund. However, he did not fully explore the downside of that idea, which obviously lies in the likely costs that must fall ultimately on the taxpayer or on pension funds, many of which are already struggling. I listened with interest to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Lynne Jones). I am not sure that I agree with her recipes, but she brought her extreme concern and interest and her knowledge of the subject to the House, as she always does.

I hope that the Under-Secretary will make it clear that the Government understand two points that go beyond the central crisis in the pensions industry and which they have refused to acknowledge—they simply go on and on consulting. First, they must accept that the crisis in winding up is the red-hot tip of the crisis as a whole. Secondly, if they announce possible action and give detailed options that put extra burdens on companies but do not make their measures retrospective to the date of the announcement, they will worsen the problem, and thousands of people will suffer.

Will the Government unbundle this urgent issue from the rest of the package? We have made it clear what we think, and we are willing help them to take legislation through the House, if it is even needed; the central issue of priorities could be handled by secondary legislation. Will the Under-Secretary also address the point about retrospection?

The Opposition take our responsibilities seriously. We have repeatedly drawn attention to this issue. We have set out our views in black and white in the motion about what should be done about the central issue of prioritisation. We have even offered the Government every possible co-operation in taking swift action in the House to tackle the problem. When are the Government going to take action?

7.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Maria Eagle): I welcome the debate, which although short, has been robust and fascinating. I welcome the fact that the Opposition are buying into some of the proposals in the Green Paper, which shows a willingness to develop a consensus for moving forward. Certainly, on pensions, the wider the consensus that we can achieve, the better. We look forward to hearing what else they have to say and what other parts of the Green Paper they agree with, because the motion is very narrow.

Many Members from all parties and many people outside the House are concerned about ensuring an appropriate level of protection for the interests of pension scheme members on wind-up, whether or not insolvency is the cause. That is partly because there have been high-profile cases to which right hon. and hon. Members have referred. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, West (Kevin Brennan), the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) and others have talked about ASW.

[Maria Eagle]

If we value our voluntary system of private pensions, and we do, pension promises must be kept. That is an important part of the partnership. The question is how we can balance appropriate protection for members, which is tremendously important, with sufficient flexibility and the lowest possible costs, which will make the provision of pension schemes appealing to employers as well.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Pensions set out our proposals for improving protection on wind up, so I shall refer to only one or two of them before I deal with some of the points that have been raised in the debate. In the Green Paper, we are already consulting on whether there should be a fairer sharing of assets between those with larger and smaller pensions when a scheme winds up. We are looking at capping the level of the highest payment where there are limited assets. In his opening remarks, the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire appeared to show some sympathy for that, so we look forward to the support of the Opposition on that proposal.

Where there is a wind-up of an underfunded scheme, we are looking into possible changes to the priority order, introduced in 1995 by the Conservatives, to ensure fairness for those affected. However, it is right that we should listen to what everyone affected might think of the proposals, as the National Association of Pension Funds noted in its parliamentary brief for this debate. Despite the calls for immediate action, citing the ideas of the NAPF, which we heard from Opposition Front-Bench speakers, the association itself says that further discussion with interested parties would be necessary to finalise the fairest and most practical solution. The NAPF does not suggest that we move immediately to producing a set of regulations but that we should get things right before we go forward. I approve of that.

The motion expresses deep concern at the current arrangements for dealing with pension funds affected by employer insolvency. As we have already heard, the Conservatives devised those arrangements, so it is touching that they are now championing workers' rights. I prefer to look at the Conservatives' record, however, and to judge them on the basis of what they did when they had the chance.

During their 18 years in office, the Conservatives did nothing to enhance protection for workers affected by insolvency and redundancy and they themselves devised the order of priority between unsecured creditors on the wind-up of schemes that they now criticise. When prompted, the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire remembered that in fact he was responsible for that when he was an Under-Secretary at the former Department of Social Security. As the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) kindly reminded us, the responsibility did not lie only with the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire; both the current Leader of the Opposition and their previous leader were involved in setting out that order of priority.

It is not as though there was no pressing problem of company insolvency and redundancies during the Conservatives' time in office. They were engaged in systematically wrecking the private pension provision of millions of workers by promoting mass unemployment. That did not happen by accident; they did it on purpose. Creating mass unemployment was an instrument of economic policy for the Conservatives. They were also engaged—just for good measure—in allowing the mis-selling of private pensions on a truly staggering scale, so people who did not lose their jobs might have fallen foul of that.

Mr. Brazier: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maria Eagle: No, I do not have time.

In fact, the Conservatives were so keen on the ideological policy of promoting private provision at any cost that they actually incentivised private pension sales to the tune of £3.6 billion. They threw millions of workers on to the dole as an instrument of economic policy while presiding over the two worst recessions this country has endured since world war two.

If people came out of that with their occupational pension intact they were lucky. Millions did not. Not only in my own city of Liverpool, where three quarters of manufacturing jobs were lost in 18 months between 1979 and 1981, in an avalanche of factory closures and pensions closures engineered by—

Mr. Brazier: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Will you confirm that when the hon. Lady refers to shortage of time, the division between the two debates today is arbitrary and agreed? It is not a fixed point. The Opposition are completely relaxed about letting the hon. Lady have an extra minute.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Whatever else, it is nothing to do with the Chair.

Maria Eagle: It was not only in Liverpool that we suffered the loss of three quarters of our manufacturing jobs within 18 months; more than 2.6 million manufacturing jobs were lost throughout the country, many of which had good pension schemes. That avalanche of job destruction and that wanton industrial and social vandalism were wreaked deliberately by the party that said that unemployment was a price worth paying. The Conservative record speaks for itself.

I shall now deal with some of the points that were raised during the debate, so I hope that Opposition Members will be pleased. The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire referred to the so-called £5 billion raid on pensions. The Opposition keep repeating that figure yet they never mention the off-setting effect of the corporation tax cuts that were introduced at the same time. The withdrawal of payable credits removed a major distortion in the tax system that encouraged companies to pay out their profits as dividends rather than retaining them for reinvestment in the business. It was designed to create a more neutral environment for planning and investment decisions that would encourage long-termism rather than the damaging short-termism of the previous arrangements. In any case, when the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) was asked whether he would reintroduce the dividend credit he said, in *The Observer* on 24 November last year, that he did not think that the Conservatives would do that. He said that helping pension funds did not mean going back to the previous system. On that point, I think that the Conservatives protest a little too much.

Many right hon. and hon. Members referred to concerns about independent trustees and their behaviour on wind-ups, especially the fact that they take a great deal of money out of funds because they have higher priority than other creditors. The law requires independent trustees to disclose the scale of the fees that they charged within the past 12 months. Such transparency is important.

Independent trustees should also be able to demonstrate to the pensions regulator that they are acting professionally and in the best interests of the members. If that is not the case, the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority can replace trustees where there is evidence that those appointed by the insolvency practitioner are failing to carry out their duties responsibly. The proposals in the Green Paper for a more proactive regulator should strengthen those powers. I hope that that will reassure my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney) and for Cardiff, West and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who made a particular point about that.

The hon. Member for Northavon, who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, made some points about speeding up wind-up. The Government are also concerned about the length of time that it can take to finalise arrangements when a scheme winds up. We introduced new legislation last April that places greater visible accountability on the people involved. We need to reduce costs to make the whole process more efficient. The new rules mean that OPRA has a more proactive role and we expect it to ensure that the improvements actually come about.

Several Opposition Members referred to the closure of defined benefit schemes, although the right hon. Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot) struck a somewhat discordant note in respect of his party and made an interesting speech that advocated the increasing use of defined contribution schemes. I agree that there is nothing inherently better about defined benefit schemes; it is the level of contribution that matters. At present, contribution levels tend to be less—about half as much—in defined contributions schemes than in defined benefit schemes. Although it is true that closures of defined benefit schemes have been accelerating over recent years, only 1 per cent. of them closed in 2001. We need to keep the matter in perspective. Many employers are still committed to their defined benefit schemes.

Mr. Heald: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maria Eagle: No, I do not have time. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Heald: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We will give the hon. Lady another minute. Will she give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Once again, that is entirely a matter for the participants in the debate.

Maria Eagle: The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire stops me from dealing with the points that were made in the debate.

I welcome the conversion of the Tory party and their new-found deep concern for the workers. However, I am a suspicious sort and so I suggest to the workers and their trade union representatives that they beware of Tories bearing gifts. Sometimes wolves appear in sheep's clothing. Pensioners will judge the Tories by what they did when they had the chance, not by what they say now when they are about as far away from power as I am from being recognised as the tallest woman in Britain.

The Conservatives described the £200 winter fuel payment as a gimmick. They opposed free television licences for the over-75s. They said that the minimum income guarantee had nothing to recommend it. They said that they would reconsider the pension credit, which rewards people for saving, and their leader has been a long-standing advocate of wrecking the basic state pension, of which he once wrote that it should become a function of the private sector.

To top it all, the Conservatives are now advocating a 20 per cent. across-the-board cut in public expenditure, which would devastate pensions. All that from the party of VAT on fuel, charges for eye tests and pensions mis-selling—and from the party that slashed SERPS not once but twice. It cut inherited SERPS in half, then did not bother to tell anyone. No wonder the Opposition kept their motion so narrow—they did not want their record examined. But we remember that record and will keep reminding the people of Britain that despite the Tories pretending to be the workers' friends, they cannot be trusted on pensions. I commend to the House the amendment in the name of my right hon. Friend.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 191, Noes 315.

Division No. 56] **[7.30 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Michael rh
Arbuthnot, James rh
Atkinson, David
Atkinson, Peter
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John
Barrett, John
Beith, A. J.rh
Bercow, John
Beresford, Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Annette L.
Browning, Angela
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Vincent
Calton, Patsy
Cameron, David
Carmichael, Alistair
Cash, William
Chapman, Sydney
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Kenneth rh
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, David rh
Davey, Edward
Davis, David rh
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel
Dorrell, Stephen rh
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Alan
Duncan, Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, Eric rh
Foster, Don
Fox, Liam
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger

Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, John rh
Hague, William rh
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark
Hogg, Douglas rh
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald
Hughes, Simon
Jack, Michael rh
Jackson, Robert
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris
Kennedy, Charles rh
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Julie
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Knight, Greg rh
Laing, Eleanor
Lait, Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, Peter rh
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Anne
Mackay, Andrew rh
Maclean, David rh
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Brian rh
May, Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Mitchell, Andrew
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Andrew
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen
Osborne, George
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mark
Pugh, John
Redwood, John rh
Reid, Alan
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus
Robertson, Laurence
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Adrian
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, Gillian rh
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith
Smith, Robert
Spelman, Caroline
Spink, Bob
Spring, Richard
Stanley, John rh
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Peter
Taylor, Ian
Taylor, Matthew
Taylor, Teddy
Thomas, Simon
Tonge, Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Turner, Andrew
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Ann rh
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Hywel
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Nicholas
Wishart, Pete
Young, George rh

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Hugh Robertson and
Mr. Desmond Swayne

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald rh
Anderson, Janet
Atherton, Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Anne
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Hazel
Boateng, Paul rh
Bradley, Keith
Bradley, Peter rh
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Nicholas rh
Brown, Russell
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Caborn, Richard rh
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan
Campbell, Ronnie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Helen
Clark, Lynda
Clark, Paul
Clarke, Tom rh
Clarke, Tony
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann
Cryer, John
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jack rh
Cunningham, Tony
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Alistair rh
Davey, Valerie
David, Wayne
Davies, Denzil rh
Davis, Terry rh
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Janet
Denham, John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Frank rh
Donohoe, Brian H.
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Julia
Dunwoody, Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, Frank rh
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael
Foster, Michael Jabez
Foulkes, George rh
Francis, Hywel
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce rh
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane
Griffiths, Nigel
Griffiths, Win
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom
Havard, Dai
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan rh
Howarth, George
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin
Humble, Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam rh
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
Jackson, Helen
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan
Jones, Helen
Jones, Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Martyn
Joyce, Eric
Keeble, Sally
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kelly, Ruth
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Oona
Ladyman, Stephen
Lammy, David
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan
Lewis, Terry

Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Lyons, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCartney, Ian rh
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Alice
Mandelson, Peter rh
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Marshall, David
Marshall, Jim
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Michael rh
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun rh
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moran, Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Estelle rh
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Denis
Murphy, Jim
Naysmith, Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Owen, Albert
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Gordon
Prescott, John rh
Primarolo, Dawn rh
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, Joyce rh
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick rh
Reed, Andy
Reid, John rh
Robertson, John
Robinson, Geoffrey
Roche, Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Debra
Simon, Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Andrew rh
Smith, Chris rh
Smith, Jacqui
Smith, John
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, John rh
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David
Stewart, Ian
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Howard
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ann rh
Taylor, Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Gareth
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis
Turner, Desmond
Turner, Neil
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Walley, Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Alan rh
Williams, Betty
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Rosie
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D.
Wright, David
Wright, Tony

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Ivor Caplin and
Mr. Fraser Kemp

Question accordingly negatived

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR DEPUTY SPEAKER forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House acknowledges the crucial contribution of the UK tradition of occupational pension provision; welcomes the range of measures in the recent Green Paper to strengthen that tradition and to renew the pensions partnership between employers, employees, the financial services industry and Government; supports, in particular, the promotion of occupational pensions as a means to recruit and to retain good staff through the employer task force and other measures; notes the proposal to give employees the right to be consulted on changes to an employer's pension scheme; further notes the Government's consideration of a range of options to bolster member protection in cases where schemes are wound up, including options for a fairer sharing of assets when schemes close, with more priority for workers closer to retirement or those with more years of contributions; believes that there should be 100 per cent. protection in cases of fraud; supports the appointment of a new proactive regulator to investigate fraud and maladministration; further notes the proposed £150–£200 million administrative savings which will encourage firms to open new schemes and keep existing schemes running; and further welcomes the establishment of the independent Pension Commission to assess how effectively the current voluntarist approach is developing and to make recommendations to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on whether there is a case for moving beyond that approach.

Food Supplements Directive

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I must advise the House that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.43 pm

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I beg to move,

> That this House notes that the Food Supplements Directive includes a list of nutrients and nutrient sources that may be used in supplements and that there are nearly 300 safe nutrient sources on the UK market which are missing from the list; further notes that unless full safety dossiers are submitted for consideration by the European Scientific Committee for Food by July 2005 these nutrients will be illegal; observes that the cost of commissioning research to include within a dossier, and the compilation of such dossiers, makes the task prohibitively expensive and that some 270 safe and popular nutrient sources will be lost to the UK industry and its consumers; and declines to approve the proposed statutory instruments implementing the Directive unless and until the Government secures an amendment to the Directive so as to allow to remain on the national market those products which would otherwise fall outside the Directive's technical restrictions; further notes that the Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products Directive would require dossiers to be submitted to the Medicines Control Agency and would impose costs of tens of thousands of pounds per product on manufacturers; regrets that it would not allow any overseas product which had not been on the European market for 10 years even if it were demonstrably safe; and urges the Government to renegotiate the main provisions of this flawed Directive.

It is fair to say in the House that it sometimes comes as a surprise that a certain subject should produce a very large mailbag for Members on both sides of the House, and this is one of those issues. Indeed, the concerns expressed have prompted the support of hon. Members on both sides of the House through early-day motions that were tabled in the last Session and this Session. Tonight, we all have an opportunity to reinforce those concerns in a real debate in Parliament, with a real vote and a real motion reflecting those early-day motions.

The directives are important for two reasons, the first of which is specific to the directives themselves, and the second relates to the general burden of regulation. The directives will have specific effects on consumers' freedom of choice and on United Kingdom manufacturing and retail business. On the general burden of regulation, as my right hon. and learned Friend the shadow Chancellor pointed out recently, 4,642 new sets of regulations were introduced in the United Kingdom last year—one for every 26 minutes of each working day. That is not only a record, but an increase of nearly 50 per cent. on the number introduced in 1997. As well as the general burden of over-regulation, those directives reflect the European Union's increasing intrusion into areas of our national life and legislation where it has no place.

I shall first turn to the background to the two directives—first, the food supplements directive. In May 2000, the European Commission published a directive on food supplements, which was finalised in the spring of 2002 and published in the *Official Journal* on 12 July 2002. Its main provisions will be implemented over the next seven years. Although presented as essential to ensure consumer safety, the food supplements directive has been designed to standardise the different regulatory regimes for vitamin and mineral supplements across EU member countries. That may cause a slight liberalisation of the market in France, Germany and some other countries, but it will mean the loss of a substantial number of products in the existing liberal markets—the United Kingdom and the Netherlands in particular—where millions of consumers have been using higher-dose vitamins and minerals for several decades. In March 2002, Conservative Members of the European Parliament voted against the food supplements directive.

The second directive is that on traditional herbal medicinal products. Under Community legislation governing pharmaceuticals, no medicinal product may be placed on the market without having obtained a marketing authorisation. The draft directive on traditional herbal products provides for a new special procedure to apply to the authorisation of traditional herbal products. Products to which the proposal applies would be identified in a positive list, subject to their meeting certain conditions, including the need for safety to be demonstrated, a requirement to show a history of 30 years' use, the use of agreed medical indications and the need for labelling to include a clear statement that product efficacy is not proven, as well as other information on the safe use of the product. On 21 November 2002, the European Parliament voted for that directive at first reading, backing numerous amendments tabled by the Conservatives designed to protect individual choice as much as possible.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting this crucial issue. Many of my constituents are angry that they will not be able to buy their normal products in the usual way, and shops are worried about the damage to their business. Does my hon. Friend agree that the fact that the Government cannot stop the EU doing such enormous damage to something that does not need fixing shows that they have absolutely no influence at all in Brussels?

Dr. Fox: It would be reassuring for me to tell my right hon. Friend that the Government have no influence—I imagine that that is true—but I am not sure whether they tried to use any influence in this instance, so I am not sure whether we can draw any inference from their inactivity.

We have some specific reservations about the food supplements directive. The first threat is that the directive introduces a system of maximum permitted levels for nutrient content. Those levels are expected to be set substantially lower than the scientifically assessed upper safe level. That process will start with a cautious assessment of the safe level by the EU Scientific Committee for Food. That level will then be further reduced by the European Commission to take into account risk management factors, such as nutrient intake from other dietary sources and population reference intakes. Political considerations at the relevant EU Standing Committee will then come into play, with probably the Governments of France, Germany and other countries seeking to block everything, except the lowest possible dose levels in line with their existing markets.

Millions of British consumers regularly use higher-range vitamins and minerals. Removing those products from general sale will not stop consumers wanting them. A good example might be the generally high doses of vitamin C available in this country. If we harmonise down to the sort of level used in countries such as Italy, we might find that a couple of fruit smoothies from the House of Commons canteen gives us a higher does than recommended by the EU. What is to stop the outrageous and incredibly creative step of consumers taking two tablets instead of one? That directive is complete bureaucratic nonsense. As Consumers for Health Choice has put it,

"such action would raise a very real moral hazard by forcing consumers to seek"—

these products—

"from unregulated outlets such as overseas mail-order companies and the Internet, putting consumer safety at risk."

In addition, if high-dose nutrients are lost, the entire market will be genericised, putting a question mark over the future of all natural health care and alternative therapies, and putting at risk the livelihood of specialist retailers and manufacturers. Of course, UK manufacturers could take advantage of some of the loopholes. They could move abroad or go somewhere as close as the Isle of Man to continue to manufacture and market the same products to the same consumers through the internet. What is much more likely, however, is that they will simply disappear, sacrificed needlessly on the altar of European harmonisation.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): Will the hon. Gentleman set out how British manufacturers such as Peter Black in my constituency currently have access ~~to~~ the German, French and Austrian marketplaces, to which he referred as liberalised in this process? Currently, I believe that they are not able to sell into those marketplaces satisfactorily.

Dr. Fox: I referred to the United Kingdom and the Netherlands as liberalised. I referred to France and Germany as much more restrictive, which is entirely in line with what the hon. Gentleman says. I fear that, rather than liberalising and allowing German and French consumers access to the products currently available to UK consumers, the exact opposite process will occur, with greater restriction of the markets in the United Kingdom to bring them into line with the restricted availability in other countries. The directives will be designed to suit the already restrictive practices in other countries, not the liberal trading environment of the United Kingdom. It will be against the interests of British consumers and British manufacturers.

The practical effect of the detailed proposals in the second directive on herbal medicines would remove many safe and popular products from the marketplace, as some products have not been on the market for the necessary period. The imposition of the extraordinarily arbitrary 30-year period would jeopardise the position of products introduced over a period of nearly three decades and prevent all future innovation. No new products could be brought to market, even if they had been available for many years in another non-EU country with a good safety record. The directive would not allow products that were combinations of otherwise legal ingredients—for example, existing mixtures of herbs with nutrients such as vitamins and minerals—leaving some of those products, which represent an important section of the UK market, in a regulatory vacuum.

On top of all that, the cost of the new framework would be completely beyond many small manufacturers, forcing them out of business. What do we want the Government to do?

On the food supplement directive, the Government must immediately use every opportunity to persuade the Commission and the Governments of other EU member states to allow the most liberal possible interpretation of the legislation. The Government must also force an early review of the procedures of the EU Scientific Committee on Food so that the requirement to submit dossiers for nutrients currently not on the permitted list is not overly burdensome and expensive. Above all, the Government must work now for an amendment to the directive that would allow those safe supplements, which would otherwise lie outside the directive's technical restrictions, to remain on the UK market. As the Health Food Manufacturers Association put it

"What is needed is a system whereby the SCF can accept minimum data requirements for such products, based on their history of safe use. The UK Government should be arguing for this in Brussels."

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Is it not the case that if the Government do not use their influence in the way that my hon. Friend suggests before we receive the final directive to be considered in Standing Committee, it will not matter what Members of the House think about it, or what representations we make? It will be a done deal, and we will have no power to amend it.

Dr. Fox: As ever, my hon. Friend is absolutely correct. I shall come to the democratic deficit that that represents in just a moment.

What do we want from the Government in relation to the second directive? The directive's scope is currently restricted to herbals alone, thereby making many safe and popular products that combine herbals and food nutrients ineligible, as well as excluding many important combination products used in traditional Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine. That needs to be addressed.

The second area is cost. There are two ways in which the impact of registration costs could be ameliorated: first, by ensuring that registration fees are kept as low as possible; and secondly, by encouraging the early development of a national positive list made up of products with a long tradition of safe use in the United Kingdom, for which minimum regulatory assessment will be required. Those are not huge steps for the Government to take, but they will take some energy in pushing them forward, given the state of play that the Government have allowed to develop.

There is more to this debate, however, than the specific directives. We suffer in this country, as I said at the outset, from an increasing burden of over-regulation. Digby Jones, the director general of the CBI has said:

"our flexibility has been steadily eroded by ever increasing regulation and there is still more to come onto the statute book. We now face a real danger of our advantage being destroyed and there are clear signals that firms will go elsewhere if they are burdened with more legislation."

That is exactly what is happening in this arena. A survey of 600 members of the Institute of Directors showed that 84 per cent. feel that the problem of excessive

[Dr. Fox]

bureaucracy has got worse under the Labour Government. Much of it, however, originates in Europe. On the burden of legislation, it is worth pointing out to the House that the Lord's prayer has 59 words, the Ten Commandments have 297, the American declaration of independence has 300, and these two directives together have 10,038. That makes the point clearly.

Time after time, the EU extends its influence though the spurious use of directives, and we in this House, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) said, can do absolutely nothing about it. Time and again, control over whole areas of our national life is abandoned with little more than ministerial whimpering. Specific directives such as those under discussion may be small issues in themselves, but they amount cumulatively to the castration of this Parliament. I cannot stand the nanny state telling us how we must live our lives. If I hate one thing more than the British nanny state, however, it is "Euro nanny" running amok. It is time that Members on both sides of the House stood up for those who elected us to protect and not surrender their interests.

7.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Hazel Blears): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"recognises, in relation to the Food Supplements Directive, the Government's firm commitment to the view that the law should allow safe and properly-labelled food supplements to be freely marketed; welcomes its intention to take advantage of flexibility, secured by the UK, to permit continued use of substances not on the permitted lists where products comply with existing UK food safety legislation; notes that the impact on the long-term availability of products currently on the market will depend upon future developments on maximum limits and lists of permitted nutrients; supports the Government's efforts to press the case for any maximum limits which may be established at EU level to be based on thorough scientific risk assessments; further recognises that the proposed Directive on Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products would introduce regulatory arrangements to set safety and quality standards for unlicensed herbal remedies, and introduce systematic consumer information about the safe use of products and permit companies to make claims; further notes that the proposed Directive is supported by most interest groups, who believe it will protect public health and boost consumer confidence in herbal medicines; further welcomes the progress of the Government in negotiations for more flexibility to take account of valid evidence of traditional use from outside the European Union and to permit herbal nutrient combination remedies; and further welcomes the stated willingness of the Herbal Forum, representing all UK manufacturers' trade associations in the sector, to work with the Medicines Control Agency to minimise regulatory impact, consistent with the need to protect public health."

I do not think that these are small issues but ones of great importance to people up and down the country. I am therefore delighted that we have the opportunity tonight to debate these two European directives: the food supplements directive, which has already been passed, and the directive on traditional herbal medicinal products, which is currently under negotiation.

I want to make it clear at the outset that we support the right of consumers to have access to a wide range of safe remedies and supplements. We understand the anxieties that people have about the possible effects of the directives, but the discussions have also included a great deal of misinformation, which has caused consumers some unnecessary anxiety.

It is absolutely vital that we get the right balance in this area of policy. The hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) rightly mentioned the views of consumers, the important issue of freedom of choice and the effect on manufacturers, which I will deal with in my remarks. I am absolutely amazed, however, that he did not once mention public health in relation to the important area of food supplements and herbal remedies. We must get the right balance between consumers having freedom of choice and access to a wide range of safe supplements, while making sure, crucially, that we protect public health.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Does not the hon. Lady subscribe to the fundamental principle of European law that once a product has been accepted for free movement in one member state it should be generally allowed in every other member state? By excluding these products, the French and Germans are therefore acting illegally.

Ms Blears: No, what is important is that products are able to demonstrate their safety, quality and efficacy. I will be amazed if Conservative Members depart from that principle. The proposal for the herbal sector is for a simplified registration process so that the products do not have to go through the even more lengthy and expensive process of obtaining a specific medicines authorisation. The proposal is designed to try to make sure that those products can get to market in a way that recognises their traditional use.

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): I am interested in the Minister's remarks, but can she explain, if supplements have been on sale perfectly safely in this country possibly for generations, why the European directive will effectively take some of them off the market? Where is the evidence that public health requires some of them to be removed from the market?

Ms Blears: The hon. Gentleman raises an important question and I intend to deal with it in relation to both the food supplements directive and the herbals directive. In both cases, there are important public health issues, so I shall deal with that point in some detail.

Dr. Fox: The Minister is right to suggest that public safety should be paramount. However, is she suggesting that the current legislation is insufficient to protect the public? If she thinks that some of the products that are currently available might be adversely affected by the directive, why will they be on sale until 2009?

Ms Blears: The hon. Gentleman is certainly well aware of the significant concerns about a whole range of herbal products. For example, in Westminster Hall, we have debated aristolochia, which has been found in traditional Chinese remedies and has led to serious health problems. We have also seen recently how prescription-only steroids have been used in traditional Chinese eczema remedies. We placed in the Library last year a whole dossier relating to the concerns about such products. It is generally accepted—among manufacturers as well as consumers—that getting proper quality standards into the sector is a top priority. I shall come to the views of manufacturers in due course, because they are important.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Given the Minister's concerns—which I do not share—will she answer the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) as to why the products will remain on sale for many more years?

Ms Blears: If the hon. Gentleman is referring to the food supplements directive rather than to the herbals directive, he might like to know that it makes provision for a transitional phase. We need also to introduce quality into the herbals sector, because some of the products are pretty dangerous. On food supplements, we have to make sure that people recognise the findings of the dossiers that prove that products are safe. There is a long way to go on food supplements. We have not yet had any negotiations about maximum permitted limits, and there is a great deal to play for in getting the best deal for the products that are on sale in Britain. Much of what the hon. Member for Woodspring said was speculation about what might happen in the future. The important thing is that the Government are engaged actively in the debate and are not simply throwing our hands up and saying that there is nothing that we can do.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Late on Thursday, I become the latest Member of the House to present a petition, and this time it was on behalf of 437 of my constituents who have expressed a great deal of concern about the two directives. Can my hon. Friend assure me that the views of the hundreds and thousands of people who have been represented in the many petitions that have been presented to the House are being taken into careful account in all the work that she is doing on this issue?

Ms Blears: I certainly can give my hon. Friend that assurance. The allegation has been made that the Government have failed to use their influence on this important issue. I absolutely reject that. The Government have been able to exercise considerable influence on the food supplements directive and on the herbals directive. I will come to the details of that, because we are absolutely determined to engage actively in putting forward the interests of the people of this country. We will not abdicate our responsibility.

Mrs. Browning *rose*—

Angus Robertson (Moray) *rose*—

Ms Blears: I have given way lots of times. I now intend to make a little progress.

As I said, it is important to get the balance right between protecting public health and promoting honest and informative labelling so that people can make informed choices. It is for consumers to choose what to eat. We are not in the business of the nanny state—whether it is a British nanny state or a European one. We know that consumers welcome a wide range of choice and we are determined to make sure that that is sustained. The rationale of our approach applies as much to food supplements as it does to other foods. We know that many consumers value the range of food supplements that are currently available on the UK market.

Our current position on the food supplements directive is the one that we took in the negotiations. They were difficult negotiations. It was not a case of our not engaging; we were in there arguing the case for our position. The negotiations were carried forward with great vigour and in full consultation with all interested parties. The negotiations are now over and the supplements directive is a fact of life, but the Government were positively engaged in achieving the flexibility that enables us to have transitional provisions from 2005 to 2009 and in securing a commitment in the directive that the maximum permitted limits, which is the crucial issue for most consumers, will consider not just nutritional need, which was the view taken by most other members states, but safety, which was the view taken by the Government, and dietary intakes. We achieved in the negotiations a broader base of factors to be taken into account in setting maximum permitted limits than we would otherwise have done had we taken the view of the hon. Member for Woodspring and opted out of the negotiations.

Mrs. Browning: If I heard the Minister correctly, she said a few minutes ago something about safety, which suggested that she believes that some products on the market contain dangerous components or ingredients. She mentioned a Westminster Hall debate on one of them. Before statutory instruments appear before the Standing Committees of the House, will she place in the Library a list of all products on the market in this country that she believes contain dangerous ingredients or components? If she has the medical and scientific evidence to show that dangerous products are on the market, the House deserves to know what they are and why they are dangerous.

Ms Blears: That is exactly why, following the debate in Westminster Hall, we did just that. We placed in the Library a dossier compiled from reports from all around the world about substances that had given rise to health concerns. If any further items have given rise to concern since the dossier was placed in the Library, I shall gladly include them on it.

I have already referred to aristolochia. In addition, digitalis causes serious irregular heart rhythms. That was reported in the United States following the accidental substitution of harmless plantain with digitalis. Synthetic drugs have been adulterated. For example, fenfluramine, a prescription-only medicine, was banned globally on health grounds in 1997, but has been identified in traditional Chinese weight-loss remedies. Steroids have been found in skin creams, and there are herb and drug interactions with St. John's wort.

There have also been quality issues. Analysis has been carried out on echinacea, and lots of leaf and ash have been found in the product even though it should be made from the root if people are to obtain the benefits that they think they are buying. A lot of information is available and the dossier is in the Library. If further

[Ms Blears]

matters have arisen since the dossier was produced—the debate should be based on proper evidence—I will gladly place information about them in the Library.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): Why does it take a far more adverse reaction to remove a pharmaceutical product from the shelves than it does a herbal product?

Ms Blears: Herbal products are only just starting to be regulated. That is why it is important to support the directive. We need a proper regulatory framework for the herbal sector as well as our framework for traditional medicines. Herbal medicines are becoming more accepted in different medical environments, and the hon. Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick) has been pressing their case for a long time. As they become more widely used and demanded, the requirement for them to be properly regulated becomes even more intense.

Angus Robertson *rose—*

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park) *rose—*

Ms Blears: I want to make a little progress. I have given way many times, and I now want to describe our current position on the food supplements directive.

We have taken a robust position in the negotiations. The directive establishes the positive list that defines the range and form of vitamins and minerals that can be used in food supplements. It sets the principles for defining the maximum permitted limits; it does not go into specific limits but sets a framework. It also provides for mandatory labelling on nutrition information, warnings about keeping the product out of the reach of children and a statement making it clear that supplements are not a substitute for a balanced diet. We welcome those provisions.

Dr. Tonge: I thank the hon. Lady for her generosity in giving way. I have not seen the dossier in the Library—I have been concentrating on other dossiers recently—but what is the directive's position on qat, which is classified by the Government as a herbal substance and is chewed mainly by people in the north African community? It is a great concern to the elders of that community, who have been to see me, because it is a powerful tranquilliser, then stimulant, causing young people in particular to do nothing with their lives. Can the Minister advise us whether the directive will cover that substance?

Ms Blears: I am not in a position to do so at the moment, but I undertake to look into the matter. I shall get back to the hon. Lady about the important matter of where that substance falls in the regulatory framework.

The directive contains a provision enabling member states to require notification of new products when they are developed. We will not activate that provision because it will involve unnecessary regulation. We are anxious to keep regulation to a minimum, but commensurate with the protection of public health—we want to get the balance right. It is fair to say that, if the Government and the Food Standards Agency had not engaged actively in the negotiations, the directive would have gone through and we would not have won flexibilities. Nor would we have broadened the base on maximum permitted limits, which is an important gain.

The directive must be implemented by 31 July this year. Draft regulations have been prepared and are out for consultation. The first effect of the directive, on labelling, bites on 1 August 2005. Reports of the imminent withdrawal of swathes of products are misleading. I am concerned that, in the motion, the Opposition talk about 300 products being taken off the shelves—*[Interruption.]* Well, they talk about 300 but mention 270 later in the motion. I am not sure whether they know which figure is correct—perhaps it depends on which briefing they are citing.

The food supplements directive contains two positive lists. The first deals with vitamins and minerals that can be included in food supplements, and lists all the vitamins currently used in food supplements and all but six minerals in those supplements. The controversy arises in relation to the second positive list, which deals with sources of nutrients, not nutrients themselves. The distinction is important. This is not about taking products off the shelves, but about the fact that 270 sources of vitamins are not included in the positive lists. Both lists remain open for amendment—they will not be closed—and new sources can be added to them.

The second positive list in the food supplements directive includes 32 sources of vitamins, nine of calcium, 11 of magnesium, 11 of iron, eight of zinc, eight of sodium and nine of potassium. A range of nutrient sources are included in the positive list, so consumers have been caused unnecessary alarm. It is simply not the case that the products on which they rely will be withdrawn.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Is the Minister saying that our brief from Holland and Barrett, a reputable company, is grotesquely inaccurate and dishonest? It says:

> "The Directive, when transposed in UK law will still . . . lead to the banning by August 2005 of several hundred nutrients and nutrient sources which are currently permitted, affecting potentially thousands of UK products".

I have a retail outlet in my constituency. I like the shop, go there and use its products from time to time. Is it being dishonest?

Ms Blears: Many of us have such outlets in our constituency—I have myself. I have not seen the letter, but it refers to "nutrients and nutrient sources", thus making the point that I have been making—that the vast majority of things that are not on the positive list are not vitamins and minerals, but combinations and formulations of those ingredients. I am informed that the vitamins that people want to take will be available in the formulations—the nutrient sources—on the positive list. However, companies may be required to reformulate their products or submit dossiers if they want to carry on with a specific formulation.

I have just said that there are a number of formulations for all minerals and vitamins on the positive list, so it is unlikely that a whole range of products will be wiped out. Both lists include a wide range of vitamins, minerals and formulations. Admittedly, other formulations and nutrient sources are not included in the lists at present, so it will be a matter for industry and manufacturers to decide whether they want to submit dossiers on those nutrients or provide products derived from nutrient sources included on the lists. They therefore have many choices to make. I have received letters from constituents who think that echinacea and garlic will be banned. That is not the case—there is no substance in those allegations.

Angus Robertson: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way—she has been generous in accepting interventions. She will appreciate that many hundreds of thousands of people in Scotland, as throughout the rest of the UK, are concerned about the measures, but I have heard nothing about joined-up government and devolved Administrations. Matters such as food hygiene, composition labelling and advertising are devolved. What discussions has the Minister had with her counterparts in the Scottish Executive? How many times has her opposite number in the Scottish Executive, Malcolm Chisholm, who is Minister for Health and Community Care, attended the Council of Ministers to battle for a Scottish interest on that important subject?

Ms Blears: The matter is clearly of concern and interest to consumers up and down the country, and the proposed regulations have been consulted on in other countries. On the second question, I am not in a position to give the hon. Gentleman the exact details.

On the future of food supplements, the next big step is maximum permitted limits, which will be of great interest to consumers. Substances can be added to the list so long as a dossier is submitted by 12 July 2005. Member states may allow continued use until 31 December 2009, so there is a lengthy transitional period for manufacturers and retailers to take steps to ensure compliance. I welcome the fact that manufacturers using substances that are not on the list are co-operating in the preparation of dossiers, which clearly reduces the costs and regulatory burdens on them.

The directive does not set maximum limits, but establishes a framework for them. The House should be aware that other member states take a view of food supplements that is very different from ours. They regard them much more as medicines and, initially, have taken a more restrictive line than the one that we take. We have been able to achieve a wider framework for the setting of permitted maximum limits that looks at safety and thorough scientific risk assessments as well as nutritional need. We shall to continue to press those key considerations. Our efforts will focus on getting a good deal for the UK on implementation. I accept that many consumers value the high-dose products on the UK market, but we are actively pressing for thorough scientific risk assessments. There is still a great deal to play for.

Mr. Todd: Can I return to the point that I raised with the Minister's opposite number, who wilfully ignored it? From the perspective of a UK manufacturer seeking to enter the European marketplace, is not the attempt to break down restrictions in currently restricted markets good news?

Ms Blears: Indeed, it could well be in future. We are speaking of a different viewpoint from that of our country. The Netherlands shares our view, but other member states take a much more restrictive view. It is important, therefore, that we have been able actively to engage in those negotiations to make sure that we can retain UK consumers' rights to the supplements that they value, and ensure that we make those goods more widely available in future.

We set up an expert committee on vitamins and minerals, which is preparing a report and has consulted widely. The report is likely to be published this summer. It will then go to the European food safety agency and will form the basis of our negotiating position on the maximum permitted limits. I can promise the House that that will be robust, and that we will argue the case as strongly as we can.

Dr. Iddon: Is my hon. Friend aware that the European Union committee on food safety has set a maximum daily dose of 25 mg on vitamin B6, without taking into account factors such as dietary intake? The dose recommended by the committee may be less than 25 mg. It is traditional in this country for consumers to take more than 100 mg of vitamin B6. What will happen if there is such a wide disparity between the UK and the EU figures?

Ms Blears: I am aware that vitamin B6 is taken by many thousands of people in this country, and that there are concerns about the consumption of very high levels of vitamin B6 and the effect on the nervous system. At this point, it is not right to speculate about the European food safety agency's view on these matters. That is why it is important that we have succeeded in widening the framework within which the maximum limits will be set, rather than simply on the basis of nutritional need. Safety is the primary concern and must be taken into account.

On the directive on traditional herbal medicines products, there is agreement across almost the entire herbal sector that current regulatory arrangements for unlicensed herbal remedies are unsatisfactory. We do not set quality standards, we do not set safety standards, we do not require consumer information about the safe use of products, and we do not allow companies to tell consumers what the product is for. We have had repeated examples in the UK and across the world of unsafe or poor quality unlicensed products, or products containing illegal ingredients. I have already set out some examples of the wrong herb being used, contamination and poor labelling. We have placed the summary of evidence in the Library. The Medicines Control Agency has undertaken several successful prosecutions in relation to herbal remedies found to contain illegal ingredients, but the real issue is the lack of systematic quality controls to prevent those illegal ingredients from getting into the products in the first place.

The House of Lords Science and Technology Committee examined the issue of complementary and alternative medicine and reported in November 2000. The all-party group took evidence from various sources and was clear on the case for regulation. It stated:

[Ms Blears]

> "We are concerned about the safety implications of an unregulated herbal sector and we urge that all legislative avenues be explored to ensure better control of this unregulated sector in the interests of the public health."

The House of Lords Committee realised that public health was an important consideration, as well as consumer choice and the rights of manufacturers.

The proposed directive will put in place systematic arrangements to protect consumers. Ministers, including myself, have had meetings with people from the sector—manufacturers, herbalists and consumers. The clear majority of interest groups broadly support the directive. Groups representing practitioners, manufacturers, pharmacists, doctors and toxicologists, and the Consumers Association have all indicated their support. They believe that the directive will protect public health and, importantly, boost consumer confidence. The herbal manufacturers want a regulated regime, because they want their sector of the market to have the confidence of consumers, so that they will want to buy the products and feel that they can rely on their efficacy and quality.

Unlike Consumers for Health Choice, which has campaigned and issued hundreds of thousands of leaflets, and which is funded by some large companies in the field, including Holland and Barrett, Solgar and Biocare, many other groups do not have the resources to engage political lobbyists, but they are passionate in their support for the directive.

The European Herbal Practitioners Association, which represents 1,200 herbal practitioners in the UK, states that the EHPA now supports the proposed directive,

> "recognising that it represents the best chance to safeguard the public by ensuring reliable quality and safety standards for herbal products."

The EHPA states that in its judgment, failure of the proposed directive to pass into law

> "could potentially jeopardise the supply of herbal medicines to the public since in the absence of agreed quality and safety standards for herbal medicines throughout the EU, there would undoubtedly be a loss of confidence in the sector".

The Herbal Forum, which represents all 10 manufacturing trade associations, recently stated that it sees the need for the directive and that it wants to work closely with the Medicines Control Agency. Such views are held not only in this country. The draft strategy of the World Health Organisation on traditional medicines was published last year and recommends support for all countries to establish effective regulatory systems for registration and quality assurance of herbal medicines.

In our European negotiations, our main aim has been to press, as in the case of food supplements, for increased flexibility as regards the scope of the directive. We are very hopeful of progress. We understand from the European Commission that the next version of the proposals, which is due out shortly, will extend the proposed simplified registration procedure to herbal/nutrient combination remedies. The hon. Member for Woodspring raised the issue, and consumers and others in the field have been raising it for some time. The combination products, which at present do not have authorisation, would currently be required to go through a full market licensing procedure, but they may well be able to come under the simplified procedure of the directive. That would be an extension of consumer choice, rather than a limitation of it. We look forward to the next draft. If that development is confirmed, it will be an example of the Government's creativity and the Opposition's lack of imagination on the subject.

We have also pressed for the directive to be amended so that more account can be taken of valid evidence of traditional use from outside the European Union. The Medicines Control Agency, with the support of many groups across the UK herbal sector, has fought long and hard in Europe over several years to get wider recognition of non-EU traditional remedies. We welcome the possibility of progress. We think that the next draft of the directive will give the European herbals committee power to reduce the requirement for a minimum 15 years' EU usage where valid evidence is supplied. On those two issues, combination products and traditional non-EU usage, we are hopeful of progress.

The thousands of leaflets issued by Consumers for Health Choice will have frightened many consumers. Last year, we extended the public consultation process and asked people who were worried to send in examples of products likely to be ruled out as a result of the directive. We referred 200 substances for examination. The results showed that three or four of them might have been excluded. That is the extent of the issues with which we are dealing. To frighten consumers by talking about hundreds, if not thousands, of products being ruled out is not a responsible course of action.

We are keen to ensure that Chinese and Ayurvedic medicines can be incorporated in the category of traditional non-EU use. We shall continue to press for that.

Manufacturers large and small are supporting us in this cause. They are concerned that some of their competitors are short-changing the public with lesser quality products. Why should the public have to accept patchy, second-rate standards merely because a medicine is made with herbal ingredients rather than chemical ones? None the less, we attach great importance to trying to keep the regulatory requirements to a minimum, so we are keen to engage with the industry in that regard. The MCA and the Herbal Forum have launched a detailed programme of discussions about the dossier process, in which they are asking how those requirements can be streamlined and how they can ensure that companies collaborate so that they are not all starting from scratch, perhaps by enabling them to refer to each other's evidence.

The hon. Member for Woodspring proposed the idea of a national positive list. We are certainly sympathetic to that idea, but we think that many of the practical issues could be dealt with by co-operation between those in the industry, who should use each other's information. We are not unsympathetic to the idea of a national positive list as well as a European one, and we will continue to explore it.

Mr. Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith): I am glad to hear about the consultation that my hon. Friend is promising to continue to hold with the industry. Will she assure the House that she will not allow any directives to pass through the European Union legislative process unless the industry's concerns are taken into account?

Ms Blears: From the outset, the Government, the MCA with regard to herbals and the Food Standards Agency with regard to food supplements have been engaged with the industry, including large and small companies, manufacturers, retailers and the whole field to try to ensure that we advance the views of the people whom we represent and to protect consumers and public health by getting the balance right.

On the food supplements directive, our focus is now on good implementation, ensuring that we maximise consumer choice and pressing for a safety-based approach to maximum limits. On herbals, we want to enhance the status of herbal medicine and maintain consumer choice, and our initiative is widely supported in the sector.

It is crucial that we get the balance right between protecting public health and ensuring that consumers have a wide choice of safe and effective food supplements. I suppose that I can do no better at the end of my speech than to quote from the brief that the Consumers' Association—an independent and challenging organisation—has given to hon. Members for this debate. It states:

> "There is potential for harm in relation to both herbal medicines and food supplements, where there is inadequate quality control and insufficient information. These two EU Directives will establish regulatory frameworks that ensure consumers can take full advantage of these products in the secure knowledge that they are using them safely and that they contain what they say they contain."

The Government are ensuring that that happens. As usual, the Opposition motion is cynical, short-sighted and opportunist. It exposes their inability to take mature and responsible decisions on behalf of the people of this country. Our amendment sets out our plans actively to engage on all these important matters with other member states and the Commission to get the best possible deal for consumers in this country, as well as adequately illustrating the difference between us. I ask the House to support our constructive amendment.

8.31 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): The Liberal Democrats welcome this debate and applaud the Conservative party for raising on one of their Opposition days a subject that features heavily in hon. Members' postbags and which has attracted much cross-party support as the subject of early-day motions. It has also been the subject of petitions submitted by many of my hon. Friends and, indeed, hon. Members on both sides of the House. The Under-Secretary was uncharacteristically harsh in her closing remarks in claiming that the Conservative party's motion was cynical, short-sighted and opportunistic. That might embarrass some Labour Members who support at least some of the sentiments underlying the concerns that have been expressed. Generally, the debate has been detailed rather than partisan, and I hope to continue in that spirit.

The Under-Secretary was right that there is an issue of public health, and it has to be balanced with choice. She has my sympathy in grappling with the difficulties of finding that balance. I think that the main principle should be that people should be allowed to consume products where it is safe to do so and where they are not being misled into doing so. In some cases, we are dealing with vulnerable consumers who are seeking specific health effects, even if they are not advertised as such. Another principle that should be established is that the greater the health claim, the greater the potential vulnerability and the need for safety. In that respect, information is very important.

The labelling aspects of the directives have not been stressed enough. They will provide for proper labelling. Yes, there will be a cost to the industry and retailers in providing it, but we support it with regard to food and licensed medicines and it is right that we should support it with regard to an intermediate group of products. The directives are good in that respect. I know that people who feel that there should be freedom to consume also recognise that that must exist in the context of adequate health information. For example, very few hon. Members would ban smoking, but most of us insist that a significant amount of information should be given to people who are especially vulnerable, as they are addicted in many cases.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): The hon. Gentleman is a medical practitioner, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) and the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon). The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) referred to smoking. The European Union promotes and subsidises the production of a leaf—tobacco—that is known to cause harm, yet we are considering banning substances that humans have used for many years and have not been proven harmful. What is the logic of that?

Dr. Harris: I agree that it is morally outrageous that the European Union subsidises tobacco crops. Many hon. Members feel strongly that such subsidies should end because they cannot be justified, especially when the products are marketed in the developing world. It is therefore consistent, and the hon. Gentleman is consistent, to raise anxieties about that and to be worried about some of the directives' unintended—or, indeed, intended—effects on products that are currently available. I hope to deal with some of those concerns.

Although I generally agreed with the speech of the hon. Member for Woodspring, he went further than I would go in decrying regulation. I shall revert to that shortly. He was inconsistent when he argued that the directives would send people and users underground and that they would double their dose, go abroad or seek black market sources, because that argument also applies to some softer drugs. He praised the Netherlands, but it is important that hon. Members realise that some countries are consistent in their liberal approach of allowing consumer choice, provided that adequate information exists about a product's safety or health risks. There are health risks associated with, for example, cannabis.

I do not believe that over-regulation is the problem. We support the principle of regulating food supplements and herbal products, but there are valid concerns about the detail. The directives aim to improve the single market. The hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) pointed out the difficulties that

[Dr. Harris]

manufacturers in this country experience in marketing products in other European countries that are stricter. That is the problem with a single market, which the Conservative party supported in the past.

Safety, information, labelling and public health also need to be tackled. We must take a balanced view, and I am therefore worried about scapegoating the pharmaceutical industry. Although there are problems with pharmaceutical companies, they are not the baddies with regard to the directives. As we have heard, significant commercial resources back those who lobby against the directives or some of their provisions. That does not invalidate their concerns, many of which I share, but the pharmaceutical industry does not have a monopoly on lobbying.

It is pleasing that some progress has been made in amending the food supplements directive in the European Parliament. My Liberal Democrat colleagues in the European Parliament supported a move to extend the 18-month period for submitting evidence for the harmless nature of a food supplement to at least 36 months. It is regrettable that it is not longer. If the derogation allows the products to be used until 2009, it is strange to set a cut-off date of 2005. The evaluation would not require four years.

I agree with those who tabled the motion, Consumers for Health Choice and others, that up to 300 nutrients or nutrient sources that are currently in use may not be available, and that that is unsatisfactory. I do not believe that the Minister disputes the numbers. It is worrying that the maximum allowed dosage may not be based on an upper safety threshold. I believe that all hon. Members would support such a basis.

It is unclear whether the positive list remains open in the way in which the Minister implied when she spoke about the amendment. The positive list remains open only with the provision of the dossier. That places a significant burden on smaller companies, and there is a valid concern that it will be more difficult for established small companies to ensure that their products are included on the positive list. It would be useful if Ministers cleared up the part of the amendment that implies that the positive list remains open without qualification.

The suggestion that there should be a British positive list could only result in support being given to smaller companies to enable them to work with other people to establish the safety of their product. There is an argument for at least some kind of framework for helping those companies, if not for Government intervention, given that they will be put in a difficult competitive position by the regulations, which will have been difficult for them to foresee when they first marketed and established their product.

The Government have made progress. They have obtained—or, at least, they claim to have obtained—a derogation to allow the use of existing products until 2009. Their approach goes in the right direction with regard to the maximum permitted safety levels, and there is therefore much to be welcomed in their approach. It could have been worse: they could have taken a very narrow line on these issues. It is, therefore, appropriate to give them our support and wish them luck in future negotiations on these matters.

A series of amendments to the directive on traditional herbal medicinal products has been tabled in the European Parliament. Again, the position is not as bleak as had first been thought. Liberal Democrat colleagues have supported the amendments to allow the inclusion of non-herbal ingredients such as vitamins and minerals—I suppose that Conservative MEPs will have done so too—and to modify the definition of a herbal medicinal product to mean those products containing pharmacologically active ingredients.

Dr. Fox: Those were Conservative amendments.

Dr. Harris: I shall put on record that I accept that the hon. Member for Woodspring claims that they were Conservative amendments, but the Conservative party—and its colleagues, such as they are—does not have a majority in the European Parliament and requires the support of other groups to pass such amendments. There is a greater spirit of co-operation, and more recognition of the need to form such coalitions, in the European Parliament than we have here. Amendments tabled to clarify the border between food and herbs and to ensure that the directive does not apply to food supplements or cosmetics were also successful.

It was regrettable, however, that there was no success in amending some other parts of the directive, and those areas give rise to some concern. First, it needs to be clearly established that combinations will be allowed under the directive, and I hope that the Minister will clarify that point. During an earlier debate of a European Standing Committee, it was not entirely clear that the Government had been reassured on that position. Indeed, it was not clear that the Government even supported the concerns raised by, among others, the hon. Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick) about whether such combinations would be permitted. It would be useful if the Minister could put his views on that matter clearly on the record.

It is also regrettable that there is inequality between the amount of traditional use allowed in other parts of the world—where there has been traditional use for longer—and in the European Union, and that we require the passage of a measure through the Council of Ministers even to make progress to 10 years rather than 15 years of European use. An early review will be required to see how the measures are working, but it is not clear that that is to be delivered. It is, therefore, reasonable to suggest that we expect a lot of the Government in regard to the traditional herbal medicinal products directive, which has not yet been published and is therefore not yet in force. The Government claim to seek flexibility on the years of European use necessary, and I would be grateful if the Minister would clarify exactly what his aspirations are in that respect, and what level he would consider unsatisfactory.

The Government also claim to be trying to reduce the regulatory impact burden on smaller producers of these products, but more substance needs to be put on the bones of that claim. Otherwise, people whose business depends on such action may not believe them. Like the Consumers Association—I, too, shall quote selectively from its briefing—we recognise that

"there are positive benefits . . . from both of these EU directives"—

but, in both cases, there is still more work to be done.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I must tell the House that a number of hon. Members are clearly seeking to catch my eye, but there is a limited amount of time left. It would, therefore, be helpful if Members could make their remarks as brief as they feel is reasonable.

8.44 pm

Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): If any Members in the House tonight were medical students in China, they would be given a simple message in the first lecture of the first part of their course: food is our first and strongest medicine. It has the power to cure us and make us well, but it also has the power to kill us. The importance of that in medicine lies in understanding the significance of thresholds and appropriate intakes. Even in this country, a large number of members of the medical profession will happily repeat part of that message. They will tell people that if they were to drink even water in sufficient quantities, it could kill them. For me, the sad thing is that that common ground between our conventional medicine and the traditional medicines of our own country and of the east seems to end there.

Our medical culture is dominated by a view of medicine written largely by the pharmaceutical companies. As such, we have a medicalised model that addresses, by and large, not health, but ill health. We have a culture that is resistant to the idea of people taking responsibility for their health. No matter how much we say that we want people to be responsible for their health, we increasingly throw up all sorts of obstacles in their path to doing so.

In some ways, tonight's debate has managed to capture the contradictions of where we are, although it is further complicated by a number of disparate and different interests, which we are trying to encompass in one discussion. We are dealing with two directives involving some common ground, but lots of differences of interest. Also, two Ministries are involved as are, at European level, two different views as to the place of nutritional supplements and traditional herbal remedies in the pattern of health culture.

In addition, there are two clear political tendencies with interests in the debate. One, which seems to exert a disproportionate influence in the European Union, is pro-standardisation and pro-regulation while the tendency in our country is much more pro-choice and pro-information. I can understand that the negotiations involve genuine differences of view that have to be argued and fought out between those different perceptions.

As if that were not complicated enough, there are two clearly different sets of lobbying interests—the pharmaceutical industries and some large herbal product suppliers and, on the other side of the equation, members of the public who just want more extensive choices that they are empowered and trusted to make. We have to try to navigate our way between those sets of competing interests.

For Ministers, the final complication is that, within our advisory system, different views are taken by the Food Standards Agency and the Medicines Control Agency. Members should remember that throughout our debates on nutritional supplements, the MCA has consistently sought to medicalise the health model that applies to traditional herbal remedies and food supplements. We need to try to hold off those interests as separate from and in competition with those being put to us by members of the public and our constituents.

Let me make it clear that it would be crass for the House not to support the Government amendment. A good amendment has been tabled and, even as a sceptic, I think it incumbent on us to support and understand its importance, because it reflects the negotiating position that the Government seek to occupy. In particular, it is worth supporting because, as I must say for the record, the robust negotiations involving Lord Hunt have presented a formidable challenge to many of the inclinations that people wanted to be written into the first draft of the directive.

It is important for us to recognise the lobbying and negotiating role played by the Food Standards Agency. A former Minister in this House, the noble Lord Rooker, had the sense to kick some of our earlier debates into touch. He put together a Joint Committee, which is due to report to the Government and to the House this spring. It would be naive and politically dishonest of us to try to pre-empt that. It may turn out that it puts forward a strong position, and most of us who support nutritional supplements and public choice may find it an ally in our negotiations, not a limitation.

I want to focus on my concerns, which I hope the Minister will heed. The food supplements directive raises issues about potency that we must address. The wording that has so far been used stresses the notion of safe levels. It is important for us to recognise that what some other European countries mean by that is minimum levels. The references to vitamins C and B6 show how problematic that could be. The idea of a safe level of 25 mg of vitamin B6 would be a sad joke to the thousands of British women who regularly take vitamin B6 to maintain their well-being as part of their informed health choice.

The Minister referred to the adverse effects of an intake of large amounts of vitamin B6—four times the current safe level recommended by the EU, or even eight or 10 times that level. There is no medical evidence to support that claim. People in the Department advise the Minister on the basis of one study alone, the Dalton and Dalton study. It is worth going through that study if one wants to read a piece of hocus-pocus research. The authors have persistently refused to allow their peers to review the data on which they based their recommendations. It is astonishing that researchers have made such far-reaching claims but have refused to let their peers examine the basis on which they were made. I understand that there is one study that may offer a crumb of comfort to them, but as it was a study on dogs rather than people, I suggest that any investigation of its significance should be carried out with caution.

The Medicines Control Agency has attempted to bounce successive Governments into a medicalised view of regulating these supplements, because it suits its needs and those of the pharmaceutical industry, which would make an awful lot of money out of the process if

[Alan Simpson]

it were able to capture that market. It would give the agency monopoly control, and it would allow the industry to charge monopoly prices. The vast majority of women who campaigned in opposition to the initial proposals to set ludicrously low limits on the availability of vitamin B6 knew what game they were playing and what was at stake.

Whatever figure we choose to put on it, there is a problem with having a limited number of nutrients allowed to be registered under the directive. I think that it would be crass of us to say that some of the nutrients that are currently available in the UK would not automatically be covered by the new directive. To go down that path would be to take a serious step backwards, with no medical evidence on which to base our contention.

I also caution the Minister and other colleagues about going down that path, because it does not make any sense, even in pragmatic terms. In today's globalised information market, if we set foolish, prohibitive and restrictive rules, consumers who have looked into this issue and made their own health choices will go through other channels. They will use mail order or the internet to do so. A more open and regulated market will always be better than the present market, which is prescriptive and pushes more people into making choices outside a formal market framework.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): The hon. Gentleman has voiced many of the anxieties that lie behind our motion, and indeed behind early-day motions signed by many Members. Does he not realise that this motion gives him, and others on both sides of the House, an opportunity to make their point robustly?

Alan Simpson: I do, and the terms of the motion certainly presented an initial attraction. The more I read the Government's amendment, however, the more I saw a compelling case for Members on both sides of the House to support it. We are talking about negotiations that are currently in progress, and our debate should send Ministers a message about where we want the progress to end up. That will, I think, strengthen their position. The message is clear: if we as a Government fail to meet demands made by Members on both sides of the House, Members on both sides of the House will not give their support.

Let me say something about the proposed directive on traditional herbal medicinal products. I urge the House to be cautious about the catalogue of criticisms that we are offered in relation to the dangers of herbal products. It would sit more easily on my conscience if we had a similar list of the problems associated with manufactured pharmaceutical drugs. The catalogue of health disasters foisted on people by an industry that appears at times to be able literally to get away with murder is scandalous.

In that context, it is outrageous for us to allow ourselves a distorted debate that fails to recognise the thousands of years of knowledge—especially in the east—of the use of traditional herbal remedies. The issue is not the use of the herb involved, but an understanding of dosage. That has always been the basis of the application of such remedies. The House must not become trapped in a caricature of a debate—an exchange in which scare stories are thrown around, suggesting that if Ayurvedic medicines or different herbs are used there will be terrible consequences for us all. Using such herbs in an informed fashion is arguably one of the best ways of giving people more responsibility for and control over their own well-being, and all parties in the House should welcome that.

We would like the Minister to return from his negotiation with affirmative answers based on the need to address the existence of products that have been on the market for some time, and ought not to be outside the loop of existing or proposed legislation. We should oppose the suggestion that no new products should be brought on to the market even if they have been available in another EU country and have a good safety record. We should recognise that the standards for manufacturing of such products must relate to food safety rather than medicinal standards. We should allow more emphasis to be put on labelling, rather than on the restriction of dosages.

One question relating to how the markets will function after the two directives are agreed on and become operative will concern the number and nature of suppliers. The costs of compliance will have a profound effect on the range and character of the choices that the public face.

Therefore, I hope that the Minister will agree tonight to commit the United Kingdom to five clear points at the negotiations. The UK must reserve a position that gives it the right to derogations, otherwise the consensus would be for a market that was so restricted that it was diametrically opposed to everything that the UK has built up. We must emphasise upper safety levels rather than minimum risk restrictions. We must have a commitment to abolish the arbitrary period that a herbal product must be on the EU market before it is allowed to register. We must press for maximum rights to clear information about product labelling, and minimum presumptions that positive health choices need to be medicalised rather than just publicised. Finally, we must try to set the lowest possible price hurdles for product registration in each of the respective markets.

Consumer choice will depend not on the assurances of agencies or Ministers but on the freedoms, derogations and choices that end up being written into the legislation or directives. The UK is committed to a strong negotiating position. The message that must come from the House is that we must deliver on that position if the House eventually is to offer any support to the final directives that come through.

9.1 pm

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) is to be congratulated on his choice of debate this evening and on the eloquent way in which he set out his stall and explained in great detail some of the problems that we face. I will try to add a little colour to what he said.

Talking of colour, I straight away refer to the Minister's speech. She presented an amazingly rosy picture of the Government's approach and what they have done in the past few months. I am astonished to hear her blame organisations such as Consumers for Health Choice for scaremongering, and others for distributing leaflets when it is the very fact that they generated interest among the public that brought the Government to their senses and got them to act in the first place.

If the Minister casts her mind back to the spring of last year, the Department of Health was in disarray on the matter. It was impossible for any of the manufacturers such as the ones to which the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) referred to see a Minister to put their case. It was not until her Department agreed to meet me, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton), and industry experts on 17 June to discuss the problems that the Department became aware of what was going on. The only reason why the Minister and Lord Hunt agreed to meet us then was that the next day they were going before Standing Committee C and they were going to get a right grilling.

In the Minister's defence, she had just taken over the brief from, from memory, the hon. Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). It was not easy to go before that Committee at that time but she did and she defended herself in an honourable way, on the basis that she had very little knowledge of the subject; that is a slightly double-edged compliment.

We have many specific concerns about the directive and they have been listed this evening: unreasonably requiring 30 years' continuous medical use; unreasonable demands for compliance; the exclusion of safe and popular products; and leaving many combination products outside the directive's remit. I should like to look at some of those in turn but, to give an example of how wrong the Government got it, they had to extend the consultation period on the herbal directive. It was not an achievement to extend the consultation period; it happened because the Government were behind the game. That was the problem. On 18 June, the Minister appeared before the Standing Committee and had a pretty rough time of it. It was only then that we saw some action.

The Minister has given a typically upbeat, new Labourish presentation. *[Interruption.]* She shakes her head—perhaps she is part of old Labour, but she has given such a presentation. However, I do not want to get her into any trouble. In her rather clever debating style, she managed to focus on the few rogue problems that have occurred in the herbal industry. She referred to aristolochia, as I knew she would. We have surely been round that track before: the mis-prescription of a wrongly labelled drug by the wrong practitioners at the wrong time for the wrong purposes, and the resulting problems. She has gone on about the hoary old chestnut of steroids in creams—yes, we know all about that—and one or two other matters.

The Minister has tried to distract us from the issue. No one on this side of the House wants unsafe remedies on the market, and it is a good thing that two professional committees, under Professor Pitillo and Lord Chan, are looking at herbal medicine and Chinese acupuncture, and trying to draw the strands together in this country. No one is suggesting for one second that we want unsafe products on the shelves. The real problem is that the shelves will be denuded if this Government do not get their act together. I am very relieved to hear that, almost at the last fence, the Minister has got some good news on combination therapies.

The hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson) mentioned the dangers of herbal medicines when compared with other products, as did the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon). I nearly described the latter as my hon. Friend—perhaps because we once led a march together. I have looked up the figures. In 1997, the last year for which figures were provided, 562 people died from taking paracetamol, and 51 died from taking aspirin. In his winding-up speech, the Minister who is to reply might like to tell us how many people in this country have died from eating parsley, or from taking most of the other herbs that are obtainable in stores such as Holland and Barrett. The Minister made much of this issue, but the fact is that the number of herbs that have caused health problems is very small indeed. Generally speaking, such problems have occurred because of incorrect labelling and rogue marketing. We obviously welcome a tightening up in that regard, but we do not want this Government to be rolled over and knocked about by members of the Commission or the European Parliament because they failed to present Britain's case effectively.

The really big issues that we are considering through the motion are borderline products and the combination products of herbs, vitamins and minerals. The Minister made much of the positive lists, which she says are still open, but she has said little about the costs that manufacturers will have to incur if they are not on those lists. Even if they are on those lists, they will still have to produce complex dossiers—*[Interruption.]* I note that the hon. Member for Nottingham, South is nodding. They will also have to clear the hurdles set by the Medicines Control Agency. That will of course result in restriction of choice—my party stands for choice, not restriction—and it will prove damaging to the industry as a whole. Are the Government really in favour of monopolies in this field? What will happen to the small producers? I am slightly suspicious of the position taken by the hon. Member for South Derbyshire, because I have a feeling that he is representing only the larger manufacturers, such as the one in his constituency. We should focus much more on the little people. We do not want them to be wiped out.

I was pleased to hear today from the Minister about the new negotiations on simplified procedures. That announcement conveniently slipped out today in order to take the wind out of our sails, and having seen what happened in the Department before the Minister participated in Standing Committee C, I have no conscience about offering such criticism. We have all called for simplified procedures, and we want vitamins, herbs and minerals to be sold in this country as they were in the past. This has been a bone of contention, and although the Minister says that everything is wonderful and that they have been on top of the situation the entire time, that simply is not the case. She must accept that fact—*[Interruption.]* I do not know whether she is smiling or blushing, but it would not surprise me if she were upset at thinking about what happened in the past.

My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring and the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) referred to the work of MEPs. The Government are not responsible for the amendments to

[Mr. David Tredinnick]

the traditional herbal medicines directive; that responsibility lies with John Bowis, MEP, the former Member for Battersea. I spoke to him on the telephone at some length this afternoon. I said, "Put me straight. What have the Government actually done?" He replied, "Precious little. They let it coast along. They did not intend to do much." Only the pressure that has been brought to bear on them has caused them to take any action at all. The amendments are nothing to do with the Government. They were produced by the Conservatives in the European Parliament and include amendment No. 1, which concerns easier registration, and Nos. 9 and 11, which are about combinations. Some of them are supported by the Liberal Democrats—I will give them that.

The awful truth is that the letters sent out by Lord Hunt in the summer were intended to lull us into a false sense of security, but it is possible that the amendments will be rejected and that we will be in a worse situation than we were in the spring. Perhaps when he winds up the debate the Under-Secretary will tell us whether there is a guarantee that the amendments will be accepted. In this case, the big gun wheeled out by the Government was inertia. They let the issue drag on. It is only the determination of certain groups to bring the subject to people's attention and to needle the Government about it that has brought them kicking and screaming to the point where they take the issues seriously.

The Council of Ministers, which is made up of national representatives, will have an impact on the matter, and the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears), should get in there and make strong points. We want to see a little fire in her belly and a little action. We do not want to hear from our representatives in Europe that nothing much is going on. The former Member for Battersea is a very honourable man, and in our conversation earlier we were not trying to make political points. I asked him what line I should take in this debate, and he said that not much has been done about the matter. It is not very good.

The Minister still has time to effect change. The Government should introduce proposals that would allow the UK to set national rules to permit the continued sale of products that are safe and appropriately labelled, but which may lie outside the restricted code. They should abolish the completely arbitrary period for which a product must have been on the EU market before being allowed registration. That period has no relation with the availability of safe data. Finally—the Government can certainly do this—they should end the attempts by the Medicines Control Agency to regulate herbal medicines as if they were pharmaceutical drugs, thus reducing compliance costs. We are talking about the third way, which has been referred to in the past. That was part of earlier legislation but it was never implemented.

I turn briefly to the food supplements directive. We have already heard about the problem of minimum dosage levels, and the hon. Members for Nottingham, South and for Bolton, South-East have spoken about the pressure in Europe to reduce the maximum permitted levels of vitamins. If the Government do not stand up and sort this out, it will simply be a tax on poor people. They will buy the amount that they want—they will buy on the internet and get the products from abroad—but they will have to pay three times as much. The Government must stand up and be counted. It is wrong that we should be forced to reduce the levels of vitamins when 20 per cent. of the nation are using supplements and complementary therapies. It is time for the Government to be tough.

The possible effects of the directives include the loss of thousands of safe, popular herbal products, completely unnecessary restrictions on consumer choice, substantial job losses in the retail sector, the bankruptcy of several specialist manufacturers and retailers, an adverse impact on public health and a substantial increase in the number of visits to general practitioners.

The Government's approach to the directives has been the most appalling example of inertia, muddle, late action, refusal to consult, defensiveness and, if not deception, at least sleight of hand. We are often told, as we have been tonight, that everything will be all right in the end, but the amendments could be thrown out and worse could come. We shall not avoid problems in the future. The Government have done far too little, far too late, but I hope that some good may come out of it.

9.15 pm

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): I want to make a few new points.

The pharmaceutical industry has been accused of being behind the directives and promoting them for its own benefit. I do not believe that. The pharmaceutical industry was born from natural products. Many of the drugs that we use nowadays are derived from plants, roots, berries and tree bark. Salicylic acid, for example, comes from the bark of the willow tree, and then turns into acetyl-salicylic acid or aspirin. Many of our modern drugs follow similar pathways.

I should like to tell the House a funny story about a late friend of mine, Dr. Michael Scrowston, who used to lecture in my subject at the university of Hull. Over many, many years, he collected a large number of beautiful plants from all over the world, potted them and nurtured them in his greenhouse. He gave lectures on how the modern drugs industry was derived from the plants described in little books such as the one I have in my hand. On one occasion, he set out a wonderful display of plants on the lecture bench in front of him; there were beautiful flowers such as the autumn crocus and some extremely rare plants. When he had finished his lecture, the lady from the Women's Institute who had invited him said, "Dr. Scrowston, how wonderful of you to bring all those amazing plants for the raffle", and he lost the lot.

I do not want the Government to underestimate the public reaction that always occurs when new legislation is introduced in this policy area. If the public were not fully behind the natural health products industry, how could it have achieved such growth? The hon. Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick) has just referred to MLX 249. When it was under discussion a few years ago, there was a march from Hyde park and a rally in Trafalgar square. I still cannot believe that the hon. Gentleman and I stood on the plinth of Nelson's column talking to a large gathering about MLX 249. Probably, nobody had ever heard of it, apart from the people in

Trafalgar square on that day. Thousands of people came from all over the country because they were annoyed about a European directive that has long since passed into law.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) has pointed out, more than 20 Members, including him, have presented petitions to Parliament expressing concern about the directives relating to the UK health products industry that we are debating. Altogether, there are more than 1 million signatures and the petition is one of the largest presented to Parliament in modern times. Just before Christmas, I presented six boxes, which alone contained 350,000 signatures. Those petitions are still coming in and they show that people in every corner of the country—in all our counties and nations—are extremely concerned about what is going on. The Government should not lose sight of that fact.

As of today, 165 hon. Members have signed my early-day motion 278 on the food supplements directive and 164 Members have signed early-day motion 279 on the traditional herbal medicinal products directive. That, too, demonstrates the concern expressed to us by our constituents.

Mrs. Annette L. Brooke (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Iddon: I have little time, so the hon. Lady will forgive me. If my constituents cannot purchase health products from a local shop, they will not blame the European Parliament but the Government. They may be tempted to purchase such products on the internet or from mail order catalogues that may not be manufactured to the standards that they have come to expect. My hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) tells me that he has seen health products on sale at car boot sales. Not much regulation there.

Many people, myself included, like to keep as far away from our doctors—with the greatest respect to the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris)—as possible and self-medicate minor ailments. If popular over-the-counter products are removed by legislation, there is a slight possibility that general practitioners and even hospitals will be under greater pressure.

The food supplements directive is almost set in stone. It appeared in the *Official Journal* of the European Commission in July 2002 and must be implemented by our Government in July this year. I am glad that the Government have stressed safety as the important factor. Government representatives have worked hard on putting their arguments across in the Council of Ministers and its working parties, where people from less liberal regimes on the continent are pressing for topping up the nutritional requirement a little.

The European Union Scientific Committee on Food has already published a list of recommended daily doses to be enshrined in the final directive. My hon. Friend the Minister referred to the ad hoc committee on vitamins and minerals that was established following the vitamin B6 fiasco which has now become part of the Food Standards Agency. In May, it will report its own recommended levels. I have already indicated the disparity that might exist, particularly in respect of vitamin B6. The European recommended level is 25 mg but people in this country are taking 100 mg and up to 200 mg per day—most of them without any adverse effects. In any event, if they exhibit peripheral neuropathy, it is reversible if they lower the dose or stop taking B6.

We can all adhere to the safety requirements that are enshrined in the directive on herbal remedies but it requires manufacturers to adopt pharmaceutical processes that will add costs, because it requires each batch of herbal remedy to be tested. Industry estimates may be over the top but I have been given a figure of £2,000 per batch. Smaller organisations prepare about 10 batches of the same product every week, so a lot of money would be added to the cost of producing a particular product. Some companies handle 100 products, so that requirement could soon mount up to £200,000 of extra costs for a small or medium-sized enterprise.

This afternoon, some of us put that concern to the Minister in the other place with responsibilities for the herbal remedies directive. He assured us that he does not want any small or medium-sized enterprises going out of business as a result of imposing such regulations on the industry. I am sure that manufacturers will be pleased with that news, as we were.

However, there are other costs. The cost of registering the product may also be about £2,000 per product. The industry has set a figure of £15,000 on the cost of preparing the dossier on each product because specialist advice will have to be taken. I accept that those ballpark figures are over the top, but nevertheless, if they are imposed on small and medium-sized enterprises, they may be the straw that breaks the camel's back.

We do not want those small and medium-sized enterprises to go out of business. We want to preserve the competition that exists in the industry. We do not want the large concerns—Holland and Barrett has been mentioned, but there are many others—to begin to attain monopoly positions. I, too, am concerned about the extra costs that both directives, particularly the herbal remedies directive, will impose on the industry.

I will vote for the Government amendment because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South has suggested, it clearly enshrines words that tell us that the Government are still manoeuvring on both directives, particularly on the herbal remedies directive. I wish the Government a fair wind in achieving what the British people expect them to achieve, so that our consumers do not suffer from a reduction in the wonderful choice that they already have in health product shops.

9.26 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) on his speech. He echoed many of my concerns on these issues, but I particularly want to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick), because there is no doubt at all that, although people might smile gently as he gets to his feet, he has done all constituents and hon. Members a great service in bringing this very important subject to our attention.

The Minister has popped out of the Chamber briefly, so I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy), will

[Mr. David Amess]

pass on my remarks. In her speech, she sought to charm and reassure the House. There is no doubt at all that she succeeded in charming the House, but I have to tell her that she did not reassure hon. Members.

I should also like the Under-Secretary to pass on to the Minister the fact that I had not realised until now that she was a highly accomplished joke teller. In fact, so good were her jokes that I shall include them in after-dinner speeches in the future. She told the House that the Government are not about the nanny state. Well, I had to scrape myself up off the floor. For goodness' sake, if the Government are not about the nanny state, they are not about anything. They interfere in anything and everything. That is why the country is such a mess, and the sooner my colleagues get their act together and replace them with a good Conservative Government, the better for all of us. The Minister then had the nerve to talk about the Government's creativity. We all applaud their creativity in reannouncing things time after time and in duping the general public, but she certainly did not reassure the House.

Unless the food supplements directive is changed, it will result in the loss of up to 300 currently available safe nutrients. That is certainly causing great distress to my constituents. Unless the traditional herbal medicinal products directive is changed, it will result in the loss from the United Kingdom market of a wide range of safe and popular herbal remedies, as the hon. Members for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) and for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson) said. That is a very serious matter, and many of our constituents our worried that a large number of products that are mixtures of nutrients, vitamins and herbs could be lost.

I would like a derogation from the food supplements directive so that the United Kingdom may continue to allow products to be sold, provided that it is satisfied that they are safe and appropriately labelled, even if they fall outside the technical restrictions of the directive. Furthermore, there should be added to the list of 300 permitted nutrients and nutrient sources those that are currently missing but that are accepted as safe by the UK authorities prior to the deadline of July 2005.

On the first of the directives, my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth has blown the Government's position out of the water, following his conversation with one of our representatives in the European Parliament. I would like active lobbying by the Government to ensure that maximum permitted levels for nutrients are set at acceptable levels, not the restrictive ones preferred by France and Germany.

On the traditional herbal medicinal products directive, I would like a derogation from the directive to allow the United Kingdom to introduce national rules to permit the continued sale of products that are safe and appropriately labelled, but which may otherwise lie outside its restrictive scope. Furthermore, the completely arbitrary period for which a product must have been on the European Union market before being allowed registration should be abolished. Finally, I want an end to attempts by the Medicines Control Agency to regulate herbal remedies as though they were pharmaceutical drugs, thus reducing compliance costs.

9.32 pm

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): First, I want to set out one principle: consumers in the perfect world—at the moment, we have something close to this—should be free to purchase food supplements and herbal remedies that are not harmful or marketed dishonestly. In my view, the issue of scientific efficacy should be largely irrelevant to that process, provided that no claims are made to that efficacy.

As a result of a liberal regime run roughly on that principle, we have an extremely diverse marketplace, in which there are small, niche retailers and one can also purchase many of those products in large supermarkets. There are manufacturers who design and develop specific products for very narrow marketplaces, and bulk manufacturers—I have been criticised for having one in my constituency, but I am delighted to have it and to argue for its interests, among others—who supply the supermarket sector and other sectors.

However, we must strike a balance. We seek a free European marketplace and a position in the provision of those products in which some of our citizens can visit another European Union country, receive broadly the same treatment when they get there and buy goods on the same terms. We should all share that aspiration, but it is not a process in which our view can be imposed unilaterally on our colleagues. That was made clear in a wise speech by the hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson), who dwelt on the different cultures and perspectives in relation to this subject. We cannot impose our will; compromise is required.

I have spoken on these topics previously, and I compliment the Government on making substantial progress on this issue. It is undoubtedly true that more remains to be done, but we should be positive about what has been done so far and recognise that the balance of these goals—between individual choice, our liberal values and the requirements of a free market—requires compromise. That balance will undoubtedly affect our marketplace, and it is important that we recognise that. It is particularly likely to affect—I take the point made by the hon. Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick)—small niche players, both as retailers and as manufacturers. By eliminating some of the higher dose and more marginal products to which some of our European partners are particularly averse, we may remove the competitive advantage in the marketplace of some smaller players. That would be true in any other industry; it must be true in this. It will aid consolidation and maturity in the market—that would probably happen anyway—but I am not sure that that is the role of Governments.

We may also impede new product development, and I will listen to what the Minister has to say about that in winding up. In particular, we may impede the development of products that use familiar ingredients in novel combinations. It is important to have greater clarity about how we deal with the development of the marketplace, because we cannot freeze the products in aspic and suggest that that is all that consumers will want in the future. It is a fast-developing sector, with new demands from consumers, and we need a clear framework by which new products can be added to the marketplace for our consumers and those of other

European Union states to enjoy and use. If we do not do that, we will inevitably encourage the use of the internet to purchase the products.

Many manufacturers, such as Peter Black in my constituency, seek to make more formal claims for their products than heretofore. In a maturing marketplace, one should not expect people simply to rely on recommendations in magazines or informal endorsements. It should be possible for a manufacturer to make clear endorsements of a product and statements of its effects. Manufacturers such as Peter Black wish to do that and recognise that it requires a tougher regulatory framework if they are to do so. They would welcome that.

Manufacturers also recognise—we should commend this aim in any case—that we need tighter quality controls. My hon. Friend the Minister referred to notable examples of poor quality control that exposed consumers to risk. We need to recognise that, as consumers become more demanding, they expect the highest possible quality and we should aid them in that goal.

What should Ministers do in the remaining negotiations? First, we need to ensure that we set for ourselves the lightest possible touch for our regulatory activity. I particularly point the finger at the Medicines Control Agency, which, as several Members have said, does not have a track record of sympathy for the sector. It is important that it understands its responsibility not to crush innovation and stifle consumer choice through the dead hand of an institution that is used to dealing with very large companies.

Secondly, we need continually to review the effect of the framework on the way in which the industry and marketplace operate, so that innovation and learning from experience are permitted. We should not stifle that process. Finally, we need to make sure that negotiations aim at safety as the prime goal but with the widest possible choice. To stray down the route of seeking proof of medical effect that some of our European counterparts may suggest to our negotiators would be dangerous. We have taken a consistent intellectual path until now, and we should persist in that.

9.39 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): This has been a timely and important debate on an issue that has prompted a million people around the country to lobby their Members of Parliament, sign petitions and otherwise express their great concern about something that affects many people.

The debate provides the House with an opportunity to make its views clear to the Government. Many Members on both sides have signed early-day motions both in this Session and in the last expressing their concerns about these matters. Indeed, the motion on which the House will vote tonight reflects the views of more than 160 Members from all parties, including 88 Labour MPs, who signed two of those early-day motions.

Our debate began with a spirited attack by my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) on the flaws in the two directives. He also made telling points about the torrent of regulation from Brussels and its impact on our manufacturing firms. The Minister unsurprisingly defended the directives on public health grounds. More worryingly, she said that many of the products in the health sector were "pretty dangerous". If that is the case, the Government ought to take urgent action under existing legislation. Why are products that the Minister regards as pretty dangerous on sale in this country? She also admitted that many companies would have to reformulate their products, but appeared not to understand the cost to manufacturers. In their amendment, the Government make a disingenuous claim about the list system, implying that it will still be possible for products to remain on an exclusively British list. There is no formal evidence in the wording of any of the legislative documents on the measure to suggest that that is true.

Turning to the contributions of the hon. Members for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson) and for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon), the wording of tonight's motion is drawn from two early-day motions that they signed. Indeed, the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East proposed tabling them. Will he vote tonight against the very words that he suggested and, if so, what message does that send to the community outside that is concerned about the measures, and what will that do to his credibility in those circles? I very much hope that he will reflect on what he has said and join us in the Lobby.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick) accused the Government of painting far too rosy a picture. If anyone in the House knows about that, he does, and I pay tribute to all the work in this area that he has done over the months and years. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) talked about the distress in his constituency about the likely impact of the measures. That distress is shared across the country, as the two directives will have stark effects. The food supplements directive creates an approved list of nutrients which the European Commission will permit for use in foodstuffs. Almost 300 ingredients, however, will disappear even though they are currently deemed safe in the UK. In 2005, those products will become illegal. We may get an extension to 2009, but people who swear by those products to treat illnesses like osteoporosis, ME, digestive disorders, stress and bronchitis will lose the right to buy them.

The only way for those products to remain legal is for manufacturers to submit, at a cost of many tens of thousands of pounds, a dossier to the European Commission, effectively applying to allowed to keep on the market the products that they are selling today. In a written answer to my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) last year, the Government admitted that the initial cost of the dossiers would be between £80,000 and £250,000, which would result in an additional cost to the industry of £24 million to carry on selling products that are sold legally and safely today. That point was recognised by the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd), who said that small manufacturers who cannot afford the cost of the measures will suffer.

This morning, I walked down the aisles of the Holland and Barrett store in Epsom past product after product that will become illegal under the two directives. However, they are popular and are selling well and safely. That is the absurdity of the current situation—a small manufacturer of a perfectly safe nutrient that has been on sale for years will lose the right

[Chris Grayling]

to sell it in future unless he pay tens of thousands of pounds for the privilege. In my view, that is a scandal. If that were not enough, the directive sets maximum permitted levels for vitamins and minerals. At first glance, that appears sensible, but the maximum levels bear no relation to safety—they are simply a compromise with the norm in other countries. In Italy and Germany, there has traditionally been a different approach to the use of vitamins. Almost every one of the vitamin tablets that I saw when I walked around the store this morning will have to be modified if it is to continue under the directive.

When hon. Members walk into their supermarket next weekend, they should look at the vitamin C tablets on the shelves. The vast majority of the vitamin C tablets sold in this country will become illegal under the new directive. There is no suggestion that they are dangerous. There is a long tradition of using vitamin C in those doses in this country, so what on earth is the rationale for turning those tablets into an illegal product?

Even the Government admit that the restrictions will be a disaster for the industry. The former Health Minister, the hon. Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), stated in a written answer last year:

> "Setting unnecessarily low maximum permitted levels for nutrients in food supplements is likely to have a detrimental impact on the viability of the United Kingdom's specialist food manufacturers and on UK consumer choice."—[*Official Report*, 30 April 2002; Vol. 384, c. 765W.]

She is right and we agree with her. Why are the Government not taking tougher action to deal with the matter?

Even the European Commission, in the small print to the directives, admits that the measures will have an adverse effect on small and medium-sized enterprises—the manufacturers. Surely it is not right that, for no reason, we are placing a burden on those businesses that may make it difficult for many of them to survive. It is not good legislation, and it is not too late for the Government and the House to reject it.

The food supplements directive is only part of the story. The traditional herbal medicinal products directive could have an equally serious impact on smaller manufacturers. The Government say that their goal is to provide a proper regulatory framework for herbal medicines, and to provide improved protection for the public. No one on either side of the House would disagree with the desirability of maintaining public safety, but the measure is tantamount to using a sledgehammer to crack a nut, like so many of the regulations introduced by the Government since 1997.

Once again, the improvements that the Commission and the Government seek will be achieved only at the expense of the manufacturers—literally. They face bills of thousands of pounds to secure approval for products that have been selling in the UK for years, and possibly even decades or longer. Many smaller manufacturers cannot afford to pay the bill. As a result, their businesses may disappear. Even if the manufacturers can afford to pay the bill, they may not be given the opportunity to do so, because the directive requires manufacturers to prove that a product has been on the market for 30 years, and for 10 or perhaps 15 of those years in Europe, in order for it to be eligible for licensing in the future. If it has not, it will be banned in perpetuity. As a result, many products that have been introduced over the past few years will disappear.

Let me share with the House the words of one of the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), who wrote:

> "I know of many people who cannot find a cure for their particular ailment through the NHS and opt for self-help using natural remedies. To deny them is to deny them their health."

I know that those anxieties are shared in the constituency of every hon. Member. I suspect that there is not a Member in the Chamber who has not received representations on the issue. The wording of the motion has been carefully chosen to reflect those representations and the concerns expressed by hon. Members in all parts of the House. It has been designed to give Parliament the opportunity to state its view—to allow us to act on behalf of a huge number of the people whom we represent, which is, after all, what we are here for.

The two measures will do real damage to businesses around the country. They will do little to improve public safety. The authorities already enjoy the power to tackle areas of concern quickly and effectively. When the measures become law—which I hope they do not—people who have used the products for years and believe that they have made a difference to their lives will find that they are no longer able to buy them in their local health food shops or their supermarket. Do Ministers honestly believe that that means they will stop buying them? Instead, they will buy products from overseas by mail order or via the internet, from suppliers in countries where the rules do not apply—countries where health and safety and quality checks are not present, and where the contents of the products cannot be guaranteed.

I believe that some simple principles should underlie legislation in this area. Consumer choice should not be reduced unless there are genuine safety reasons for doing so. No manufacturer should have to pay thousands of pounds to continue to sell a product that they have been selling safely for years. We should not ban safe and legitimate products in the United Kingdom simply to achieve harmonisation across Europe.

Opposition Members believe that the two directives fail on all those counts. I know that that view is shared by many hon. Members in all parties. I believe that the measures do not have the confidence of the House, and tonight presents us with an opportunity to send them back to the drawing board. I very much hope that the House will take that opportunity.

9.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. David Lammy): I warmly congratulate all hon. Members who have spoken in a very good debate on this very important subject. We have heard some excellent speeches delivered with passion and conviction. In particular, strong speeches were made by my hon. Friends the Members for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson), for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) and for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd).

The debate started with the speech of the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox)—*[Interruption.]* Indeed, he is an hon. Member. It is fair to say that he set the tone for the contributions made from the Opposition Benches. His speech was perhaps the most animated contribution that I have heard him make, I suspect because it was not about health, but about Europe. We know from his speech and his suggestion that we live in a Euro-nanny state that his sentiments are shared by the majority of those on his Benches and that his speech must have been written by a nanny with a handbag in another place.

Mr. Swayne: Sir John Krebs states in his letter to us of 17 December that 300 sources are currently omitted by the directive. Nevertheless, we will be able to continue to use them until 2009 should evidence of their safety be presented by July 2005. If evidence of their safety will preserve their use until 2009, why will we have to do without them thereafter?

Mr. Lammy: The hon. Gentleman refers to 300 sources; the motion refers to 270.

Mr. Swayne *rose—*

Mr. Lammy: What we need from the Opposition is some clarification. As my hon. Friend—

Mr. Swayne *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Minister is not giving way.

Mr. Swayne: The hon. Gentleman asked for clarification.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is clearly in need of some supplements.

Mr. Swayne *rose—*

Mr. Lammy: If the hon. Gentleman will permit me to answer the question, I can say that the issue is about nutrient sources and not the nutrients themselves. I shall go on to explain that issue further.

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) made a slightly rambling contribution, as expected, in which he took a number of different positions. Presumably, they were assigned to different audiences. None the less, he asked a couple of important questions. He asked whether combinations were permitted. Yes, of course they are. He also asked for clarification about positive lists and whether they were still open. Indeed, in order to add substances to the positive lists, safety dossiers will have to be submitted. They need to be submitted by 12 July 2005. That is the position and we are clear about it. It sits alongside the derogation that we obtained leading up to 2009.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South made a very measured and reflective contribution in support of the Government. He expressed his concern about nutrients that may be prohibited and may no longer be available in the UK. There is an important difference between nutrients and nutrient sources. My hon. Friend listed several sources, which may continue. However, time is available for contributions to the list.

Dr. Fox: The Under-Secretary avoids the crucial point. As my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) said, if a dossier is presented before 2005, and a substance is subsequently made available, why should it become unavailable again after 2009? That is ludicrous.

Mr. Lammy: That is not ludicrous. We are considering public safety—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman did not use the term "public safety" when he opened the debate. We are considering public safety in the absence of regulation. That is why we are having the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South also mentioned traditional use. The consultation period was extended to allow contributions on that, but few were forthcoming. There are serious issues to consider about herbal remedies outside Europe. There have been unfortunate instances of contamination, for example, metal and other substances have contaminated Chinese and Indian medicines.

The hon. Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick) made a rambling contribution in which he made familiar points about his favourite single issue. *[Interruption.]* Indeed, he took 10 minutes to say little. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Mr. Swayne is becoming very excited. In fact, he may need some medication because he is out of order. I advise him to try to listen to the Under-Secretary calmly. It helps.

Mr. Lammy: Doom and gloom pervaded much of the speech of the hon. Member for Bosworth.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East made an excellent contribution. As a chemist, he brought considerable experience to the debate. The hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) also spoke. However, his jokes were poor. My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire made a helpful contribution in his usual reflective manner.

Hon. Members will remember that, after the general election, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) pronounced that his party should be quiet about Europe. He is also keen to portray the Conservative party as the party that will help the vulnerable and champion the needs of children in our inner cities. Just as the Christmas decorations were coming down in homes all over the country, and children were preparing to return to school, the Opposition did a U-turn on that issue.

David Maclean (Penrith and The Border) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

[David Maclean]

The House divided: Ayes 196, Noes 309.

Division No. 57] **[9:59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, rh Michael
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Barrett, John
Beith, rh A. J.
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Carmichael, Alistair
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, rh Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel
Dorrell, rh Stephen
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland)*
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John
Hague, rh William
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howard, rh Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury & Atcham)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, rh Michael
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Pugh, Dr. John
Redwood, rh John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Desmond Swayne and
Hugh Robertson

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Corston, Jean
Cousby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, rh Dr. Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*

Dalyell, Tam
Darling, rh Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
George, rh Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*

Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, David
Laxton, Bob *(Derby N)*
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Lyons, John *(Strathkelvin)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, rh Peter
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, rh Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moran, Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, rh Estelle
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
O'Hara, Edward
O'Neill, Martin
Owen, Albert

Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry

Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vaz, Keith *(Leicester E)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. John Heppell and Dan Norris

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 347, Noes 151.

Division No. 58] **[10:12 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Baker, Norman
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry

Barrett, John
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, rh A. J.
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold

Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cairns, David
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Carmichael, Alistair
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, rh Dr. Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, rh Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doughty, Sue
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
George, rh Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Harvey, Nick
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Healey, John
Heath, David
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Holmes, Paul
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, David
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Laxton, Bob *(Derby N)*
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Lyons, John *(Strathkelvin)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, rh Peter
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, rh Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moore, Michael
Moran, Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, rh Estelle
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
O'Hara, Edward
O'Neill, Martin
Owen, Albert
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Thurso, John
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*

Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vaz, Keith *(Leicester E)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Nick Ainger and Dan Norris

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, rh Michael
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burt, Alistair
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, rh Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Curry, rh David
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel
Dorrell, rh Stephen
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland)*
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John
Hague, rh William
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Heald, Oliver
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howard, rh Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, rh Michael
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Redwood, rh John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Hugh Robertson and Mr. Desmond Swayne

Question accordingly agreed to.

Mr. SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House recognises, in relation to the Food Supplements Directive, the Government's firm commitment to the view that the law should allow safe and properly-labelled food supplements to be freely marketed; welcomes its intention to take advantage of flexibility, secured by the UK, to permit continued use of substances not on the permitted lists where products comply with existing UK food safety legislation; notes that the impact on the long-term availability of products currently on the market will depend upon future developments on maximum limits and lists of permitted nutrients; supports the Government's efforts to press the case for any maximum limits which may be established at EU level to be based on thorough scientific risk assessments; further recognises that the proposed Directive on Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products would introduce regulatory arrangments to set safety and quality standards for unlicensed herbal remedies, and introduce systematic consumer information about the safe use of products and permit companies to make claims; further notes that the proposed Directive is supported by most interest groups, who believe it will protect public health and boost consumer confidence in herbal medicines; further welcomes the progress of the Government in negotiations for more flexibility to take account of valid evidence of traditional use from outside the European Union and to permit herbal nutrient combination remedies; and further welcomes the stated willingness of the Herbal Forum, representing all UK manufacturers' trade associations in the sector, to work with the Medicines Control Agency to minimise regulatory impact, consistent with the need to protect public health.

Dr. Fox: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The motion relating to the previous debate was taken from two early-day motions, 278 and 279, from the last Session. That was done with the intention of allowing Members of Parliament to vote in the House for something that they had put their name to on paper. Yet bizarrely, several members of the Labour party actually voted against the early-day motion that they had put their name to in the House.

We do expect Members to act consistently, although we understand that all are free to change their minds. However, would it not be only honourable for Members

[Dr. Fox]

who have actually voted against their own early-day motions now to withdraw their names from them? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Perhaps I can answer the point of order, if the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) will allow me. As the hon. Gentleman said, hon. Members are free to change their minds. *[Interruption.]* Order. Of course, that is why we have debates: so that hon. Members can be swayed by persuasive words.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9)(European Standing Committees),

DIOXINS, FURANS AND POLYCHLORINATED BIPHENYLS

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 13438/01, Commission Communication on a Community strategy for dioxins, furans and polychlorinated biphenyls; and supports the Government's objective that effective and proportionate measures are taken across the European Union in order to reduce emissions of, and exposure to, these substances, and to meet national, other regional and global commitments.—*[Gillian Merron.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Airguns

10.27 pm

Mr. Bill Etherington (Sunderland, North): The petition that I present tonight has been signed by almost 10,000 people from in and around the city of Sunderland. I must give great credit to those who were responsible for obtaining the majority of those signatures: to Monique Swan, whose name is appended to the petition, and to the *Sunderland Echo*, which has campaigned vigorously on the vexatious question of airguns. It is some weeks since this petition was lodged, and I am pleased that we seem to be making some progress.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the city of Sunderland

Declares that stricter legislation and licensing of airguns throughout the country is needed to safeguard the public.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons pass legislation to restrict the purchase, ownership, hire and use of airguns and ammunition to persons aged 18 years and over, and to establish a comprehensive and strictly enforceable firearms licensing system and secure storage and transport protocols for all owners and users of airguns.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Natural Health Products

10.29 pm

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme): Appropriately, I have pleasure in presenting a petition signed by 240 people, on behalf of Keith Woolley, a constituent of mine who is proprietor of the Boots health and herbal store in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

The petition states:

The petition of Consumers for Health Choice and its supporters

Declares that consumers in the United Kingdom have for many years maintained good health by choosing to take safe vitamin and mineral supplements and herbal remedies; and fears that the European Food Supplements Directive and the Proposed European Directive on Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products would severely restrict the number and range of such products on general retail sale in the future.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons require that the Secretary of State for Health do all in his power to protect the rights of UK consumers by ensuring that such European legislation does not unnecessarily and unacceptably restrict the availability of natural products.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Dog Welfare

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Gillian Merron.]*

10.30 pm

Mr. Andrew Rosindell (Romford): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me the opportunity this evening to speak up for man's best friend and to bring the issue of dog welfare before the House. Millions of British people, including many of our constituents, either own or have owned a dog. There are an equally large number of dog lovers in Britain who recognise the importance of these creatures in the lives of humankind. I am therefore certain that hon. Members will agree that we all have a responsibility to be concerned for their well-being.

You will be aware, Mr. Speaker, of my close interest in dog issues over many years. During the past decade in particular, I have had the privilege of working with some of the most dedicated and committed campaigners on dog issues. Indeed, I would like to begin by paying tribute to some of those people and the organisations that they represent. They include Clarissa Baldwin of the National Canine Defence League, whose famous slogan, "A dog is for life, not just for Christmas", has probably saved the lives of thousands of dogs up and down this land, and Ronnie Irving, Phil Buckley and Caroline Kisko of the Kennel Club, whose work in the dog world goes far beyond the wildest expectations of any dog lover, ranging from welfare issues to dog shows, breeding and, of course, the Westminster dog of the year competition.

Juliette Glass of the "Fury" Defence Fund has been a personal inspiration to me. She is always there with an open ear and friendly advice to people all over the country who have problems in the dog world. Juliette has helped to save many dogs from immediate death, following the implementation of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, prior to its amendment. Battersea dogs home does miraculous work in looking after dogs that have been cast out by cruel and irresponsible people. Today I had the privilege of visiting the home. I met staff and volunteers, as well as some of their four-legged boarders, including Rex the singing collie, Teddy the Staffordshire bull terrier and Snoopy the greyhound. I am sure that I echo the views of hon. Members in paying tribute to Battersea dogs home for its caring work in helping to give deserted dogs a fresh start in life.

As a former owner of a Staffordshire bull terrier, I also briefly mention Staffordshire Bull Terrier Rescue, the Sussex branch of which is run by Joanna Mason—a more caring person I have yet to meet. I am also honoured to have been asked to become a honorary member of both the East Anglian Staffordshire bull terrier club, which includes the county of Essex, the Staffordshire bull terrier club itself, and Staffordshire Bull Terrier Welfare. The more I work with those organisations, the greater is my determination as a Member of Parliament to help to secure a better future for our canine friends.

I was also pleased last year to be asked to become the chief patron of Justice for Dogs, a charity that exists to offer free legal advice and assistance on all matters relating to canine welfare and to encourage the formation of groups throughout the UK working for better education on responsible dog ownership. I am sure that hon. Members will understand that groups such as this, which face no easy task, and work on a shoestring budget, are often the only hope for dog owners who have been trampled on due to breed-specific legislation, of which I will speak in greater detail a little later.

Dog ownership goes way beyond the daily walk and a bowl of water. The individuals and organisations I mentioned, as well as others too numerous to mention this evening, do a magnificent job in representing and protecting our canine friends. Dogs are inherently loyal creatures. They will always stand by us as our best friend. Most important, they never stab us in the back.

Hon. Members will be aware that until last year, I, too, owned a dog: a Staffordshire bull terrier called Spike. Sadly, he passed away on St. George's day. My hon. Friends know that Spike stood by me at every step of my political career. Dressed in his trademark Union jack waistcoat, he accompanied me on my first victorious campaign when I was elected a councillor in Romford in 1990.

As the hon. Members for Glasgow, Baillieston (Mr. Wray) and for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) will recall, Spike trudged the streets of Glasgow, Provan with me during the 1992 general election and in Thurrock in 1997. On both occasions, he shared my disappointment when I failed to be elected to Parliament. Finally, he stood by my side as I was elected Member of Parliament for Romford in June 2001—a Conservative gain.

Spike regularly caught people's attention with his outspoken column in my newsletter. He successfully campaigned to overturn the no-dogs policy at Havering town hall and made a justifiable effort to oppose the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. His proudest moment was when he greeted the noble Baroness Thatcher during her visit to Romford two days before the general election. Always full of energy and enthusiasm, Spike proved to me that a dog really is a man's best friend. Until the last day of his life, he remained reliable, committed to everything that I did and, above all, steadfastly loyal. Politicians could learn a thing or two from these creatures.

Before I move to the main focus of my speech, I ask hon. Members to reflect on the significance of dogs in our everyday lives. They are not just household pets; there are guide dogs for the blind and hearing dogs for the deaf. There are schemes that take dogs into hospitals where they bring relief and joy to the sick. Dogs bring happiness and often help to the disabled.

Dogs perform vital tasks in the police, Customs and mountain rescue services, as sniffers and in search and rescue. Indeed, more than 100 dogs were involved in the operation to find survivors in the aftermath of the tragic events in the United States of America on 11 September 2001.

Dogs are a great source of companionship to elderly and lonely people. There is no doubt that dogs contribute to society and play a significant role in all our lives, as is well demonstrated by the excellent work of organisations such as PAT Dogs, Dogs for the Disabled and, of course, Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Sadly, 12 years ago, the House committed an awful injustice to certain breeds of dog following the introduction of the Dangerous Dogs Act—which, to my

[Mr. Andrew Rosindell]

regret, was introduced by a Conservative Government. The 1991 Act was a draconian piece of legislation that penalised some breeds just because of a handful of isolated but tragic incidents. It was a classic example of ill thought-out, rushed legislation at its worst. The Act has led to the unnecessary destruction of countless gentle family pets and criminalised many respectable dog owners. Especially before the 1997 amendment, that led to the compulsory death sentence of dogs. The legislation has also cost the British taxpayer millions of pounds. In a written answer to me on 8 May 2002, it was revealed that the total cost to the Metropolitan police, which hold the largest number of dogs under the 1991 Act, was more than £4.5 million. Multiplying that figure across the 451 police forces in the United Kingdom paints an expensive picture. I challenge any right hon. or hon. Member to prove that all those dogs are necessarily dangerous to society. Surely it is the deed, not the breed, that should be punished.

The Act's provisions fundamentally go against the grain of the British legal tradition. Under section 1 of the Act, it is for the owner of the seized dog to prove to the court that it is not of a banned type—hardly innocent before proven guilty. I am not asking for the handful of dogs that cause problems to go unpunished but as the Kennel Club correctly puts it, the deed should be punished, not the breed.

I hope that the Minister will acknowledge the work that must be done to promote responsible dog ownership. There are no problem breeds, just a handful of problem owners. The law punishes a dog simply for the way that it looks, rather than cracking down on the criminal and antisocial behaviour of certain irresponsible dog owners. Surely it would be more successful to refocus the law to deal with the irresponsibility that leads to problems—making the offence not the ownership of the dog but the handling of it—and rather than attacking entire breeds, properly to enforce laws such as those that prohibit unleashed dogs in public areas and compulsory muzzling orders.

As part of the drive to promote responsible dog ownership, dog awareness should be covered in schools. If children are taught from an early age how to respond when around dogs and to look after a dog properly, and are taught what a dog needs to lead a healthy and trouble-free life, when those children become dog owners later and enjoy them as pets in a family situation, they will be able to give their dog the care and attention it deserves.

I am fortunate in having a large greyhound stadium in my constituency that regularly plays host to many significant events in the greyhound calendar. Most recently, I was pleased to attend, together with colleagues from the all-party parliamentary greyhound group, the 2002 Coral Essex Vase final at Romford dog track. However, a significant problem is attached to greyhound racing, when some owners destroy their dogs when they can no longer run. I find it astonishing that anyone who works with animals could destroy a dog simply because its running days are over. I am advised by the National Greyhound Racing Club that its rules ensure that owners are responsible for the future of their greyhounds at the conclusion of their racing careers. A number of options are available for them to comply with the rules.

Greyhound racing is enormous fun but those who participate must surely consider the welfare of the dog during and after its racing days. That is why I am pleased to commend the efforts of the Romford retired greyhounds association, which is doing wonderful work in rehousing greyhounds at the end of their racing, and Greyhound Rescue, representatives of which I was delighted to meet at Crufts last year.

To conclude, I seek some assurances from the Minister tonight: first, that the Government will not seek to introduce legislation without proper consultation with the main dog organisations and charities; secondly, that they will seek to form stronger relationships with those groups, giving support where it is needed; thirdly, that the Minister will consider promoting dog awareness and responsible dog ownership in schools and communities; and, finally, that the Government will seriously review those laws already on the statute book, the limitations of which I have highlighted. I truly believe that a dog is man's best friend, and I urge all hon. Members to join me in working to achieve justice for dogs.

10.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Romford (Mr. Rosindell) on the way in which he has raised this issue. He made a number of important and serious points, and I shall reply in the spirit in which they were made. I can say that as a former dog owner—I owned German shepherds, although it was a long time ago.

I echo the hon. Gentleman's appreciation of the work of many charities and welfare groups, such as the National Canine Defence League, the Kennel Club, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Blue Cross and a range of dogs homes, not least Jay Gee Animal Sanctuary, which is based in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Mr. Cawsey) and from which he obtained his very lovable Labrador, Ben, which I see quite regularly.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Staffordshire bull terriers, and I happen to know a great deal about them. In fact, I may know more than I care to know about them. He is not the only hon. Member with an affection for such dogs; at least one other has such an affection. He was very willing to pull from his wallet pictures of his dog, although he did not seem to carry a picture of his wife. He was certainly very keen on his Staffordshire bull terrier.

I understand about the very real loss of a pet. I sincerely express my sympathy with the hon. Gentleman because all of us who have pets, which become part of the family, feel that loss very considerably. Of course, the loss of a dog is no less than that of any other pet, particularly because of the loyalty that they display. I confess that, because of my current lifestyle, it is just not possible to own a dog because I could not give it the attention that it would rightly deserve, so I have become a cat owner because they are a great deal more independent. They are a bit different from dogs: it is often said that dogs have masters, but cats have staff.

I agree that dogs, like other pets, reduce stress. That is one of their great values. Dogs also fulfil many important roles—for example, working dogs. The hon. Gentleman is right to refer to enforcement and responsible ownership, and we take those issues seriously. I was very pleased that he mentioned greyhounds. A great many people are concerned, as he is, about greyhounds when they reach the end of their working lives.

By coincidence, I was talking to my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Harry Cohen) before we entered the Chamber. He co-owns a greyhound, Sobers Maxine, and not only does he share the hon. Gentleman's views on the need to take care of retired greyhounds, but I understand that he intends to keep that dog as a pet when it reaches the end of its working life. I congratulate him on his responsible ownership.

There are some doughty campaigners on the issue of retired greyhounds, such as Annette Crosbie, who has also spoken on the subject to the associate parliamentary group for animal welfare on several occasions. I was delighted to hear about the Romford retired greyhound association, and I wish that there were many more organisations of that kind that took their responsibilities seriously.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to reply on three points, and I shall certainly do so. First, he asked me to give an assurance that the Government would not introduce legislation on dogs or animal welfare without consultation with the various groups and stakeholders. I freely give that commitment. He will be aware that we are consulting on a new animal welfare Bill, which is designed to consolidate the Protection of Animals Act 1911 and associated legislation in a new welfare Bill fit for the 21st century. Not only are we consulting on that but we have been through one round of consultation. We intend to respond, and we propose to produce a draft Bill on which people will be able to comment before we apply for parliamentary time. It is right and proper that we have such consultation with all the various groups, particularly on such fundamental issues as upgrading animal welfare legislation, which probably comes round only about once a century. It is therefore very important that we get the Bill right.

The hon. Gentleman also asked the Government to give strong support for relationships with other groups. Again, I am happy to give that commitment. I have attended the associate group on several occasions to talk to the various welfare organisations and interested Members from all parties who want to raise issues of animal welfare, including dog ownership.

The hon. Gentleman asked, too, about promoting dog awareness, which is a serious issue that we need to support through local authorities and dog warden schemes. Many councils have a very good record on this, in relation not only to dog enforcement but to promoting responsible dog ownership. We are keen to support that serious issue.

The Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 was mentioned by the hon. Gentleman. I understand exactly his points, but even though that legislation was introduced under a Conservative Government, it was designed to address a serious problem. The Dangerous Dogs (Amendment) Act 1997 was a great improvement, and many of us thought that it would have been sensible to include that commonsense amendment, which gave the courts discretion to decide whether an animal fell within the meaning of the Act, from the very beginning. Instead, the strict and rigorous interpretation of the Act, as the hon. Gentleman rightly says, gave courts no discretion and caused a great deal of problems.

Under section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, the Secretary of State has the power to designate certain types of dog identified as primarily bred for fighting. Currently, four species of dogs are so designated: the pit bull terrier, the Japanese Tosa, the Dogo Argentino and the Fila Braziliero. Such dogs are banned in this country unless the owners have a valid certificate of exemption, which can be issued only at the direction of a court of law.

The main problem was the pit bull terrier, which became notorious not only for illegal dog fighting but for a number of well-documented attacks on individuals. It is a very broad, muscular, smooth-haired dog noted for its strength and determination: a very dangerous cocktail of characteristics and features.

There are concerns that organised dog fighting is still taking place. Unfortunately, pit bull types can go under other names: for example, American Staffordshire terriers, Irish Staffordshire terriers and American bull dogs. They may not be called pit bull terriers, but they are pit bull types and prohibited under the 1991 Act. That is an abuse, and it is unfortunate that people try to present and sell such dogs as some form of Staffordshire bull terrier, thereby encouraging illegal activities. That does no good to the reputation of the Staffordshire bull terrier breed, which is completely undeserved. The hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that, by the end of April, my Department will have published a leaflet to assist enforcement agencies, as well as those whose work may bring them into contact with dogs, with guidelines on identification to help them to deal with some of the problems that he has rightly outlined.

I make no apology for trying to protect the public and to prevent the appalling act of organised dog fighting in which dogs are encouraged to inflict as much injury on each other as possible. Organised dog fighting is an international problem and, sadly, websites advertise such dogs for sale with proud boasts about their "gameness", which is code for, and a clear reference to, their fighting ability. Because the dogs are bred for fighting, they are also a risk to people.

Although I deal with the dangerous dogs legislation, I also deal with the control of dogs. I receive many representations from hon. Members who are concerned about attacks on their constituents from the dogs held by irresponsible owners and about the damage that such dogs can do. We cannot be complacent. There are unscrupulous people who want to abuse the law and descriptions of breed, and who keep dogs that are dangerous to individuals. Such dogs are bred for the illegal and indefensible activity of organised dog fighting.

One proposal that we are considering for the proposed new animal welfare Bill is to raise the penalties for those involved in organised animal fights as well as to give the police greater powers to deal with those unpleasant events. As long as there is a threat that the number of dogs specifically bred for fighting could be on

[Mr. Elliot Morley]

the increase and that members of the public could be placed in danger, there is not a credible argument for removing those dogs from section 1 of the 1991 Act. I do not believe that the hon. Gentleman was arguing for that, as he was expressing worries about the confusion between breeds.

The 1991 Act does not just prohibit the possession of certain types of dogs. Under section 3, it is an offence to allow a dog to be dangerously out of control in a public place or in a place where it has no right to be. Again, we should not apologise for that. It is a necessary piece of public protection legislation. Although I accept that many dog attacks are caused by a lack of control, a lack of care and irresponsible owners, we must recognise that some people will breed dogs that can inflict terrible damage on people, particularly children, and that are linked with the illegal dog-fighting rings. For all those reasons, I believe that the legislation has a role to play. It has been applied as carefully as the courts can apply it, but there will always be difficult borderline cases in which it is necessary to identify a dog under the breed-specific provisions in the law. Overall, however, the legislation is justified.

The hon. Gentleman has made a very good case and a number of fair points, and I have listened carefully to him on behalf of the Government. In the animal welfare Bill, we intend to address some of the abuses and the penalties. If there are specific problems about the workings of the 1991 Act, I should be only too pleased to consider them on their individual merits.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at two minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 21 January 2003

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Palestine

1. **Mr. Robert Key** (Salisbury): What recent assessment he has made of whether EU development funds for Palestine have been misdirected to terrorist causes. [91780]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Jack Straw): Without EU assistance to the Palestinian Authority, it is likely the Authority would by now have collapsed, further exacerbating the dire humanitarian situation in the occupied territories. The European Commissioner for External Relations, Christopher Patten, has made it clear that

> "there is no case for stating that EU money has financed terrorism".

At the London meeting on Palestinian reform on 14 January, which I chaired, there was widespread recognition that the Palestinian Authority has achieved great progress on financial reform.

Mr. Key: Meanwhile, Israel kills three Palestinians for each Israeli killed. This policy is going nowhere. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that, as we know in this country, it will take more than revenge to achieve peace?

Mr. Straw: We all accept the right of all countries, including Israel, to take effective and proportionate action to deal with a security threat. We ha[illegible]aced a similar but not such a great terrorist threat in our time, and the terrorists have to be pursued vigorously. At the same time, we also know from our experience that there has to be a political process—not to excuse the terrorists, for whom there is no excuse, but to deal with the environment in which terrorism breeds. That is why we are fully committed to the quartet process and the development of the road map.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): I endorse what my right hon. Friend says about the progress made by the Palestinians in reforming and, indeed, the tribute that has been paid to the new Finance and Industry Ministers of the Palestinian Authority in taking that forward. However, if we are to achieve reform and the kind of transparency referred to, does he agree that it is vital that the Palestinians are allowed to hold the elections that they want to hold, but which is rather difficult when candidates cannot move from one town to another because of daily curfews and closures? Does not Israel have a responsibility to lift them to allow those elections to go ahead?

Mr. Straw: There are two sets of responsibilities. There is one on Israel to facilitate elections and to lift unnecessary and disproportionate restrictions on the Palestinians' daily lives, including the operation of their democratic processes. Separately, there are responsibilities on the Palestinians themselves. There is much that they can do to reform the way that they operate, notwithstanding all the unnecessary restrictions. That has been shown by the progress in reforming the way that their financial systems operate, and it therefore raises in stark relief the lack of progress, which we agreed last Tuesday had to be dealt with, in respect of other issues, including security sector reform and judicial reform.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Given that the military wing of the Palestinian Authority, the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, claims responsibility for blowing up and murdering at least 23 Israelis in Tel Aviv on 5 January this year, does my right hon. Friend accept that the Palestinian Authority is at the centre of terrorist activity?

Mr. Straw: I have not seen any evidence to suggest that the people from the Palestinian Authority whom I met were at the centre of terrorist activity—rather the reverse. They expressed similar horror and repulsion at such unnecessary and gratuitous killing as anyone else who is a member of the civilised world. However, I certainly accept one implication of my hon. Friend's question: a huge agenda remains for reforming the security sector inside in the Palestinian Authority. We cannot have a situation where there are nine separate security organisations, some under effective control by the Palestinian Authority, but some no more than terrorist organisations masquerading with the authority of the Palestinian Authority. That has to be changed.

Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that dialogue is the best way to combat terrorism? Bearing that in mind, why did he decline[illegible]meet Mr. Netanyahu when he was in London?

Mr. Straw: I had already met Mr. Netanyahu, and I gave him a very good lunch.

Bangladesh

2. **Ms Oona King** (Bethnal Green and Bow): What assessment he has made of the situation in Bangladesh. [91781]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I can confirm what my right hon. Friend said, because I was at that lunch, too.

We are concerned by reports of mistreatment of detainees, including deaths in custody, associated with Operation Clean Heart. We are monitoring closely the detention of journalists and opposition politicians, and have urged the Bangladesh Government to ensure that the due process of law is followed in all cases.

Ms King: Following the reported human rights abuses, may I thank the British high commissioner in Dhaka, David Carter, for the representations that he has made? What steps are the British Government taking to help strengthen democracy in Bangladesh? Will the Minister continue to raise the tragic case of the British resident, Surat Miah, who was beaten to death? Will he write to me on the indemnity Bill?

Mr. O'Brien: I will pass on my hon. Friend's thanks to the high commissioner. We are following closely the circumstances in Bangladesh and particularly the arrests of some journalists and opposition leaders. We welcome the release of Hussein Chaudry and others. Democracy means allowing disagreement and debate, and in Bangladesh that means that the Awami league as well as the Bangladesh Nationalist party must have the right to voice their opinions. We have raised our concerns informally with the Bangladesh authorities, and will continue to do so. I will write to my hon. Friend on the issue of the indemnity Bill. Surat Miah, who was killed at Dhaka airport, was a British resident but not a British national. We have let the Bangladesh authorities know that there is widespread concern about the case in this country, and we have made representations in that regard.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): In spite of the plague of violence in Bangladesh—for example, the bombing in Mymensingh, various murders and the general unrest that has been mentioned—will the Minister tell the House whether, following the historic visit of President Musharraf to Bangladesh, there has been any progress towards solving the long-standing problem of the Bihari population? Is there any chance of them at last being accepted in Pakistan?

Mr. O'Brien: We have made representations to the Pakistani authorities on the issue of the Biharis. We are concerned that religious minorities should be able to practise their religion with freedom and with a recognition of their rights. I very much hope that the Pakistani authorities will respect those rights, although there have been problems with that in the past.

Iraq

3. **Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley): If he will make a statement on progress with indicting senior members of the Iraqi regime for the taking of hostages in Iraq during the Gulf war. [91782]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). The Government warmly recognise the activities of the INDICT organisation, and in principle encourage INDICT in its aim of bringing to justice members of the Iraqi regime who have committed criminal acts. Criminal investigations or prosecutions in England and Wales of individual members of the Iraqi regime under the Taking of Hostages Act 1982 are a matter for the police and the prosecuting authorities.

Ann Clwyd: I thank my hon. Friend, but I remind him that it was two and a half years ago that I gave the Attorney-General and the Government details of war crimes that would enable indictments to be issued against leading members of the Iraqi regime. Is he aware that our Queen's Counsel, who is a leading human rights lawyer, says that we have enough evidence for that to stand up in a British court? Short of getting Saddam Hussein to sign a confession in his own blood, we have all the evidence we need to indict leading members of the regime. Does he recollect that Milosevic was indicted while he was still head of state?

Mr. O'Brien: As sympathetic as we are to my hon. Friend's wishes to take action in relation to Saddam Hussein—in full recognition of the appalling human rights abuses committed by him—we must operate within the law. Saddam Hussein has not left Iraq for some 21 years, and we do not accept the principle of trials in absentia in this country. We need to continue to examine these matters and to continue to encourage my hon. Friend in her campaign.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Is the Minister saying that no action has been taken against Saddam Hussein because he has not left Iraq and we cannot get him out, or is the reason an unwillingness of Governments, prior to the information given by the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), to take action earlier, as it is more than 10 years since these atrocities took place?

Mr. O'Brien: No one would be happier than my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary or me to see Saddam Hussein out of Iraq and behind bars. We must operate within the circumstances prescribed by law, however, and that is the way that Ministers are expected to act. In principle, however, we want someone like Saddam Hussein to answer for his crimes. The best place for him to answer in practice would be in a properly constituted Iraqi court in a democratic Iraq.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Is my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) not correct in saying that Saddam needs to be dealt with because of his responsibility for these matters? The Government have taken a leading role in international tribunals that deal with war crimes and crimes against humanity, so, instead of letting people off the hook, is it not now time to find a way of bringing them to book? How will the British Government go about doing that?

Mr. O'Brien: The whole purpose of resolution 1441 is to make sure that Saddam Hussein is not let off the hook. For all too long, he has been developing weapons of mass destruction and, indeed, abusing the rights of his people. We need to find a way of making sure that he does not develop weapons of mass destruction and does not abuse the human rights of his people. We want to pursue the matter through the United Nations and resolution 1441. That is the process that we are undertaking. We also hope that the circumstances will arise in which we will be able to deal with Saddam for the crimes that he has so obviously committed.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): I commend the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) on her persistence and integrity in pursuing the indictment of war criminals. If the law can be applied as she would like, that is all to the good. However, more often than not in foreign affairs and diplomacy, matters cannot be seen in simple black-and-white terms. It is often a case of choosing between different shades of grey. Will the Minister confirm that we will face some of the most supremely vexed moral decisions in the coming weeks and months and that none of them will be easy and simple? Unpalatable though it would be, might not exile for a few guilty men be better than death for perhaps thousands of innocent people? To put it another way, does he agree with Secretary Rumsfeld when he said:

> "Given a choice between peace and war, I think exile would be a fair trade"?

Mr. O'Brien: Given a choice between peace and war, I agree that we would prefer peace and Saddam to be exiled if he would agree to that. I fear that that might not be the option facing us. We will have to see. Some difficult choices are facing the international community and we will have to consider the suggestion made by Donald Rumsfeld and others that Saddam Hussein should be able to leave Iraq. I fear that given the nature of his character, it is probably unlikely that he will agree to do so. However, if the option is there, it should certainly at least be explored.

4. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What estimate has been given by the UN weapons inspectors of the time period needed to complete their work in Iraq. [91783]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Mike O'Brien): There is no specified time frame for the completion of the UN weapons inspectors' task laid down by UN Security Council resolution 1441. Crucially, the length of the task is dependent on the level of co-operation that Iraq provides to the inspectors. The inspectors will be making their first report on Monday.

Mr. Prentice: It is very reassuring that there are no artificial deadlines, because many people both outside and in the House feel that we are being led by the nose into war. Must there not be compelling evidence of a breach? If there is that compelling evidence, the matter should go to the United Nations for a second vote. A quarter of the British Army are steaming to the Gulf as I speak, and they cannot be committed to war without a vote in the House of Commons.

Mr. O'Brien: We need to take the issue of the time that the inspectors have step by step. Let us see what Dr. Blix and Dr. el-Baradei say on Monday. The obligations on Iraq under resolution 1441 are very clear. This is not just about Iraq sitting back and waiting to see whether the inspectors find something. The Iraqis must stop concealing weapons of mass destruction and start complying with UN resolution 1441. If my hon. Friend wants a path to peace, the real path to peace is compliance with resolution 1441.

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): In recent days, the Prime Minister has said that the UN weapons inspectors should be given sufficient time and space to do their work and that they should not be subject to an arbitrary time scale. Despite the significant military build-up in the Gulf, will the Government ensure that the UN process is not short-circuited and that the inspectors get the time that they need to do their job?

Mr. O'Brien: It is the case that 100 inspectors are now in Iraq. It is hoped that 150 inspectors will be there by the end of February. We will be able to assess the progress of the investigations when Dr. Blix and Dr. el-Baradei make their reports on Monday. I repeat that we are not talking about a game of hide and seek. This is about the Iraqis complying with the obligation on them to provide a full and complete declaration, which has not yet been provided, while ensuring that they co-operate fully with the investigations. Obviously, we will have to wait and see what Dr. Blix and Dr. el-Baradei say on Monday.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): Does my hon. Friend agree with Hans Blix that inspections are for the purpose of disarmament? Assuming that all intelligence is provided to the inspectors and they consequently discover weapons of mass destruction, will they have an opportunity to destroy those weapons in compliance with resolution 1441? If they do, what will be the justification for military action?

Mr. O'Brien: As we have said repeatedly, there is no decision to take military action at this point. We are awaiting the report of the UN inspectors. When we have that on Monday, we will be able to move on to the next step and make a proper assessment of the course of the inspections. The opportunity to destroy weapons of mass destructions will, to some extent, depend on the Iraqis. They have shown a lack of willingness to co-operate in the past. We want them to take the opportunity—the final opportunity, in the words of resolution 1441—to co-operate fully with the UN. If they fail to do so, again in the words of resolution 1441, serious consequences will follow. We must have full co-operation from Iraq. That is the requirement.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Does the Minister agree that given the correct policy of a major military build up, which is putting substantial pressure on Saddam Hussein, it is nevertheless vital that the weapons inspectors are given the time and the number of people to do their job properly? Does he also agree that if Saddam Hussein truly has any feelings for the people of his country, he will ensure that the arms inspectors receive the fullest co-operation so that the most awful military disaster is not inflicted on the people of Iraq?

Mr. O'Brien: It certainly is the case that if Saddam Hussein had any feelings for the people of his country he would have co-operated fully before now. He could have co-operated after 1991 and ensured that the weapons of mass destruction were removed, so avoiding sanctions, which would have given Iraq the opportunity to develop as a proper country. He did not do that. Why not? Because he does not have the sort of feeling for the people of his country that the hon. Gentleman wishes he had. I, too, wish that he had those feelings, but he does not. We must ensure that we put pressure on Saddam Hussein because it is the only thing that he understands. He would not have allowed the inspectors in without the threat of military force.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Does the Minister agree that it is very important for the weapons inspectors to be given as much time as possible to do the work thoroughly? What is his view of the opinion of the International Atomic Energy Authority that it may well take 12 months to complete a full inspection?

Mr. O'Brien: If the hon. Gentleman is referring to the comment by Dr. el-Baradei, I should explain that the question he was asked was if, and it is a big if, the inspections were continued, at what point would sanctions be lifted. As I understand it, he said that there would be at least a year's worth of inspections before we could even consider lifting sanctions against Iraq. I think that he was answering a slightly different question to the one raised by the hon. Gentleman. On a time scale for the inspectors, we will consider the situation when we get a full report from Dr. Blix on 27 January, when we will be able to evaluate how the issue of the inspections is taken forward.

David Winnick (Walsall, North): If, as some critics maintain, the United States is hellbent on war, why is it suggesting that Saddam should go into exile to prevent military conflict? As for the protesters over the weekend in various democracies who exercised their democratic and legitimate right to protest on the streets, would it not be nice if the people of Iraq could demonstrate against their Government and the terror-inflicted state gave them the opportunity that democracies give to people who hold different opinions?

Mr. O'Brien: I agree that the Iraqi people should be able to express their views. As for the United States, it has made it clear that it wants to follow the UN route.

5. **Mr. Peter Luff** (Mid-Worcestershire): If he will make a statement on the meeting of Iraqi opposition representatives in London in December. [91784]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The Iraqi opposition conference held in London in December was the first large gathering of opposition groups since autumn 1999. An official from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office observed the conference.

Mr. Luff: Did the Government explain to those Iraqi opposition representatives why they appear reluctant in public to explain exactly what humanitarian support will be made available to the Iraqi people in the event of a war? Given the growing public nervousness about war reflected in opinion polls published this morning, does the Minister think that it is time for his right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to ask the International Development Secretary to come to the House and explain exactly what will be done to help the Iraqi people, should there be a war?

Mr. O'Brien: We have held some discussions with the United Nations. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed this matter with Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General, yesterday. We are looking at all those issues. Clearly the objective at the moment is to avoid war if Saddam Hussein allows us to do so. We need full compliance with resolution 1441. If a war should occur, we will obviously have to work closely with the UN and other organisations to make sure that we try to minimise the damage to the Iraqi people. Our disagreement, our debate and our conflict, if it comes to that, are with Saddam Hussein and those around him rather than the Iraqi people, who themselves have been his victims.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Which Iraqi opposition groups favour the intense bombing likely to be conducted by the Americans to minimise the number of body bags that will be taken back to Alabama or Wyoming?

Mr. O'Brien: The Iraqi opposition groups want the removal of Saddam Hussein. If there were a choice between a peaceful and democratic regime in Iraq under Saddam Hussein and a war, the issue might be different, but the fact is that Saddam Hussein has carried out the wholesale slaughter of large numbers of his people. I urge my hon. Friend to remember the 5,000 men, women and children who died at Halabja in 1988 and the 9,000 who were injured there. We need to make sure that Saddam Hussein is recognised as the tyrant that he is, and is dealt with accordingly.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): The reason for those Iraqi opposition groups gathering in London is, of course, the tyranny of Saddam Hussein. What estimate has the Minister made of the number of Iraqi people who have died as the direct result of Saddam Hussein's policies since 1980? With how many resolutions has Saddam Hussein complied, and how many outstanding resolutions require his compliance? How long, since 1995, have the UN arms inspectors had to find arms in Iraq? Why do so many people prefer to listen to announcements from war criminals in Baghdad than to our own Prime Minister or the US President?

Mr. O'Brien: There are about nine resolutions with which Saddam Hussein has failed to comply, and about 23 obligations before resolution 1441—which imposes a number of other obligations, some of which duplicate previous obligations—was passed. There are a substantial number of UN obligations with which Saddam has not complied.

In terms of the numbers who have died, it is difficult in the circumstances of Iraq to estimate how many people Saddam Hussein has murdered. Some of the Iraqi opposition groups put the figure at about 2 million.

while others have suggested that it is about 1.5 million, but either way, this tyrant has killed a very large number of people.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): The Minister will be aware that the British public support the wish of Iraqi opposition groups to see a return to democracy in Iraq, but he will also be aware that today's polls show that their support for this war, even with a UN resolution, is dropping away. Does he accept that the British public understand, as do many in this House, that in the absence of concrete, positive evidence—such as that which could perhaps be found by the weapons inspectors—a UN resolution arrived at by contrivance and arm twisting will be devalued as a signal of genuine international consensus behind the war?

Mr. O'Brien: The UN resolution was passed unanimously in the Security Council. Many people in this House asked for a UN resolution. Many said that it could never be done, but it was passed unanimously. Even Syria signed up to it. There are those who say that we should never have threatened force. If we had not done so, the inspectors would not be in Iraq now, UN resolutions would have been worth nothing, international law would have meant nothing and a message would have gone out to large numbers of other countries that are contemplating whether to develop weapons of mass destruction—especially nuclear weapons—saying that the UN would do nothing, that Britain would do nothing and that certain Members of this House would wish to do nothing. This is not a situation in which we can act in such an irresponsible way. This Government will act, and we will do so responsibly.

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes): I support the Minister in what he has just said. Does he agree that, as the situation develops in Iraq, the role of opposition representatives becomes increasingly important? Does he accept the imperative to keep Iraq as one country within its current boundaries? Is he satisfied from his contacts with Iraqi opposition leaders that that is not only achievable but sustainable? What discussions has he had with any potential successor Government or Governments to secure the total removal in perpetuity of weapons of mass destruction and their programmes of development in Iraq? What steps has he taken to ensure that any successor Government would be democratically mandated and reflect the various ethnic and religious groups in Iraq? Why have we heard so little about those important matters?

Mr. O'Brien: I think that I counted five questions and I shall try to answer them briefly. We want to see Iraq as one country, as is set out in resolution 1441. On the question whether that is sustainable, yes, we believe that it is. Our discussions with the opposition groups suggest that they accept that that is an international requirement set down by the UN and the view of all the countries on the Security Council. Indeed, in this case at least, all the countries around Iraq take a similar view. No one wants to see the break-up of Iraq.

On weapons of mass destruction, the opposition groups understand very clearly from us—indeed, they must understand this from the UN—that there is an obligation on Iraq to remove all development of weapons of mass destruction.

On a successor Government, we want to see a Government who are not a threat to their neighbours, are not developing weapons of mass destruction and are not repressing their people, but are representative of them.

Genocide

6. **Mr. Andrew Turner** (Isle of Wight): If he will make a statement on action by the international community to combat genocide. [91785]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Bill Rammell): To combat genocide, the international community has drawn up a UN convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide and included provisions for jurisdiction over the crime of genocide in the statutes of both the international criminal tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia and in the statute of the International Criminal Court.

Mr. Turner: I am obliged to the Minister for that answer. The Prime Minister has wept over Africa and promised never again to stand by while genocide is perpetrated in that continent. Is he aware that the Save Zimbabwe campaign says:

> "We believe Mugabe is preparing for politicide (political mass killings) and even genocide—which will impact on all ethnic groups perceived not to be ZANU-PF supporters"?

The vice-president declares that whites are not human beings and the President refers to the Opposition as "weeds". He has called on ZANU-PF to

> "go and uproot the weeds from your garden".

What effective steps is the Under-Secretary taking—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The question is far too long. Perhaps the Under-Secretary has got the message.

Mr. Rammell: I have, Mr. Speaker. I understand the sentiment behind the hon. Gentleman's question. The situation in Zimbabwe is appalling, with 60 deaths and 1,000 cases of torture in the past year. However, the ICC statute defines genocide as being committed against a national, ethnic, racial or religious grouping. It is not clear that that applies in Zimbabwe, where the actions, however reprehensible, are targeted at a political grouping and not some of the other categories that I described. Nevertheless, we shall continue to do everything in our power to put pressure on the Government of Zimbabwe to stop the appalling actions that are taking place.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Does my hon. Friend share my anxiety about the deteriorating position in the Democratic Republic of the

Congo? Does he agree that the lesson of Rwanda is that the role of the international community is paramount in preventing genocide and dispensing justice?

Mr. Rammell: I share my right hon. Friend's anxiety. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed the matter with Kofi Annan at the United Nations yesterday. We need to maintain the pressure.

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes): What attempts have the Government made to raise genocide in Zimbabwe at the United Nations, to secure a resolution to bring meaningful pressure to bear on that country to hold fresh elections or at least to put United Nations observers on the ground to monitor food distribution? Why are the human rights of the peoples of the Balkans and Iraq apparently more valuable than those of millions of persecuted people in Zimbabwe, who look to the Government to take a lead? When will the Government grasp the nettle and act?

Mr. Rammell: I am conscious that the right hon. Gentleman tries to make political capital out of the issue. However, our international partners will confirm that we regularly raise Zimbabwe because of our anxiety about the position there. To suggest that we can get an international agreement on genocide leads us down a path of no sustainable action. We take the issue seriously and we are trying to resolve it.

Middle East

7. **James Purnell** (Stalybridge and Hyde): If he will make a statement on the middle east peace process. [91786]

8. **Ms Christine Russell** (City of Chester): What recent discussions he has had with the US Government about the middle east peace process. [91787]

11. **Mr. James Arbuthnot** (North-East Hampshire): If he will make a statement on developments in the middle east peace process. [91790]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Jack Straw): Lasting security can be achieved only through a negotiated settlement to secure an Israeli state free from terror and a viable Palestinian state based on Security Council resolutions 242, 338 and 1397. We are committed to reviving final status negotiations as soon as possible. We fully support the efforts of the quartet to agree and to publish a road map to that end. The London meeting on Palestinian reform, which I chaired last week, was a valuable and successful contribution towards the reform of the Palestinian Authority on which a viable Palestinian state will crucially depend. A copy of the statement of outcomes from the conference has been placed in the Library.

James Purnell: I welcome the Palestinian conference, especially the commitment to reforming the security apparatus. Does my right hon. Friend accept that until those promises become reality, the Israeli public's primary demands will be for security? Does he also accept that a Labour Defence Minister initiated the construction of the defensive wall and that the Labour candidate supports that, not as a land grab but as a method of allowing the Israelis to withdraw from the occupied territories?

Mr. Straw: Progress on all aspects of reform in the occupied territories must take place as fast as the Palestinian Authority can reasonably undertake it, notwithstanding the current restrictions. We have always acknowledged the Israelis' overwhelming security concerns, but they must act proportionately. That applies to the security fence. Although we understand some of their anxiety to establish the fence, its line has been unjustified. The British ambassador in Tel Aviv has made representations about it.

Ms Russell: I should also like to congratulate my right hon. Friend on the conference on Palestinian reform last week, and on his persevering with it despite the intransigence of the Israeli authorities in not allowing the Palestinian delegates to travel to London. I believe that one of the conclusions of the meeting was that the continued building of illegal settlements was seriously jeopardising the viability of a two-state solution. Following his discussions with his counterparts in the United States, what does my right hon. Friend perceive to be the view of the US Administration on the illegal settlements? Do they, too, wish to see them dismantled? They are a real obstacle to peace.

Mr. Straw: The building of the settlements is in defiance of international law, to which the United States has subscribed, as has every other permanent member of the Security Council. There have been frequent occasions on which United States Secretary Powell has issued statements condemning further settlement activity. The simple fact is that these settlements are unsustainable. They cannot continue, and they are a blockage in the way of a solution to the problem of Israel and Palestine. Their removal has to feature in every possible conception of a solution to this terrible conflict.

Mr. Arbuthnot: Does the Foreign Secretary accept that the Prime Minister's inviting the Israeli Labour leader to Downing street in the middle of an Israeli general election campaign was not something that was calculated to improve our influence in the middle eastern peace process?

Mr. Straw: I do not accept that. There are plenty of occasions on which visiting foreign parliamentarians, including Opposition leaders, have been accorded proper respect, not only by this Government but by Governments whom the hon. Gentleman has supported. We are the Government of this country, but we also have party-to-party associations. That was true for the right hon. Gentleman's party as much as it is for ours. I believe that the even-handed approach of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister makes a great contribution towards a final situation in which we can make progress towards peace.

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that progress on the middle east process, as in any other peace process, depends on a measured, balanced and even-handed approach, involving the concept of two states to the west of the Jordan; an Israel secure from attack within acceptable borders; a viable Palestinian state; Israeli withdrawal from the occupied west bank, alongside an end to terrorist incursions into Israel and a reformed constitution for the Palestinian Authority; and a readiness on both sides to reach accommodations on issues such as Jerusalem, the right of return and the removal of the settlements? Does the right hon. Gentleman also agree that progress towards those ends will be advanced only by painstaking work based on the Tenet/Mitchell proposals, on the negotiations at Camp David and Taba, and on low-level agreements which, in the end, are the only way to help to build confidence between the two sides?

Mr. Straw: Yes, I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. This is a terrible conflict, but there have been other, worse, conflicts in which, thanks to a commitment on both sides, there is now hope. I refer the House to the situation in Sri Lanka, where thousands more have died as a result of terrorism even than in the occupied territories and Israel, but where, because of a commitment by both sides, there is now a peaceful process leading, I hope, to a final negotiated settlement. We have to follow the same process in respect of Israel and the occupied territories. There is no future for the 3.5 million Palestinians and, in a sense, still less for the 6 million Israeli citizens, unless we have a political process alongside the necessary security action.

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): May I also congratulate my right hon. Friend on last week's London conference on Palestinian reform? I support all its outcomes. My right hon. Friend regularly advises us to look at our approach to Northern Ireland. Has he tried to impress upon successive Israeli Governments that, if they were to look at the way in which the parties in Northern Ireland have approached the problems there, and the way in which we as a Government—I do not want to describe us as the occupying power, although some people saw us as that—have responded to acts of terrorism, the Israelis might consider that a way of sending a message to the Palestinian people that they really were committed to peace?

Mr. Straw: Yes, I do use the example of Northern Ireland as well as that of Sri Lanka, although I do not want to pretend that the situation in Israel and the occupied territories is anything like as apparently straightforward as the situation in Northern Ireland. The situation in Northern Ireland was terrible, but the situation between Israel and the Palestinians is very much worse. At least we did not have to contend with the utter horror of suicide bombings.

All that said, I must repeat that the only way in which we can secure peace for Israelis as well as Palestinians is through a negotiated settlement. That is why we must keep on track, not least in supporting the process of the quartet—the European Union, the United Nations, the United States and the Russian Federation.

Many dark things have happened since the intifada was declared two years ago. One good thing, however, is the unanimous agreement that now exists in the international community that the only way forward is a two-state solution involving a viable state of Palestine alongside a secure state of Israel, borders and other matters being dealt with on the basis of the key UN resolutions 242, 338 and 1397.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): What pressure has the Foreign Secretary put on the Israeli Government to pay for the considerable damage done to installations and infrastructure in the occupied territories, many of which were paid for by our own Department for International Development and European aid?

Mr. Straw: We continually make representations to the Israeli Government at every level when we believe that the Israeli defence force has acted disproportionately by, for example, destroying humanitarian projects financed by the European Union and United Kingdom taxpayers. There has not been much progress on that, but there has been better progress in respect of payments by the Israeli Government of the arrears of tax revenues owed to the Palestinian Authority. Those revenues are beginning to be paid, as a direct result of reforms of the financial arrangements that the Palestinian Authority itself introduced.

Kenya

9. **Peter Bradley** (The Wrekin): What discussions he has had with the new Government in Kenya. [91788]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Bill Rammell): We welcomed the election of President Kibaki on 27 December, and we are looking forward to meeting new Ministers to discuss their priorities. The Secretary of State for International Development is visiting Nairobi today, and Baroness Amos will have meetings there on 28 January. We expect the new Kenyan Vice-President, Michael Kijana Wamalwa, to be in London from 22 to 25 January.

Peter Bradley: I am sure that the whole House welcomes the recent elections in Kenya, the country's return to democracy and in particular its commitment to eradicating corruption. Is the Minister aware, however, that many British citizens, including constituents of mine, have unfinished business with the previous Kenyan regime? I am thinking especially of those whose assets, property and land have been withheld. Will the Minister give an undertaking that when Ministers and officials meet their Kenyan counterparts they will impress on them, as a matter of urgency, the need to resolve those outstanding cases at last, equitably and justly?

Mr. Rammell: I am happy to give that assurance. I am aware of the constituency case that my hon. Friend is pursuing. Let me repeat what I have already told him: I shall be more than happy to arrange a meeting between Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials, him and the Kenyan high commission to see how we can press the new Kenyan Government on the issue. I think the situation is positive at the moment; we must take the opportunity that it offers.

Mr. Hugo Swire (East Devon): Let me add my congratulations to the people of Kenya on their return to democracy with a convincing win by President Kibaki and the National Alliance Rainbow coalition. Will the British Government offer every assistance to the new Kenyan Government in their pursuit of corruption? Will they also provide any assistance they are called on to provide in pursuing anyone who has misappropriated funds from Kenya in the past before any more money is advanced by the International Monetary Fund?

Mr. Rammell: We certainly welcome the fact that a key plank of President Kibaki's campaign was the commitment to root out corruption, and we will certainly seek to support him in whatever way we can, specifically in relation to the international financial institutions. Assuming that the Kenyan Government govern on the basis on which they campaigned—a commitment to good governance and rooting out corruption—we will seek to re-establish contact with those institutions.

Hugh Bayley (City of York): Does the Minister agree that the successful implementation of a new partnership for Africa's development will depend on the principle of reciprocity? That is to say that when an African country complies with its obligations under NEPAD—the New Partnership for Africa's Development—as Kenya has done in terms of good governance, a peaceful transition from one governing party to another, and tackling corruption by appointing the chairman of Kenya's chapter of Transparency International to the office of the anti-corruption commissioner, it should see demonstrable benefits coming from our side of the partnership through trade liberalisation and development assistance.

Mr. Rammell: My hon. Friend makes a reasonable point. It is a two-way street. We are at a critical juncture. If the new Kenyan Government act in the way in which they are committed to act, it is important that we look to restore the aid programme and particularly that we use our best efforts with the international financial institutions to get progress on that issue, too.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the election last month in Kenya contrasts dramatically in its free and fair character with that in Zimbabwe? Given the clear pledge and immediate actions taken by President Kibaki, whose election we greatly welcome, to tackle the cancer of corruption that has bedevilled Kenya, does the hon. Gentleman welcome the indications of an early-stage meeting with the International Monetary Fund and of a positive dialogue with Kenya to help it to return to being one of the success stories of the African continent?

Mr. Rammell: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The contrast with Zimbabwe in terms of free and fair elections could not be more significant. We are in a positive situation at the moment in Kenya and I think all of us have a responsibility to build on the peaceful transition to move that process forward. We will certainly look to work with the IMF to take that process forward.

EU (Greek Presidency)

10. **Mr. Chris Bryant** (Rhondda): What assessment he has made of the priorities of the Greek Presidency of the European Union. [91789]

The Minister for Europe (Mr. Denis MacShane): Greece has identified five main priorities for its presidency: enlargement; taking forward the Lisbon agenda of economic and social reform; asylum and immigration; the debate on the future of Europe; and external relations.

Mr. Bryant: Clearly, one of the major issues facing the Greek presidency is the next steps involved in the Convention on the Future of Europe. Now that the French and German Governments are finally succumbing to British pressure and are supporting the British Government's suggestion of a permanent president for the European Council of Ministers, does the Minister think that it may be possible to persuade the French and the Germans to abandon the ludicrous caravanserai between Brussels and Strasbourg and to have a permanent site for the European Union?

Mr. MacShane: There is a permanent site for the European Parliament and that is enshrined in treaties: it is in Strasbourg. I sometimes wonder whether the European Parliament could win more friends if it met occasionally in other great cities of Europe but that is a matter to address to the European Parliament. The permanent site remains Strasbourg.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney): When the Minister meets with the Greek presidency, can he discuss EU directive 2000/68, which states that every horse, donkey and pony in the European Union will have to carry a passport, I quote, "at all times"? Is the Minister aware that that has come about because of French concerns about equine drugs entering the food system? Does he not think that it is ridiculous that horse owners should have to carry extra paperwork just to satisfy those deeply unsatisfactory French eating habits, and will he reflect on the fact that while the Government seem to be going to vast efforts to stop horses that are crossing continents from coming to this country, the asylum system is still in a shambles?

Mr. MacShane: I was not sure when the hon. Gentleman was referring to horses, ponies and donkeys whether he was referring to his own Benches, but the transporting of animals is a serious problem in Europe and the hon. Gentleman, representing a farming constituency, should have some mind to that. Knowing the origin of animals and having them properly marked and logged is of deep importance to the farming community in this and other countries. The hon. Gentleman should not make light of or mock the need to defend our farmers by ensuring that they know where animals have come from and where they go.

Zimbabwe

12. **Mr. Graham Allen** (Nottingham, North): If he will make a statement on the situation in Zimbabwe. [91793]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Bill Rammell): The political, economic and humanitarian situation in Zimbabwe is of grave concern to the UK Government and the wider international community. The leadership's policies have contributed to a situation where the country can no longer feed its people. We have increased our humanitarian assistance in response to the current crisis. We are also continuing to work closely with our EU and Commonwealth partners, along with other countries in the southern Africa region, to encourage the early restoration of good governance and sound economic management in Zimbabwe.

Mr. Allen: As a member of that diminishing band of masochists—a supporter of the England cricket team—I nonetheless commend the Government for trying to persuade that team not to go to Zimbabwe. Just in case on future occasions there might be some confusion about doing too little too late in similar circumstances, may I urge my hon. Friend to obtain from the cricketing authorities an England fixtures card for the next 10 years?

Mr. Rammell: As a fellow member of the all-party group and a passionate England cricket fan, I am well aware of the fixtures list—as all of us are. I simply reiterate the point that we have made on a number of occasions, going back to last July. Given the appalling circumstances in Zimbabwe, we do not believe that the England cricket team should play in Zimbabwe. We cannot order them but we do not believe that participation is in anyone's interest—least of all that of English cricket.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): While agreeing with that, the question should be answered by the Foreign Secretary. I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to his earlier replies. There is a case for indicting the Zimbabwe Government for policies akin to genocide. Has he seen the paper sent to him by the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, produced by a delegation from Matabeleland, that indicates that a particular race group or tribe is being singled out in a way that amounts to genocide?

Mr. Rammell: I am happy to look at that issue again but all the legal advice that we have at the moment is that it would be virtually impossible to sustain an international legal case within the International Criminal Court on the ground of genocide. I would much welcome the opportunity to stand here and say something different but if I were to do so, I would not be saying what I believe to be the case.

Tony Cunningham (Workington): Does my hon. Friend agree that the leaders of African countries—particularly those in the region—have a vital role to play in restoring the democracy that was stolen from the people of Zimbabwe by Mugabe?

Mr. Rammell: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. We are in constant dialogue with all the African states and frequently stress the importance of them pressing the Mugabe regime. We emphasise also that it is a regional problem, not just a problem for Zimbabwe.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): The Minister fails to understand the history of Zimbabwe. There is absolutely no doubt in the eyes of the majority of people in the civilised world that Mr. Mugabe and his Government carried out genocide against the Matabele people in the early 1980s. In 1983, thousands of Matabeles were slaughtered by the Korean-trained brigade in Zimbabwe. Is it not possible even at this stage to bring a charge of genocide against Mr. Mugabe, to prevent what he is planning now—further genocide against the Matabele people?

Mr. Rammell: With regard to the incidents in the early 1980s, I am aware of the honourable role that the hon. Gentleman played in bringing them to public notice. Nevertheless, action was not taken at that stage. As to the current debate about whether it is possible to take legal action for genocide under the auspices of the ICC, that would only be possible from the date at which the court's statute came into being—which was 1 July 2002. I reiterate that while I would like to stand here and say that it would be reasonable to pursue a legal action for genocide, I do not believe that is the case.

Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Does the Foreign Office view the refusal of President Mugabe to go into exile as a snub to an initiative of President Mbeki of South Africa, and if so, is this likely to make South Africa more ready to bring pressure to bear on Zimbabwe, since it is the only country in the region that has the leverage to effect change?

Mr. Rammell: We certainly hope that President Mugabe accepts the wise counsel of President Mbeki. We are also conscious that the suggestion of a possible arrangement has been denied on all sides, but I believe that discussions between those parties will continue.

Global Terrorism/Iraq

12.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Jack Straw): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement on yesterday's ministerial meeting of the United Nations Security Council, which was called to discuss the international community's response to global terrorism. I have placed a copy of my speech to the Security Council in the Library of the House. After the formal meeting, Security Council members discussed Iraq and North Korea in informal session.

The focus of the Council's meeting was the work of its counter-terrorism committee, which was established by United Nations Security Council resolution 1373. This resolution was passed in the wake of the 11 September atrocity, and for the first time imposed a legal obligation on all countries to end safe havens for terrorists, and to stop terrorist financing. The committee has been chaired by our own ambassador to the UN, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, who yesterday received many tributes for his work. I know that the House will want to endorse those tributes, which were fully deserved.

Under the committee's programme, each country's progress in countering terrorism is actively being scrutinised. Where necessary, the committee is helping countries to improve their capacity to deal with terrorism. As we heard yesterday in New York, the vast majority of Governments, about 180, are complying with the new obligations on them. However, two—those of Liberia and, for very separate reasons, of East Timor—have failed to respond at all, and 13 are months behind. Therefore a deadline of 31 March was set yesterday for compliance.

Yesterday's meeting then discussed and unanimously agreed a new resolution on terrorism. Its key elements include the adoption of new measures to improve and to reinforce the work of the counter-terrorism committee; a recognition that the fight against terrorism has to be linked to international action against the proliferation of conventional arms and of weapons of mass destruction; and our agreement that our struggle against terrorism is not biased against any religion—including Islam. People of all faiths and of all cultures have been the innocent victims of terrorist attacks, and people of every faith have a common interest in countering the global threat.

In adopting the resolution, the Security Council recognised the dangerous connection between the terrorists who respect no rules, and the rogue states that know no rules either. It is the leaders of such rogue states who set a deadly example, and—through their illegal programmes to develop chemical, biological and nuclear weapons—provide a tempting arsenal for terrorists.

Eight years ago, the world woke up to the nexus between terrorism and weapons of mass destruction when a sarin gas attack inflicted thousands of casualties in Tokyo. Since then, there has been abundant evidence that the al-Qaeda terrorist organisation is trying to acquire and to develop substances that are just as lethal, if not more so. There can be no doubt at all that al-Qaeda would use such weapons of mass destruction—nerve gases, viruses and even nuclear weapons—if it could lay its hands on them.

There are some who argue that the issue of proliferation is an unwelcome distraction from the campaign against terrorism. This view is profoundly misplaced, however. The global trade in weapons of mass destruction technologies has never been more dangerous. North Korean missile exports undermine security in the middle east. Illegal Iraqi imports of weapons-related technology flout United Nations sanctions, and are re-arming a regime that has previously shown no restraint in using mustard gas and nerve agent to murder thousands of its own people. It would therefore be wildly irresponsible to assume that we can turn a blind eye to this trade on the presumption that lethal materials will not ultimately fall into the hands of terrorists. In today's climate, no responsible Government could take such a risk with their citizens' lives.

The two greatest threats facing Britain and its citizens in the next decade are terrorists and rogue states with weapons of mass destruction. The most dangerous terrorist organisation is al-Qaeda. The most aggressive rogue state is Iraq. Since the adoption of United Nations Security Council resolution 1441 last November, the choice for the Iraqi regime has been clear: resolve the 12-year stand-off with the UN peacefully through full co-operation with weapons inspectors, or face disarmament by force. Typically, Saddam Hussein's response so far has been characterised much more by deceit and delay than by any interest in a peaceful outcome.

The initial Iraqi declaration of WMD holdings submitted to the UN on 7 December contained stark omissions, not least the failure to explain what has happened to the large quantities of chemical and biological weapons matériel unaccounted for by UN inspectors in 1998 and set out in a report of more than 200 pages to the UN by the UNSCOM inspectors—the previous inspectors—in February 1999.

Last week UN inspectors discovered 12 chemical warheads, and a large quantity of hidden documents relating to a possible nuclear weapons programme, which were found within the area of a private house. Neither of these finds had been declared. Dr. Hans Blix and Dr. Mohamed el-Baradei used their visit to Baghdad last weekend to set out their concerns to the Iraqi regime about the lack of Iraqi co-operation, and to remind the regime of the "serious consequences" of failure to abide by the terms of Security Council resolution 1441.

On Monday next, 27 January, Dr. Blix and Dr. el-Baradei will submit their progress reports on the inspection processes to the Security Council. I plainly cannot anticipate those reports, but two things are clear: first, the international community must maintain the pressure on Saddam Hussein to end his games of hide and seek. Secondly, Iraq must comply fully, actively and positively with all its international obligations. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence reminded the House yesterday in announcing further troop deployments to the Gulf, the lesson of the past four months is that diplomatic pressure will have no effect without the visible and credible threat of force.

The terrorist threat to Britain and our citizens is real. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is co-ordinating the most comprehensive security response our country has seen for many years. Our country can never become an island of security in the face of the global dangers of terrorism and rogue states, so just as we should redouble our efforts to enforce the law at home, our interests demand that we be at the forefront of enforcing the law overseas.

For too long, Iraq has flouted international legal obligations to disarm, and has laughed in the face of the United Nations. Saddam still has a choice to comply and I hope very much that he does so. If he does not, those who are serious about a commitment to a global community based on the rule of law and the United Nations cannot afford to shrink from the challenge posed by Iraq.

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and for giving me advance sight of it.

I echo the right hon. Gentleman's tribute to Sir Jeremy Greenstock for the work that he has done, and I welcome the new Security Council resolution on terrorism which was passed yesterday.

I agree with the Foreign Secretary's analysis of the current situation and his warnings about the relationships between rogue states and international terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

We are now moving inexorably, whether by diplomacy, force or voluntary exile, towards the end game in Iraq, in which the central issue of weapons of mass destruction will be resolved. We firmly continue to support the objective of eliminating Saddam Hussein's evil armoury and his arms development programmes.

Since last September I have consistently pressed a number of requirements in pursuance of that objective: the need to pursue the United Nations route; the need to be totally transparent and clear with the British people as to what the options for future action are, and why; the need to concentrate on the elimination of weapons of mass destruction as the key objective; the need to have a clear and comprehensive plan for the future of Iraq; and the need for substantial humanitarian support for the suffering people of Iraq.

On the United Nations route, does the right hon. Gentleman consider that there is now a prima facie case that Iraq is in material breach of resolution 1441, under paragraph 4? In his view, does last week's proven failure to disclose warhead casings and documents, followed by further continuing failure to comply with this and other resolutions, amount to a material breach?

I heard the Foreign Secretary recorded as saying in New York that his patience with Saddam Hussein was running out, and that he was not impressed by Iraq's recent actions. In terms of resolution 1441 and the forthcoming report by the inspectors, what does that mean? Presumably, it is that he believes that Saddam Hussein is continuing to fail to comply, thus establishing material breach.

Does the right hon. Gentleman realise, however, how much work still needs to be done to persuade the British people that Britain's interests and the safety of British citizens will be at risk if action is not taken to eliminate these weapons of mass destruction? It is simply not enough to talk in vague terms about the general relationship of terrorism with rogue states. If, as the Prime Minister implied last Monday, intelligence suggests that there is a real, present and growing danger, the British people should be given more factual information—and urgently.

Will the Foreign Secretary accept from me that we will support action to protect and defend British interests, and so will the British people, but that we could not support going to war just because another country asks us to?

I realise the risk of compromising intelligence sources, but if these dangers are as substantial as the Prime Minister hinted, surely a formula could be found to inform the British public of their nature and imminence? Does not the right hon. Gentleman agree that there is nothing more dangerous in these circumstances than obfuscation or mixed messages? Can he drum that latter point into his divided Cabinet colleagues? Is there not now a compelling case for a further debate in this House in Government time? [HON. MEMBERS: "And a vote."]

What plans are there for a post-Saddam Iraq, brought about by either his leaving or his defeat? Is there a comprehensive plan that would help to create representative government, which would maintain the integrity of the state of Iraq and fully comply with all the various resolutions, especially in relation to weapons of mass destruction? What is being done to create the environment for a prosperous and democratic Iraq in the future?

What plans have the government made to ensure swift and adequate humanitarian aid to the suffering people of Iraq once the weapons problem has been resolved? Have any estimates of the aid required been made? Are, for instance, vaccines being stockpiled in surrounding countries? And why is the International Development Secretary so reluctant to come to Parliament to discuss these issues? When shall we have a statement from her?

This is a time for candour and consistency. If, in the face of potential military conflict, the Government are seeking the people's trust, first they must trust the people.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's opening remarks, in particular his endorsement of the tributes to Sir Jeremy Greenstock.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me a series of questions. I shall try to answer each.

First, the right hon. Gentleman asked whether I thought there was now a prima facie case that Iraq is in material breach. Under operational paragraph 4 of the resolution, there are two limbs to the definition of material breach. One is a failure in respect of the disclosure. There has also to be some other failure to comply with the obligations of the resolution. There is no doubt that Iraq has already failed the first limb, as it failed fully to disclose all its holdings. It remains to be seen whether it has failed the second test set by the second limb of operational paragraph 4. We in the international community will be in a better position to assess that after next Monday's discussion in the Security Council.

The right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) said that he heard me say that my patience was running out. In fact, I said that the international community's patience was running out. *[Interruption.]* And mine too, but I do not presume to speak for the community as a

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whole. However, from a personal point of view, I was not impressed with the 10-point plan that Iraq has apparently agreed with the inspectors. Every one of those 10 points is non-negotiable under UN Security Council resolution 1441—they include matters such as overflights by surveillance aeroplanes and non-intrusive interviews with Iraqi scientists—and Iraq should have been complying with them since 8 November, when resolution 1441 was passed.

Of course I accept that we have to take the British public with us on this matter, and we have worked hard to do so. That is well illustrated in our contacts with the British people. There will be great debate about public opinion polls, and all of us, whatever we say, take account of them. The polls show that there is very significant support for the UN route, which is precisely the route that we have followed.

The right hon. Member for Devizes asks about more intelligence being made available. This Government have been more open about publishing what intelligence we can than any previous Government, but the right hon. Gentleman knows and accepts that we cannot publish intelligence if the result would be to compromise the source or to end the flow of intelligence. I suggest that those two factors must remain, for the time being, the more important considerations.

The right hon. Member for Devizes asks about further debates. Yes, there will be a full day's debate tomorrow—[HON. MEMBERS: "It will be a defence debate."] I do not know whether the Opposition have noticed, but a quarter of Britain's troops are just about to go to the Gulf, with the possibility of being involved in military action in Iraq, if that is justified. I hazard a guess that tomorrow's defence debate will be dominated by the issue of Iraq.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): What is the motion?

Mr. Straw: There are five defence debates a year. Of course I accept that there should be maximum parliamentary consideration of this crucial issue. [HON. MEMBERS: "And a vote?"] And a vote as well, as we have already emphasised.

The right hon. Member for Devizes asked about representative Government and humanitarian aid. When I am in Washington tomorrow and Thursday I shall be discussing with Secretary Powell the issue of representative Government in Iraq on what might be called the day after. A good part of yesterday's discussion with Kofi Annan was dominated by UN plans for humanitarian assistance to Iraq, again on the day after. Kofi issued a plea, which we of course accept, for the maximum number of donors to come forward in advance of any possible conflict so that humanitarian assistance can be in place, if necessary.

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): I welcome the Government's statement and appreciate having a copy provided in advance. I should like to associate the Liberal Democrat party with the tributes to Sir Jeremy Greenstock, and I also welcome the passage of the new resolution.

International terrorism is a real threat to the world, and it is right that we treat it seriously. Likewise, murderous regimes in possession of weapons of mass destruction are a danger to many countries around the world. However, the Prime Minister has stated repeatedly that there is no link between Iraq and terrorism. In dealing with Saddam Hussein, UN Security Council resolution 1441 sets out in considerable detail how the international community should handle matters, including promising serious consequences if the regime fails to comply.

Last week, Dr. Hans Blix said that there was "no smoking gun" arising from his work so far, but the Foreign Secretary told the UN yesterday that

> "there comes a moment when our patience must run out. We are near that point with Iraq."

In view of the Foreign Secretary's latest comments and the announcement of the military build-up in the Gulf, will he confirm that the Government remain committed to the process set out in resolution 1441? Does he agree that the Security Council as a whole should consider the reports of the inspectors, that the successful continuation of their work should be the primary focus of the United Nations, and that the process should not be prejudged by impatient or precipitate moves towards war by any Security Council members?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his opening remarks.

On the question of whether there is a link between Iraq and terrorism, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has given precise answers—as he did earlier today before the Liaison Committee. When he said that there has been no link between Iraq and terrorism, he was explicitly referring to al-Qaeda in the run-up to 11 September. There is of course a lot of linkage between Iraq and terrorism generally. One of the international terrorist organisations that I banned—proscribed under the Terrorism Act 2000—was the MEK, an Iraqi-backed terrorist organisation operating in Iran. Moreover, the Iraqi regime actively supports several rejectionist terrorist organisations, including Hamas and Hezbollah which operate inside Israel and the occupied territories. We have to recognise the possibility of great danger if we fail to deal both with what the hon. Gentleman described as international terrorism and with the murderous regimes in rogue states. Al-Qaeda would have been a shadow of what it was had it not been able to base and feed itself in a rogue state—at that stage, Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the Government are committed to the route set out in 1441. Yes. It should never be forgotten that it was a joint United States/United Kingdom draft resolution that the Security Council passed on 8 November.

Should the Security Council consider the reports of the inspectors? Yes. That is set out in the resolution. Should we ensure that we do not prejudge the results of inspections? Yes: but it should never be forgotten by those who see Iraq through rose-tinted spectacles that there were no inspectors in Iraq between the end of 1998 and the beginning of this year because Iraq had excluded them, in flagrant violation of international law. It was only active US-UK diplomacy, backed by a credible threat of force, which led, first, to the passage of 1441 and then to the readmission of inspectors. Yes, of course the inspectors have to do their job, but we make it easier and more effective by keeping up the pressure and reminding everyone that the closing paragraph of 1441, signed up to by every member of the Security Council, including Syria and many others, spelled out that if Iraq failed to meet its obligations "serious consequences would follow". The words "serious consequences" have only one meaning—the use of force.

Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): My right hon. Friend is correct in what he said about Iraq and about the work of Sir Jeremy Greenstock on the counter-terrorism committee, but does he agree that, on proliferation, North Korea is the arch proliferator of ballistic missile technology? For example, North Korea supplies that technology to Pakistan and gives Pakistan uranium enrichment facilities. Was North Korea specifically mentioned in the new resolution and did Pakistan, which has received that help from North Korea, support the resolution?

Mr. Straw: North Korea is also a proliferator, but this is not a competition; we have to deal with both Iraq and North Korea and with other proliferators. As I said in my speech to the Security Council yesterday, we should attempt to resolve all those challenges patiently by diplomatic means. That is what we are doing with North Korea. By God, it is what we have tried to do, and are still trying to do, with Iraq, 12 years after that country first fell into defiance of the United Nations.

North Korea was discussed, not in the formal Council session but at an informal meeting afterwards; there was an active discussion, not least between the United States, the Russian Federation Foreign Minister, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang and myself, as four members of the P5. The UK is one of the few European Union countries to have diplomatic representation in Pyongyang. We regard that as important, and we are actively working within the P5 and with the four key countries in the region to try to find some architecture for multilateral discussions, in which North Korea could safely air its anxieties about its current situation and we could also put it back on the route to compliance with its obligations. I hope and believe that that can be done diplomatically—if so, no one would cheer more than me.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Everyone will agree that rogue states pose a tremendous problem, but the essence of the problem is that there are so many of them. Although the regime in Iraq is terrible, my impression has always been that its links with international terrorism have so far been less than those in several other states, including Syria. If we are to make real progress in the war against international terrorism, we need a much clearer strategy. If it is seriously argued that, having dealt with Iraq, we should then go on to deal with all the other rogue states, including Saudi Arabia which financed the attack in New York, we shall find that world opinion will not be with the politicians. We must have a much clearer world strategy.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman has an odd view of human behaviour, especially for a Member on the Conservative Benches. Time without number during my 24 years as a Member of the House, I have heard more members of his party than of mine say that we should set clear examples in respect of criminal behaviour in this country, not only in dealing with immediate cases of criminality but also by ensuring that there is clear deterrence. I share that view and I believe that the same principles apply in dealing with the international criminals who run those rogue states.

We cannot do everything at once—the hon. Gentleman is right—but that does not mean that we should do nothing. There is much that we can do and we have to deal with the worst case. That is the strategy. Iraq is clearly in a league of its own. It is the only member of the United Nations that is in flagrant violation of 23 separate UN obligations.

Sir Peter Tapsell: What about Israel?

Mr. Straw: There are no sanctions against Israel. There are no mandatory resolutions against Israel. A series of resolutions apply to Israel and the occupied territories—to the Palestinians and the Arabs—and we want them all to be implemented, but we are not going to resolve the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians by military action. However, we may be in a situation in which the only way to resolve Iraq's defiance is by military action.

In any event, through the action that we are currently taking and the resolve of the international community in respect of Iraq we not only deal with Iraq but we also raise the game against all other proliferators. In my judgment, if we do that we shall ensure that compliance with international law on the non-proliferation treaty and much else besides is much easier to achieve, because those other countries will see the consequences that follow flagrant violation.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): The House will have noted the Foreign Secretary's comments on the 23 obligations with which Iraq has failed to comply. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is for the United Nations Security Council to uphold its mandatory resolutions in accordance with article 2(4), and that if the UN fails to do so it would badly let down the international community?

Mr. Straw: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. We have responsibilities, but so, too, does the whole international community, within the Security Council, have a responsibility to ensure compliance with 1441 or, if not, to take effective action.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The right hon. Gentleman has characterised Iraq as the most aggressive rogue state. While that may be historically true, will he give the House what evidence he has that Iraq is now plotting aggression against its neighbours or anyone else? Why should we not be able to rely on the policies of containment and deterrence that have been effective since the last Gulf war?

Mr. Straw: The right hon. and learned Gentleman says that that may have been historically true. That is absolutely right. Of course I am relying on the history, but it is very recent history. I have not made this up, and I am relying on the fact that, during the history of

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Saddam Hussein's regime, which is still in place and running that country tyrannically, he has invaded two of his neighbours—both Muslim countries—Iran and Kuwait. He has launched missile attacks on five of his neighbours, including Iran and Kuwait. He has murdered hundreds and thousands of Iranians and thousands of Kuwaitis, and he has also killed thousands of his own people. He is in a league of his own. We are now asked to give the benefit of doubt to that same man, and we cannot do that.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman then asks about containment. The simple fact of the matter is that containment may well not have worked. That is why we have the inspectors. If containment had worked, the inspectors would not have faced a situation where they could not properly inspect. They had to leave in November 1998. They then said that thousands of tonnes of chemicals to make biological and chemical weapons were still unaccounted for in Iraq. That is why the onus is on Iraq to explain fully to the inspectors that it is now clean. The choice is still Iraq's, but the jury is out.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): The policy of merging the issue of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq with the aims of the war on terrorism is no substitute for any hard evidence of weapons of mass destruction or, indeed, a link with al-Qaeda. Does the Foreign Secretary realise that many will view this attempt as disingenuous? It is also a disaster for good international relations and, in terms of protecting the people of this country, it is downright dangerous. Why does not the Foreign Secretary stop listening to the hawks in the White House and start listening to the people in this country who elected him? This latest attempt to prove that there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the link with al-Qaeda is just futile.

Mr. Straw: I do not agree with my hon. Friend. Frankly, she is wrong. The UN Security Council, including Germany, Pakistan and Syria, unanimously said yesterday that

> "there is a growing and serious danger of terrorist access to and use of nuclear, chemical, biological and other potentially deadly materials, and therefore a need to strengthen control on these materials".

The only way—*[Interruption.]* Yes, of course, to strengthen control, okay, and the way to strengthen control—

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): Exclusively in Iraq?

Mr. Straw: Of course not exclusively in Iraq, I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Glenda Jackson). I have already dealt with the issue of North Korea. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Glenda Jackson) will have to wait until I call her before she puts a question.

Mr. Straw: Meanwhile, I am happy to deal with my hon. Friend's sedentary intervention. Not exclusively in Iraq, but for the reasons that I have explained, Iraq is the worst case. I only say to her and to other hon. Friends who are uncertain about the link between international terrorism and rogue states, let us not wait until the terrorists have such material and we then have some explaining to do to our constituents. Let it not be forgotten that, certainly in the past two weeks, a very dangerous nerve gas, which cannot be produced by terrorists alone, has been discovered in this country.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement. Earlier, we had a reference to consistency, which raised a wry smile around the House because politicians and Governments have never been really successful at being consistent. Does he agree that if it has been difficult in the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, as part of the United Kingdom, to find illegal weapons that have caused tremendous destruction, it is a little naive of people to say that there is no evidence for the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq? Does he also agree that it is foolish to threaten if one is not prepared to fulfil the threat if people do not respond to it because, at the end of the day, that holds the whole international community up to disdain?

Mr. Straw: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. We have to take action against the illegal holding of weapons of all kinds. That is why we, together with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, have been very active in this country in seeking far better control of the use, marketing and manufacture of small arms.

Mr. Bill Tynan (Hamilton, South): I hope that my right hon. Friend will forgive me if I tell him that the statement smacks of desperation—desperation to attack Iraq. He has indicated that the public accept a UN route. Does he not accept that the majority of the people of this country do not accept, and are not convinced at this time, that there is justification to declare war on Iraq? On that basis, will he ensure that public opinion is fully taken into account in any discussion with the USA?

Mr. Straw: I hope as surely as my hon. Friend does that it is possible to resolve the Iraq crisis peacefully. None of us wishes military action to be taken against Iraq unless that becomes absolutely justified and the only possible course to enforce international will, but I ask him to consider that we have to face the fact that Iraq has been in the most flagrant violation not of our rule or that of the United States, but of the rule of the UN. If the international community is to mean anything at all, it has to mean that its will can be enforced. For that reason, 15 member states of the Security Council quite voluntarily signed up to the terms of resolution 1441, including the mandatory resolution and the last paragraph, which says that there had to be serious consequences if Iraq failed to comply, and we are now following through that UN resolution.

Hugh Robertson (Faversham and Mid-Kent): What discussions has the Foreign Secretary had at the UN and elsewhere with his counterparts in those countries into which our troops are about to deploy? What is his assessment of the terrorist risk that they face?

Mr. Straw: I have had many discussions. In early October last year, I visited Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan and Iran, and had detailed discussions there with the Heads of Government and Foreign Ministers. Many other discussions have been held since. All states in the middle east and the Gulf area are very well aware of the threat from terrorism, and it needs to be remembered, as I pointed out yesterday at the Security Council, that a large number of the victims of terrorism are Muslim citizens of those states.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): I am appalled at the extent to which the simplistic ideology and language of the US hard right is coming to dominate this Government, with talk of rogue states and the pretence that the most likely source from which unconditional terrorists would obtain weapons of mass destruction is Iraq.

On Iraq, while the threat of military action is undoubtedly putting pressure on Saddam Hussein to co-operate with the inspectors, is there not a danger that the build-up of massive military forces may discourage disarmament by giving him the impression that war is inevitable, while creating an unstoppable momentum towards war both militarily and politically?

Mr. Straw: None of us has to go across the Atlantic to alight on the adjective "rogue" to describe Saddam Hussein. That is being rather gentle about a man who is absolutely tyrannical in the way that he treats his own and other people, but I am happy to call Iraq a tyrannical state. Those who run those states are rogues—they are psychopathic killers—and the experience of their people is totally outwith any of our experiences.

As far as the build-up of military force is concerned—I know that there are strong feelings on this issue, which will continue, as is right in a democracy—I notice that the debate has shifted, and there is now wide acceptance that Saddam must comply with his United Nations obligations, to which my hon. Friend accedes. We have only achieved the return of the inspectors because we have employed a credible threat of force. I last went to the United Nations Security Council on 10 September last year, the day on which the Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq issued a formal statement on behalf of his leader, Saddam Hussein, saying that there were no circumstances whatever in which Iraq would readmit weapons inspectors. That has changed for one reason only: a credible threat of force is being exercised. I am sorry to say that that is the only language that that tyrannical rogue understands. If there is to be a credible threat of force, the consequences are that that threat must be increased the closer one gets to its deployment. I still hope and pray that the message gets through to Saddam Hussein that the game is up and that he must now comply fully and actively with all the Security Council obligations. If he does so, there will be no military action, and no one would be more pleased about that than me.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Does not the Foreign Secretary recognise that the formidable UN-backed case for disarming Saddam Hussein of his weapons of mass destruction does not depend on and is not helped by an attempt to establish a link with al-Qaeda and other terrorist forces, replacing the search for the smoking gun with the search for the missing link? Surely the assembly of rogue states, failed states and proliferating states that pose a short-term and long-term threat in the assistance that they can give to terrorist movements will have to be addressed by the international community, which will have to be brought and held together in a war against terrorism. Our strategy in relation to Iraq needs to assist that war against terrorism, not undermine it.

Mr. Straw: As far as Iraq is concerned, neither I nor the Prime Minister—I refer again to the evidence that he gave to the Liaison Committee this morning—has ever suggested that we have seen any evidence of a connection between al-Qaeda and the Iraqi regime in advance of 11 September, and I have not suggested that in this House. An obvious link exists, however, between proliferators, rogue tyrannical states and terrorist organisations generally. That was part of the centrepiece of the resolution that was passed unanimously by the Security Council yesterday. It would be irresponsible not to recognise the nature of that link.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): I thoroughly welcome my right hon. Friend's active involvement in the counter-terrorism committee, as the widespread opinion of people in this country is that the threat of terrorism must be dealt with under the aegis of the international organisations and the United Nations. A growing concern exists that the United States insists on leading this debate in one direction, which is diminishing the authority and role of the weapons inspectors. Will he assure me that the Government are now fully complying with paragraph 10 of the resolution in respect of offering the weapons inspectors all the intelligence that they have? Will he also assure me

Mr. Speaker: Order. One question will suffice.

Mr. Straw: Of course, I am aware of anxieties about some remarks that are sometimes heard in the United States. As far as the United States Government are concerned, however, they have been very positively in support of the United Nations. In respect of the middle east, for the first time, we have a Security Council resolution calling for a separate viable state of Palestine with their backing, which we also have in this respect. Back in August, September and October last year right up to 7 November—many of my hon. Friends expressed grave scepticism about whether there would ever be a good Security Council resolution with United States backing. There was one, and it was backed unanimously by those countries, including Syria. I do not therefore perceive a lack of support from the United States Government, from the top downwards, for the United Nations. Whether or not it is a paradox, the Bush Administration, by their actions, happen to have been very committed to that route. We must make sure that it works.

[Mr. Straw]

As for paragraph 10 of resolution 1441, we are co-operating fully with the inspectors in the provision of all kinds of information to them.

Patrick Mercer (Newark): While noting the Foreign Secretary's comments about links between Baghdad and international terrorism, and his comments about the protection of intelligence sources, none the less, open and authoritative sources are talking about organisations such as Ansar al-Islam that may be behind the ricin plot, which has fortunately been foiled. When do the Government intend to pull together the loose ends, publish the missing chapter of the dossier and convince us that the threat is real?

Mr. Straw: Because legal proceedings are pending in respect of the ricin find, I do not wish to comment further on suggestions about its provenance. On missing chapters of the dossier, I said earlier in response to the shadow Foreign Secretary that the current Government have been more forthcoming about publishing information based on intelligence than any of our predecessors, and we will be as forthcoming as we can in the future. We must ensure, however, that any information that we make publicly available compromises neither our sources—including their lives—nor the continuing flow of information.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): As long ago as February 1998, I made a speech to the House in which I pointed out that Saddam Hussein was known to have tried to acquire weapons based on camel pox, haemorrhagic conjunctivitis, human rotavirus, botulinum toxin, mycotoxin, aflotoxin, ricin and anthrax, some of which have terrorist potential. Does my right hon. Friend agree that to transfer knowledge to terrorists on how to make those materials is an act of supporting terrorism, that that is all that it is necessary to do with some of these materials—one does not have to transfer materials—and that although weapons inspectors may destroy these agents, they cannot guarantee that the process of making them has been unlearnt?

Mr. Straw: I have a feeling that I remember my hon. Friend's speech, and I will refresh my memory—I think that it was during a Home Office debate. He is right, of course, to raise the risks. The fact that that knowledge cannot be unlearnt emphasises the need for even more effective controls over those who have access to this technology than would otherwise be the case, and for a real system of law enforcement for the international will.

Angus Robertson (Moray): I thank the Foreign Secretary for the advance copy of his statement. Like most people in the country, I commend all proportionate, consistent, ethical and just efforts to combat terrorism and rogue states, but—like the majority of people—not as a pretext for war in Iraq, and certainly not without a full debate invoked on the matter and a second United Nations Security Council resolution. If the Foreign Secretary will not listen to me about that, perhaps he will have listened to the overwhelming majority of Labour Members who have spoken following his statement.

On consistency, ethical considerations and the Foreign Secretary's concern with regard to proliferators, can he confirm whether the Government have continued to license any arms sales to the Governments of Israel, India or Pakistan?

Mr. Straw: On arms sales, we continue to issue licences for those three countries, but they are subject, as are all arms sales, to the consolidated criteria approved by the House. On the other two points, I do not know why the hon. Gentleman keeps raising the issue of a vote in the House. We have already said, as I spelt out in the debate here on 25 November, that there would be a vote on a substantive resolution on military action. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister spelt it out again this morning before the Liaison Committee, and we have also spelt out that it is our earnest hope that such a vote will take place in advance of military action. The only circumstances in which a vote would have to take place shortly after military action commenced would be if it were unsafe for our troops to have it in advance. We hope very much that it will take place in advance.

We have also said that we will seek a second resolution. That is our policy. Our preference is for a second resolution if military action is judged necessary, but—to pick up a point raised earlier by one of my hon. Friends—we have to reserve the right if the Security Council itself does not live up to its responsibilities.

Mr. Tony Banks (West Ham): When my right hon. Friend was at the UN yesterday, what discussions did he have with our European partners on this matter? What indication have they given him of the number of troops that they have deployed for possible action in Iraq?

Mr. Straw: There are four European member states on the Security Council—Germany, France, Spain and ourselves—of whom two are permanent members. Of those, the position of the United Kingdom is well known. Joschka Fischer, the German Foreign Minister and Vice-Chancellor, spelt out that there were no circumstances at all in which Germany would participate in military action even if there were a material breach. France's position was not mentioned by Dominique de Villepin, the French Foreign Minister, yesterday, but President Chirac has indicated in Paris that he would be willing to send troops to enforce the United Nations' will. I believe that Premier Aznar of Spain has done that too.

Mr. Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford): At the beginning of the statement, the Foreign Secretary referred to the problem of the proliferation of weapons—whether they be conventional weapons or weapons of mass destruction—to terrorists. Does he therefore anticipate the need for any new laws to tackle this problem, or does he believe that existing controls are sufficient?

Mr. Straw: I think that the answer is that new laws will almost certainly be needed. That is why we have to have a continuing review of the effectiveness of the operation of both international and domestic law.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Only last week, my right hon. Friend stated that 27 January should not be regarded as a deadline. Having worked so very hard to get the UN weapons inspectors back into Iraq, why does there now seem to be a rush to get them out of Iraq and to make decisions even before they have had any chance genuinely to search that country to see whether there are any weapons?

Mr. Straw: I honestly say to my hon. Friend that no attempt whatever is being made to get the inspectors out of Iraq. The only attempt that is being made is to create an environment in which they can do their job properly. It does not depend on us, the United States or any other member of the Security Council; it all depends on the Government of Iraq. When Dr. Blix and Dr. el-Baradei went to Baghdad at the weekend, their message to the Iraqi regime was that it had to co-operate. That is the message that they are delivering.

As to next Monday's discussion, I wanted—I stand by this—to ensure that people understood that resolution 1441 did not lay down in its terms that this was a deadline or the end of the inspection process. When the inspection process happens is a matter, first of all, for Saddam Hussein and his choices but, secondly, for the Security Council, which is literally the employer of Dr. Blix and Dr el-Baradei and gives them their instructions.

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): A couple of weeks ago, the Foreign Secretary put the chances of avoiding military action at 60:40 against. Not everyone thought that that was helpful, but it gave a clear indication of his thinking. In the light of the weapons inspectors' discoveries of the last couple of weeks, have those odds shortened?

Mr. Straw: I am not going to discuss the numbers here. What I would say to the hon. Gentleman is that the question of whether military action takes place is, in practice, in the hands of Saddam Hussein. No decisions have been taken about military action—none whatever—by us or the United States and we both hope very much that no decisions will be taken. However, the choice is before Saddam Hussein. If he complies fully and completely with resolution 1441, the inspectors say so and the Security Council accepts that, that will be the end of the matter.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): Will the Foreign Secretary provide the House with a reasonable definition of terrorism and rogue states so that we can distinguish between freedom fighters—which many countries, including our own and frequently the United States, support—and terrorists? It would also enable us to establish what is a rogue state. When one was using weapons of mass destruction and chemical weapons against Iran and against its own people, it was supported by this country and particularly by the United States, but, when it stops using them, it becomes a rogue state.

Mr. Straw: I just say to my hon. Friend that it is literally untrue to say that this country supported the use of gases by Iraq. There are many myths, and it does not strengthen my hon. Friend's view on this issue, which is perhaps in contradistinction to that of his Government, to rely on information that is simply incorrect. There are very many myths but it is simply not the case—we were not in government so I could easily disavow this—that, if one looks at the record, the previous Government in the 1980s supported Iraq in the use of chemical or biological weapons.

Mr. Jones: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Straw: On my hon. Friend's invitation to me to define terrorism, I am very happy to provide him with the various definitions of terrorism laid down, for example, by this House in the Terrorism Act 2000 for which he voted or in the draft comprehensive convention on terrorism. I made the point to great approbation at the General Assembly in September last year that I do not accept that terrorists can excuse themselves by labelling themselves as freedom fighters. It is my belief that there is never justification—except in very limited circumstances—for innocent lives to be put at risk in pursuit of political ends.

Mr. Paul Marsden (Shrewsbury and Atcham): The Foreign Secretary has said that the most aggressive rogue state is Iraq and that, to make it comply with UN resolutions, force may be required. Is he seriously suggesting to the House that by bombing Iraq and killing the innocent, that somehow Israel, which is in flagrant breach of various UN resolutions, will comply with those resolutions or that North Korea, which is now throwing out the UN inspectors and developing a nuclear bomb, will somehow be frightened into complying with the international community?

Mr. Straw: I do not begin to understand the logic of the hon. Gentleman's question. The UN charter clearly sets out and lays down that force may have to be used as a last resort to enforce its will. I have said before, and I repeat it, that we have to try every other avenue—yes, in the middle east, North Korea and Iraq—before we contemplate the use of force and, still less, use it. However, if we wish to have an effective international system that does not go the way of the UN's predecessor, the League of Nations, we have to back the will of the UN by force. It was a failure by the international community—not least, by members of my own party—in the mid-1930s to back the League of Nations not over Germany but, as it happens, over Abyssinia, that led to an environment in which tyranny won.

Mr. Tom Harris (Glasgow, Cathcart): I echo my right hon. Friend's tribute to Sir Jeremy Greenstock for the work that he and his team have done in leading the counter-terrorism committee in the UN. My right hon. Friend said in this statement that those countries that have yet to comply with the obligations placed on them by the committee will have until 31 March this year in which to do so. Can he tell us whether the UN is considering sanctions on those countries that fail to comply and, if so, what might those sanctions be?

Mr. Straw: No, the decision yesterday was that, if countries had failed to comply by 31 March, they would

[Mr. Straw]

be reported by the counter-terrorism committee to the Security Council for non-compliance. It would then be a matter for the Security Council to decide what action, if necessary, should be taken.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. We must move on.

Points of Order

1.29 pm

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Earlier this week, colleagues raised the matter of Government Departments transferring oral questions to other Departments, and Mr. Deputy Speaker ruled on your behalf. An oral question that I tabled to the Treasury, which was up for reply this Thursday, has been arbitrarily shifted by a parliamentary clerk to the Department of Health. The issue that I raise is different from the one on which the earlier ruling was given because my question refers to a question that the Financial Secretary to the Treasury answered in March 2001.

The matter raised in my question is fully within the footprint of the ministerial duties document because the Financial Secretary is in charge of the Office for National Statistics. When I tried before to table questions on the completion of death certificates, the Table Office told me—correctly, I believe—that it was a matter for Her Majesty's Treasury because it related to the ONS. As I do not want to delay the House, I ask you, Mr. Speaker, to look into the matter later. It seems to me that we are suffering from the arbitrary decision not of Ministers but of junior hacks—clerks—in Government Departments who do not know the history of the case or what precedents exist, and who do not read the remit of the ministerial duties.

Mr. Speaker: I understand the hon. Gentleman's frustration and anxiety, but irrespective of who in the Department instructs the transfer to be made, it is the responsibility of the Minister, and I do not have any control over that.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The Foreign Secretary perhaps inadvertently turned his deaf ear to me when he answered my question and misrepresented what I said. I did not imply that a Government of this country supported the use of chemical weapons in Iraq, but that they supported Iraq while it was using them.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has put that on the record.

Public Sector Pensions (Unmarried Couples)

1.32 pm

James Purnell (Stalybridge and Hyde): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for persons in receipt of a public sector pension to be able to provide survivor benefits for unmarried, financially interdependent, partners; and for connected purposes.

Two years ago, one of my constituents was killed in a car crash. He was returning from Sheffield on the snake pass when he was hit by a car coming the other way. His death shook my village. Although nothing could have put right the grief of his partner and two children whom he left behind, insult was added to that grief when they discovered that the Teachers Pension Agency refused to pay out on his pension. I was amazed by that and assumed that it was an anomaly, but when I looked into the problem it turned out to be the norm across the public sector. Only about a quarter of public sector pension schemes pay out for unmarried partners. Many right hon. and hon. Members share my belief that that discriminates against cohabiting families. My Bill would put that right.

The Bill would require every public sector scheme to offer its members the choice of covering unmarried partners. Last year, 202 Members supported my early-day motion on the subject, including the current and previous Chairs of the Social Security and Work and Pensions Committees, a number of Liberal Democrat Members, the Trades Union Congress and the public sector trade unions. Even some modernising Conservative Members supported it. The Government have made quite a lot of progress since then. They have introduced a new scheme for civil service pensions that allows members' pensions to cover unmarried partners. In particular, they have made it clear that they intend to introduce a registration scheme for homosexual partners. I wholeheartedly welcome that. It is a brave and overdue move. Unfortunately, the registration scheme would not cover unmarried heterosexual partners, which is why I am introducing the Bill.

As the law stands, any police officer who is killed in action could leave behind a family without support. Any of our soldiers who are killed in Iraq could also leave behind partners who are unable to pay the mortgage or support themselves. The Government made an exception when that happened in Sierra Leone to the late partner of Anna Homsi, and I have no doubt that they would do so again if the same circumstances arose, but I want to ensure that that exception is turned into the rule. That is what the Bill would do. It would require scheme trustees to consult their members about providing survivor benefits for unmarried partners and to give them an option to pay extra to cover unmarried partners. The Bill would create a consistent policy across the public sector. As I said, only about a quarter of public sector schemes provide that benefit whereas, perhaps surprisingly, 90 per cent. of those in the private sector do. So the public sector is way behind the private sector in terms of discrimination.

The Government recognised that problem in the 1998 Green Paper. They made it clear that in principle they were in favour of recognising unmarried partners, but unfortunately only the civil service scheme has been changed since then. The Bill would ensure that that policy was turned into reality. As so often, the obstacle is one of cost. The Government Actuary estimates that the cost would be between £350 million and £1 billion. That is a gross exaggeration. The £1 billion assumes that anyone with a girlfriend or boyfriend would fall within the scheme. That condition is not part of the civil service scheme. The conditions on financial interdependency and the length of a relationship in that scheme would bring the costs significantly below £350 million. Indeed, in the first few years, the cost would be extremely small because the vast majority of pensioners who are in receipt of public sector pensions are married to their partners. So the cost would only accumulate a long way down the line.

My Bill would not require any public sector spending. It would be possible for the individual schemes to comply with it by ensuring that the costs were borne entirely by their members. I have some sympathy with the trade unions when they argue that the costs should be shared between the Government and members. Of course, at the moment the Government are pocketing the savings from the rise in the number of cohabiting couples, which has tripled over the past 15 years, but the decision should be for individual public sector schemes.

The moral arguments for my scheme are sufficient to justify it. However, they are backed up by the cause of expediency. The Bill would help public sector recruitment. Private sector employers can offer coverage to unmarried partners, but those people are not covered in the public sector. That must surely be a disincentive for about 15 per cent. of the population who live in cohabiting relationships. It is clear that the Government are cutting off their nose to spite their face because we are not providing enough benefits to attract that category of people to the public sector.

The Bill would remove that disincentive. It would be in line with the recent decision by the House to give unmarried couples the right to adopt children, who under current law could end up being brought up without support. We recently voted for our pension scheme to recognise unmarried partners, yet millions in the public sector do not have the same rights. The Government have paid out when a partner has been killed in the line of duty, but they might not if the death occurred in peacetime. They accept the principle of the Bill. It would not cost anything; it would reflect the changes in our society; it would right a wrong; and it would help public sector recruitment.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by James Purnell, Ms Meg Munn, Mr. Sîon Simon, David Wright, Mr. Tom Harris, Kevin Brennan, Mr. Chris Bryant, Mr. Chris Smith, Mr. Steve Webb, Mr. John Bercow and Ms Oona King.

PUBLIC SECTOR PENSIONS FOR UNMARRIED COUPLES

James Purnell accordingly presented a Bill to make provision for persons in receipt of a public sector pension to be able to provide survivor benefits for unmarried, financially interdependent, partners; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 7 March, and to be printed [Bill 44].

House of Lords Reform

[Relevant documents: The First Report from the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform, Session 2002–03, HL Paper 17 and HC171, on House of Lords Reform.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

1.40 pm

Dr. Jack Cunningham (Copeland): It is my duty and privilege to present the first report on House of Lords reform on behalf of the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform, which I have the honour to chair. I thank the Government for accepting one of our 24 recommendations that we should have the opportunity, both here and in another place, to debate the report fully before votes are taken on motions that may subsequently be tabled. I thank the members of the Committee, many of whom are here today, for their excellent contributions, and pay tribute to the Clerks and their staff for their excellent support.

As the House knows, the report confronts long-standing issues of huge importance and great controversy. The historical background is set out in appendix 1, which mentions a number of important landmarks in parliamentary change. In 1671, the Commons asserted its right to sole control over the levying of taxation. There are a number of other staging posts—the Glorious Revolution, the Parliament Acts and other well-known reforms. Those changes have often taken place in an atmosphere of great controversy, with frenetic exchanges from time to time of great wit. Joseph Chamberlain, said of the House of peers that

> "they toil not neither do they spin".

The Prime Minister may wish to see that quotation on the office walls of some his Ministers.

Lord Rosebery warned the Liberal Government that it

> "would be extremely ill advised to touch the composition of the second Chamber until it had settled its powers"

to avoid

> "dissension in the heart of the constitution".

Naturally, the Joint Committee decided to follow that advice, and the first part of our work was to focus on role, function and powers. Lloyd George famously described the House of Lords as "Mr. Balfour's poodle", and Michael Foot, commenting much later, said an appointed Chamber would be "a seraglio of eunuchs".

One of my favourite quotations comes from a debate in February 1969:

> "We do not want to see joint committees having views about the House of Commons which result in our views being watered down by those elder statesmen, often former hon. Members of this House, who, while they command a great deal of respect, are not immediately in touch with the day-to-day life of the country as we are and as we represent it."—[*Official Report*, 3 February 1969; Vol. 777, c. 113.]

Those words from *Hansard* were spoken by the former MP for Ashton-under-Lyne, my good friend Lord Sheldon. Perhaps those of us who think of life in another place should reflect on the words of the hymn:

> "There is room for new creations in the Upper Place of bliss".

In our special report, the Committee said:

> "The Committee believes that such a settlement would need to be robust, practical and command broad support in Parliament and beyond if it is to have any chance to endure."

It went on to say:

> "the Committee is responding to the desire for this highly important matter to be taken forward expeditiously. But we are also conscious of the need to give thorough and diligent consideration to a wide-ranging set of complex issues that have been the subject of public discussion for many decades and have recently led to some widely different conclusions on the part of the Government, the Royal Commission and the Commons Select Committee on Public Administration."

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): In the context of expeditiousness, to which the right hon. Gentleman has encouragingly just referred, will he tell us how he and the Committee regard the time-scale for forthcoming events, given the considerable amount of further business listed in the report that the Committee feels it still has to do, and the doubt that now seems to exist following the seven options that will be offered to the Commons and another place? Does the right hon. Gentleman hold out any hope that that matter can be resolved in the foreseeable future?

Dr. Cunningham: The timetabling of business is a matter not for me but for the Leader of the House and the usual channels to decide. The right hon. Gentleman is right that the Committee anticipated a considerable amount of further work. We all know that the question of whether the Committee embarks on that work will depend on the Government's judgment and decisions here and in another place about which options, if any, are pursued. That is a matter for Parliament to decide, not the Committee.

Our report on parliamentary change and a new constitutional settlement was produced by parliamentarians of considerable knowledge, experience and judgment holding all shades of opinion. We were given pretty strict guidance by our terms of reference, which are set out in the report, and were instructed to consider not only many volumes of evidence but the report of the royal commission, the White Paper and the Public Administration Committee report. As Members will see, those reports were referred to regularly throughout our deliberations and conclusions. In part 2 of the report, we establish a pretty broad consensus on the future role, functions and powers of the second Chamber. Part 3 sets out five tests for the kind of Members who should make up the Chamber; in part 4, we consider composition, tenure and transitional arrangements; and in part 5, we set out the options, but we were restricted by the terms of reference given to us by Parliament. We were obliged to recommend on both a wholly elected and a wholly appointed House, and to suggest options in-between. Consequently, that was not the most taxing part of our work.

Above all, the report does not recommend maintaining the status quo. It accepts the need finally to remove the remaining hereditary peers and find new and adequate ways of appointing Members to the second Chamber, if indeed they are to be appointed. It recommends a statutory independent appointments commission and addresses the need for greater regional balance in the membership of the other place and a much better representation of gender, ethnicity and age. Those recommendations are common to all the options that the House will eventually be asked to consider.

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge): In confirming that appointment does not necessarily mean the maintenance of the status quo, will my right hon. Friend also confirm that if Members of Parliament voted for an appointed Chamber, it would not restrict the Committee to existing methods of appointment or indeed to those mentioned in the report, as there would be a wider interpretation of appointment?

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): There could be a raffle.

Dr. Cunningham: My hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland) is absolutely right, and I hear the suggestion that we could have a raffle. Even a raffle might be better than the bagatelle that we have at the moment, so it could conceivably be a step forward.

We said at the beginning of our report that there was an historic opportunity to enact a reform that would enable the second Chamber to continue to play an important role that is complementary to that of the Commons, with its future secured after almost 100 years of doubt about what it was there for and was supposed to do. It is important to understand reform in the context of the broad historical sweep to which I have referred. We have sought in our report to inform the debates and votes in both Houses by clarifying what we believe should be the future role, powers and nature of the second Chamber and identifying the implications of our conclusions for its composition. We welcome the Government's decision to ensure that all the proposals are fully considered here and elsewhere before they table the motions on which they will invite the House to decide.

I mentioned that a broad consensus had been established in this area. For the most part, the Committee, which was always good natured and easy to chair, worked with expedition and quickly reached unanimity on these matters. There was almost no dispute of any sort about them.

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke-on-Trent, Central): Will my right hon. Friend reconsider the wording that he used a couple of minutes ago in saying that his Committee was considering the best method to appoint the reformed House? Was that not prejudging the issue and putting the weight of his Committee and indeed his report behind some form or proportion of appointment and against the idea of a wholly elected Chamber?

Dr. Cunningham: I do not know whether that is a deliberate misinterpretation of what I was saying, but I shall give my hon. Friend the benefit of the doubt and assume that he has misunderstood. I was saying that, if there are to be appointments, there has to be a new arrangement and that the status quo is not an option. If there is to be a wholly or even partially appointed House, we have to have a better way of achieving that than now, so we recommend the establishment of a new independent statutory appointments commission. That is the point that I am making. Of course, my hon. Friend may believe in a wholly elected House. It is fairly obvious that those issues do not arise at all in that context. I hope that everyone accepts that, if there were to be a wholly elected House, a whole lot of other things would fall naturally into place. The bishops and Law Lords would be removed, as would many independents, as they would not stand for election. If there is to be an appointed element, however, we need a new, better and more representative system. That is what the report is saying.

Pete Wishart (North Tayside): The report still says that there will be a prime ministerial system of appointments, so Tony's cronies will still be appointed. Will he explain how what he is describing differs from what is currently happening in appointments to the House of Lords?

Dr. Cunningham: If it is necessary for me to explain to the hon. Gentleman what is different, all I can say is that he has not bothered to study the present circumstances or read the report fully. It is true that the Committee unanimously agreed that the Prime Minister of the day, whoever he or she may be, would retain the limited right to nominate people to the House of Lords simply because it might be necessary to do so to establish new ministerial appointments there. That seemed to the Committee a sensible and practical way forward for the Prime Minister of the day.

On conventions and relations between the other place and this House, we thought it important that the conventions should be retained as they are. The two most important conventions are that the House of Commons should have its way and that Government business should be transacted without undue delay. That is what happens now and those conventions have been in place for some considerable time. We believe that they should play a part in any future relationship between the two Houses.

On other roles of the second Chamber—its role as a constitutional long stop, its legitimacy in respect of the public and its representativeness in relation to the regions and nations—we also call for change. We considered the functions of the House of Lords in relation to the fact that it is a major initiator of legislation rather than a revising Chamber alone, important though the latter role is. We also considered a number of matters to which we shall need to return later in our deliberations, including increasing the effectiveness of pre-legislative scrutiny and the way in which the House of Lords deals with secondary legislation and scrutiny of policy. For example, we will be looking for ways of improving the work of Select Committees. We considered the judicial function of the House a separate and highly important matter that would need expert examination and attention that we did not feel the Committee was qualified to give.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): My right hon. Friend and the Committee have rightly placed a good deal of stress in their report on the second Chamber's role in providing scrutiny and as a constitutional long stop. Scrutiny as between the two Houses is often less important than scrutiny by Parliament of the Executive of the day. Did my right hon. Friend or the Committee feel that more work is

[Richard Burden]

needed on that issue, as well as perhaps some greater codification of the roles of the legislature vis-à-vis the Executive?

Dr. Cunningham: Yes, we considered the point that my hon. Friend raises, but if he will allow me to do so, I shall deal with it a little later.

When we considered powers, we concluded that we did not believe that the powers under the Parliament Acts needed changing overall, but warned that an eye needs to be kept on how the new carry-over arrangements for future Bills are used by the Government. On composition, as I said, we listed what we described as five desirable qualities. We referred to improvements in the representative nature of the second Chamber and its legitimacy and representativeness, no domination by any one party, independence and the need to sustain expertise. As our report says, the present House is strong in relation to some of those aspects, notably independence and expertise, but considerably weaker in relation to others, notably legitimacy and representativeness. Of course, as I said, it is also weak in terms of gender and ethnicity.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): One of the principles which the right hon. Gentleman mentioned and which is elucidated in the report is that there should be no domination by one political party. Of course, the same principle was also stated in the royal commission report. If this House voted for the option of a fully elected second Chamber, however, how on earth could that principle be achieved?

Dr. Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman asks a very important question. It would be very difficult to achieve that aim, but not impossible. We would have to ensure that the electoral and other processes gave some guarantees about that. That is perfectly possible to do. The issue goes to the heart of some of the decisions that we have to make. One can easily see that if an independent commission is making appointments and has been given proper terms of reference, it is possible quickly and easily to move to greater representativeness, gender equality and representation of the ethnic communities, as well as to a better age profile. The appointments commission would be instructed to work to those ends, but it would be more difficult to achieve them by election, and impossible if the election were conducted on the first-past-the-post system, as the Committee acknowledges in its report. It is not impossible to achieve those aims with other electoral approaches, but they would not be as quick or simple to achieve.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North) *rose—*

Andrew Mackinlay *rose—*

Dr. Cunningham: I should move on, because many hon. Members want to contribute to such an important debate.

We listed several matters that we had to leave until phase 2 of our work simply because we knew that hon. Members were anxious for us to produce a report as quickly as possible. Those matters include the ultimate size of the House and the nature of the election process that might be used. Part 5 of the report sets out the options.

I have covered some of the pros and cons of a fully appointed House and a fully elected House, but a hybrid is also possible. It is more difficult to be clear about the way in which that would work, but the Joint Committee did not believe that it was impossible to construct a system whereby the House could comprise some elected and some appointed Members.

We drew attention to the fact that none of the previous reports—the royal commission report, the White Paper, the Public Administration Committee report—took account of the costs involved in a change. We referred to that only briefly in our report, but it will be important to consider costs in greater detail when the exact nature of the change has been determined.

We are considering complex, difficult and controversial issues. The Committee acknowledged that it would take some time for a new constitutional balance to emerge. That is always the case when important changes that affect Parliament are introduced.

Andrew Mackinlay: When the Committee considered the relationship between the two Houses, did it examine the idea that Ministers who are the architects of specific measures or have an exclusive portfolio should be able to answer questions in both Houses and/or steer legislation through Parliament? That is the pattern in many other Westminster-style constitutions and Parliaments. Such a system makes sense because it gives a Minister charge of a subject instead of our having someone who works off a brief and behaves like a parrot.

Dr. Cunningham: No, we did not consider such a proposal.

We are considering a new constitutional settlement between the Houses of Parliament, and between a changed House of Lords and the Government of the day. If changes are made, apart from emphasising that they should be robust, practical and enduring, we should ask ourselves what sort of new relationship we want and how it can best be achieved.

Do we want the new second Chamber to be a replica of the House of Commons? Most people would say no to that. Would a wholly or substantially elected House accept the current role, functions and power of the second Chamber or would elected Members want to assert more authority with regard to the House of Commons or the Government? Would an elected second Chamber with an in-built majority against the Government of the day—it is universally agreed that that should be the case—accept the conventions and restrictions that have been placed on it?

Would a new approach through an independent appointments commission, with a remit to produce regional, gender, ethnic and age balance, give the second Chamber the greater legitimacy and representative nature that we are striving to achieve? How can independence and independents have a secure place and role in a reformed second Chamber?

How would a partly elected, partly appointed House work in practice? Would such an arrangement be sufficiently stable to endure in the long term? We all want that to happen. Is the second Chamber intended to represent the country electorally and politically, like the House of Commons, or should it have a different rôle?

Let me now speak for myself, not the Committee. I believe that the House of Commons should not tolerate a rival House with similar powers. We should not risk creating such a rival without great care and consideration of what such fundamental constitutional change would bring.

The public do not often get excited about this place and the other place when we contemplate our navels. In my experience, they are not greatly interested in the strategies for enhancing or reducing the powers or status of one House as opposed to another. However, our constituents are concerned about more effective scrutiny of Government—I hope that we all support that, whatever the outcome—more expeditious provision of better governance; more vigilance in defence of constituents' rights and more efficient enhancement of their social and economic well-being. Those outcomes should have priority when we decide whether changes should be made. No Joint Committee could resolve such matters alone; they are questions for Parliament. I am sure that the Government also rightly have a view.

We have an opportunity to reflect on the report and the debate in this House and the other place before voting on options for change. Like other members of the Committee, I shall listen to colleagues with great interest. I end by reflecting on the words of the American comedian, George Burns, who once said that it is too bad that all the people who know how to run the country are busy driving cabs and cutting hair.

2.6 pm

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): I pay tribute on behalf of all hon. Members who served on the Joint Committee, including me, to the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) for his chairmanship, which he undertook with skill, humour and a few sharp words. He managed a Committee of 24 people, all of whom believed that their opinion was the great, weighty view that had to be delivered on the subject.

The Committee included two former Chancellors of the Exchequer and two former Chief Whips. It was wonderful to observe some young, radical Labour Back Benchers sitting cheek by jowl with long-established hereditary peers and sometimes expressing the same opinions: doubtless they marvelled at the sight of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) and I sitting cheek by jowl and occasionally expressing the same opinions.

Serving on the Committee has been entertaining, enjoyable and, I hope, useful. As the right hon. Member for Copeland said, I hope that the debate will fuel any further deliberations by the Committee with valuable advice. I apologise to hon. Members because I shall unavoidably miss the end of the debate. However, like the right hon. Gentleman, I look forward to listening to or reading the speeches.

We are all conscious of the fact that the debate forms part of a lengthy process. The preamble to the Parliament Act 1911 envisaged that it would be a temporary measure until popular representation was introduced to the upper House. Ninety-two years later, we are still deliberating on how to achieve that, and I cannot say with confidence that hon. Members will not be deliberating on the matter in another 92 years. I am not wholly optimistic that introducing popular representation to the upper House will be the outcome of deliberations in both Houses over the next few weeks.

If we go back further in time, we realise that the process is even lengthier. In the mid-17th century, our predecessors decided to abolish the House of Lords because in 1649 they believed that it was useless and dangerous. That opinion receives a little support today, even though the decision was followed by a military dictatorship and the abolition of the House of Commons; supporters should take account of that cautionary note.

Our report states that there is no evidence of substantial support for unicameralism, but we were probably wrong—there is some support for it in the House. It is important to respect and confront that, and to understand why a properly functioning second Chamber is important. That is often demonstrated in practical ways—for example, in the huge amount of legislative work that is accomplished down the Corridor. The fact that we now go home at a nice early time in the evenings—or, at least, that we no longer have debates of quite the open-ended nature that we used to have—reinforces the need for such work to be done by a second Chamber. As the Joint Committee points out, in 2001 the House of Lords spent 53 hours on the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Bill, and many of its amendments were subsequently accepted in this place.

We need a properly functioning second Chamber for practical reasons, and for very good constitutional reasons. Every major country in the world that has set out to produce from scratch a constitution based on liberty and democracy—with the exception of New Zealand—has chosen a bicameral system. The founding fathers who wrote the constitution of the United States, those who crafted the German constitution after the second world war, and even the people who brought the miracle of democracy to India in the 1940s, created bicameral systems so that there would be some check on over-hasty legislation or an over-mighty Executive.

That is why we must face up to the belief held by some Members of this House that the upper House should be abolished altogether. It has one absolute veto remaining, which is a veto over the extension of the life of Parliament. We may think that, these days, we are all so nice and democratic that we cannot imagine voting for the extension of the life of Parliament in circumstances that were not warranted, but can we guarantee that our successors in 50 years' time will not be driven to that by some extremity?

Pete Wishart: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware of the survey that the Inter-Parliamentary Union conducted in 1995, which found that, of a total of 178 legislatures, some 127 were unicameral. Unicameralism does exist, and it obviously works.

Mr. Hague: It is not normally associated with the balanced and democratic constitutions of the world, however. Yes, we can go to places such as Pyongyang and Beijing, where there is only one legislative body, but we will not find such bodies in many countries that are founded on liberty and democracy. Let us hope that our country remains committed to those concepts.

[Mr. Hague]

That is part of the case for balance in our constitution. That case must be advanced in this debate because it should also lead us to the right options for reform of the upper House. Governments must be able to govern. They must be able to conduct their own foreign policy, and to manage their budget. That must always involve a matter of confidence in the Government. Is it really necessary, however, for Governments always to be able to get every little bit of legislation through exactly as they want it and exactly according to their timetable? I believe that the answer to that is no.

The powers and ability of this House and of Parliament as a whole—this House and the other House—are inadequate to bring proper balance to our constitution. It is possible to govern with authority without being able to legislate with impunity. Today, however, Governments expect to be able to do both. That is why Parliament as a whole should be strengthened, and that includes the strengthening of the upper House. It also includes the strengthening of both Houses vis-à-vis the Government of the day. This is not a zero sum game. More authority and legitimacy for the upper House will not necessarily reduce the authority, legitimacy or power of the lower House, if we conduct our own affairs by giving proper scrutiny to Government actions and legislation. That is what we should be doing.

The Leader of the House has introduced many reforms. Many hon. Members, including me, have disagreed with some of them, but he has introduced reforms designed to improve the scrutiny of Government decisions, and I give him credit for that. The reforms are designed to improve some of the powers of Members of the House of Commons. I particularly applauded his attempt to take from the party Whips the power to nominate Committees—I have to say something to annoy my Front Bench; I am a former leader of the party, and it is traditional to do so—although that attempt was defeated. I hope that he is only biding his time before making the proposal again, because that is the sort of thing that needs to be done in this House. Such measures should be accompanied by reforms that make the upper House stronger and give it greater authority.

That is the case for electing a large part of the upper House, and it lies in two of the five factors that the right hon. Member for Copeland mentioned: legitimacy and representation. May I, in passing, refer to the comments made in the Committee that the reform of the upper House so far has made it less representative of the United Kingdom geographically? It is a more south-east-centred assembly, now that it is largely appointed. The only respect in which the hereditary peers were representative was that they were scattered across the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley): They owned the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Hague: Well, yes, they had that advantage as well. In fact, my constituency was very heavily represented in the upper House before it was reformed. My constituents have lost most of their parliamentary representation over the last few years.

Mr. Forth: Does not my right hon. Friend concede, however, that representativeness is in some ways a political will-o'-the-wisp? One could set out to identify all the ways in which any House could be "representative"—in respect of gender, ethnicity, region, profession, politics, religion or anything else—but to achieve such a degree of representativeness is impossible.

Mr. Hague: It may be impossible, statistically, to achieve such representation in relation to every possible parameter, but it is not impossible to achieve broad representation of the people in a way that allows them to feel represented and connected with their representatives, even though those representatives may not be exactly the same gender or colour as they are. It is, therefore, possible to improve representation, and to allow people to feel represented.

We must face the fact that this would, however, have the effect of increasing the authority—the boisterousness, the effectiveness—of the upper House. We must vote for it only if we are prepared to face up to that happening. Some hon. Members on the Committee believe that the powers of the upper House will remain as they are written in the rules under the Parliament Acts, but, actually, the powers that have been exercised by the House of Lords throughout history have rarely corresponded to the ones that are written down. Much depends on the confidence with which they are used.

Back in the 18th century, their Lordships had almost equal powers to the House of Commons, except in financial matters. They could throw Bills out in their entirety if they wished—they had a total veto—yet they hardly ever did so. They did so only once during the whole of the 18th century, and that was when the King told them to do so. It is hard to see that circumstance arising now, even in relation to the Hunting Bill. They did not use that power in the 18th century because the power of patronage overrode the power that they had technically. Every peer wanted a step up in the peerage. Every lord wanted to be a marquess; every marquess wanted to be a duke. The most craven of all were the bishops, who all sought a more lucrative diocese and therefore always voted with the Government of the day. Patronage overrode the technical powers held by the House of Lords.

In the last century, their Lordships have rarely used the powers truly available to them. The powers have fallen into disuse by convention, partly because their Lordships have lived in fear of our holding this very debate and debates like it in the House of Commons. They have not wanted to push things too far, or to provoke the House of Commons into following up the Parliament Act. Who can say that that has not been a successful strategy?

The powers that are written down are not necessarily the powers that are used. An elected, or largely elected, Chamber would become a more assertive House, even under existing powers. It would, however, enjoy greater legitimacy in using those powers. The trick, surely, is to create greater legitimacy and representation without losing the independence and expertise that the Committee identified as key attributes of the upper House as it stands today.

We should recognise the value of that independence and expertise. When I was a Minister, the House of Lords was a much more frightening place than the House of Commons. I say that with no disrespect to my hon. Friends and other hon. Members; that is just how it was. If I went along to a House of Commons Select Committee having been briefed for a few hours by a civil servant of a year's experience, I felt that I could pretty much cope with everything. If I went to a House of Lords Select Committee, that civil servant would have to point out that some of the people asking the questions had studied their subject for 30 years and were in the House of Lords because they were a world expert on it, and that the civil service did not know the answer to some of the questions that were likely to be asked. That was a much more frightening thing to do.

In the mid-1990s, when we had a majority of one—and sometimes not even that—in this House and, in theory, a majority of hundreds in the upper House, it was still harder to get legislation through unamended in the upper House than it was to do so here in the House of Commons. It was necessary to work out how to win the vote in this House, but it was necessary to work out how to win the argument down the Corridor.

Mr. Chris Bryant (Rhondda): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that expertise in the House of Lords is often somewhat out of date? It might have been acquired 10, 15 or 20 years ago. By the very nature of their appointed position, many Members of that House will have made their name quite some time ago.

Mr. Hague: That is sometimes the case, but it is sometimes the case here as well. We have often been treated to speeches from Members who picked up their world-beating expertise a good 20 or 30 years ago. That can happen in any Assembly, whatever the system of appointment or election.

The one way to try to retain the necessary elements of independence and expertise, while improving legitimacy and representation, is to adopt a system of election completely different from the system used in this House. Our report refers to election for 12 years, and it is possible that that would be a non-renewable term. Some think the 12-year period too long: my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe, for instance, believes that those elected under such a system would become too independent of party, or even reality. No doubt he will advance that argument later.

Some Committee members voted for an eight-year renewable term. In any event, we all thought that the period should be much longer than a term of election to the House of Commons. We thought that most if not all Members would not envisage standing for re-election—which would create a marvellous feeling of independence—and, in my view, a majority would be elected on that basis. In my view also, an appointed element would be retained to help to preserve the independent experts whom we have just been praising.

Those are the advantages of a mainly elected House, but if we are not prepared to accept and maximise those advantages of legitimacy and independence in the upper House—if we are unwilling to see a stronger second Chamber as part of a stronger Parliament—it would be better for us not to do it at all. It would be better for us to vote for 100 per cent. appointment than to say "Well, we think we want election, but we are not prepared to accept a stronger or more assertive upper House".

According to reports in the newspapers—although such things cannot always be believed—the Government apparently now believe that 100 per cent. appointment is their preferred option. There has been a remarkable change over the years. Some of us remember the 1992 Labour party manifesto, which spoke of

> "a new elected Second Chamber which will have the power to delay, for the lifetime of a Parliament, change to designated legislation"

—or even the pledge made at the time of the last election, which referred to a much more current, more representative and more democratic upper House.

"Democratic" usually implies some measure of election. What has happened? We have all experienced political U-turns over the years, but this is a particularly fascinating one. I hope we shall hear from the Leader of the House, either today or in due course, whether the U-turn has happened, and, if it has, what is the basis for it. Has the Prime Minister really enjoyed all that power of patronage and does he want it to continue, or has being in power made the Cabinet less conscious of the need for a stronger Parliament? That could happen to any Government, and probably has happened to every Government. Is it what has happened to the Cabinet of today?

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-on-Tweed): I hope the right hon. Gentleman will deal with the wholly spurious argument advanced in favour of the U-turn that only a wholly elected or a wholly appointed House of Lords is possible. Given the various elements in the existing composition of that House, there seems to be no evidence for that proposition.

Mr. Hague: The 24 members of the Committee would certainly not agree that only one or the other is possible. Otherwise, we would not have presented seven options, five of them involving a mixture of appointment and election. Such options are both practically and politically possible.

No Members should be conned into thinking that that is the choice. I do, however, believe that a choice exists, between a predominantly or, in the view of some, a wholly elected House of Lords and an appointed House. I implore Members not to vote for a 20 per cent. or even a 40 per cent. elected House. As the Committee's Chairman knows, I argued briefly that we should not even put those options to the Houses; but it was pointed out that an amendment could be tabled, or there might be great demand for votes on the options. In my view, they provide a marginal increase in legitimacy and improvements in representation, while also providing a major increase in expense, complexity and, I think, ridicule of Parliament. I do not think that that would be worth voting for.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Does my right hon. Friend not accept that as the public are in general switching off from politics by not voting—

[Sir Teddy Taylor]

they think we have too many politicians and not enough power—there is a danger that they will all go on strike if they are also expected to vote for elected regional councils and an elected Lords?

Mr. Hague: Yes. My hon. Friend anticipates the one further point that I wish to make. I think that unless the majority of an elected upper House's membership had some clout, people would not vote. It might be a struggle to get them to vote even then, but I think it would be impossible if we were electing 20 per cent. of a House that we did not expect to have any teeth.

The idea was floated in our Committee that the vote could be combined with the European elections. The more I think about it, the more I think that even that would not work. We can all imagine the scene. There is a knock at the door; a woman stands there with a child in her arms, while another screams in the background. I am sorry—I am slipping into a stereotype. The dinner is on the stove, while the man of the house is working hard on his DIY. The woman is asked, "Will you vote in the elections for the upper House?" She says "No." "It is combined with the European elections." She is not going to say "Oh well, in that case, of course!"

I believe that only combining this election with a general election would bring people out to vote.

Mr. Chaytor: In arguing the case for a hybrid, and given the rule demanding no party majority, would the right hon. Gentleman persuade his constituent that it was worth voting for 60 per cent. or 80 per cent. when the appointed element will override the elected element? How would that galvanise people into voting?

Mr. Hague: I think that all constituents are used to the idea that others may override the people whom they elect. Indeed, that has been the experience of my constituents throughout this Parliament and the last. I do not think that that is a show-stopping argument against a hybrid system. In any case, it is one of the reasons for my advocating an elected majority. The hon. Gentleman's argument would have much more force if a majority were appointed: constituents would then be entitled to ask, "What is the point of voting?"

I hope we will rule out the ideas that have been floated by my noble Friend Lord Wakeham and the Lord Chancellor. One can almost see the Lord Chancellor sitting there saying "It is a bore that some of us must be elected. What is the minimum percentage that we think we can get away with? Let us make it 15 per cent., or 25 per cent., or something of that order."

We must either grasp the opportunity of voting for a stronger Parliament and a stronger upper House within a stronger Parliament, or say "Let the Government continue to dominate Parliament in legislation as well as in governing, and have a fully appointed upper House". That is the real choice before us. I certainly favour the majority-elected option, and I hope the vast majority will vote against the minority-elected option. I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate.

2.29 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Robin Cook) *rose—*

Andrew Mackinlay: Come back, all is forgiven!

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is too far ahead of his party.

It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague). I find myself 80 per cent. in agreement with what he said; the other 20 per cent. will be considered by an independent appointments commission, but on this issue 80 per cent. is as close to 100 per cent. as any two Members can manage.

Before I deal with the nub of the issue, let me record the thanks of the Government and, I hope, the whole House, for the work of the Joint Committee. It is not an easy task to get 24 politicians to agree on the time of day; it is even more difficult to get the same number to sign up to a report of substance and authority. It says much for the patience and skill of my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) that he should have been successful in getting a consensus in the Joint Committee on the text, with only two divisions on the entire report. As he demonstrated in his speech, in the course of his work, he has become an authority on the distressingly long history of House of Lords reform.

House of Lords reform is frequently presented as an issue of white-heat controversy. I promise to address the controversial issues, but before I do so I note that the Joint Committee's report underlines the broad agreement that exists on many aspects of reform of the second Chamber. First, there is broad agreement on the role of the second Chamber: it should be charged with revision of legislation, independent scrutiny of Executive decisions and deliberation of public policy.

Secondly, there is broad agreement on the relative status of the two Chambers. It has been a feature of all reports on Lords reform that the House of Commons should remain pre-eminent. It is common ground among all Members of this House that the right to form a Government must depend on the ability to command a majority in this place. This Chamber must remain the crucible in which Governments are forged and reputations are made or broken.

The Joint Committee helpfully sets out the conventions that buttress the relative status of the two Houses. Those provide the House of Lords with the right to question and to delay legislation but not to veto it, nor to challenge any part of the mandate in the manifesto on which a Government are elected. I am glad that the Joint Committee will return to the question of how those conventions can be entrenched in any future constitutional settlement.

The last area of agreement is comparatively recent, but I understand that it is now a common agreement between the two Front Benches: both sides of the Chamber now agree that the hereditary principle has no place in a modern Parliament. Whatever principle of composition may be adopted, few people now argue that it should be based on the privilege of birth. There are a few who are still doing it. Last month, Lord Trefgarne, chairman of the Conservative peers in the other place, chided the Joint Committee for ignoring the case for the hereditary principle, which he claimed

> "represents the best random selection process".

The case against the hereditary principle is that it is not random at all, but highly exclusive, which is why it is common to all the seven options before us that they would remove the remaining 92 hereditary peers.

As the Joint Committee reasonably points out, there are other ways in which reasonable people may conclude that the House of Lords is not truly representative. For example, it remains a rare unrepresentative corner of modern Britain in which the Conservative party is still the largest single party. The Government fully accept the principle set out by the Joint Committee and repeated by its Chairman this afternoon that no one party should dominate the second Chamber. I understand that the Conservative party also supports that principle now that it is in opposition. It is no doubt a matter of deep regret to it that, for 18 years, it never chose to put that principle into practice. It may be helpful, as we approach how to go about choosing between the options on the basis of that agreement, if I deal with procedure before I turn to the areas of controversy.

The Joint Committee has given us options for a more representative second Chamber. No one can fairly accuse it of not giving us enough options. Indeed, it has given us seven different options from which to choose, covering the entire spectrum of alternatives for reform. As the Joint Committee requested, the Government have provided an opportunity today for a general debate on the principles canvassed in the interim report. That will be followed on 4 February by an opportunity for the House to choose between all the options on a free vote.

We shall follow precisely the Joint Committee's recommendations on how those votes should be organised. Each option will be put to the vote in turn. All options will be put to the vote. Members should recognise that it is possible for them to vote for their second or third preference without prejudicing their first preferred option. Voting will not stop just because one option has secured a majority, and they will be free votes.

I do not come to the Dispatch Box today to make the case for an all-appointed House or any other House. The Government will not express a collective view on which option should be chosen. Given that this issue has profound implications for the future of Parliament, it is right that it should be Parliament that resolves what a reformed second Chamber should look like.

Mr. Greg Knight (East Yorkshire): May I ask the right hon. Gentleman what will happen after the vote and take him back to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague)? Has the right hon. Gentleman seen today's edition of *The Times*, which says:

> "Blair will press his opposition to elected Lords"?

The article says:

> "Tony Blair is preparing to intervene in the debate on Lords reform to make public his opposition to an elected Upper House.
>
> The Prime Minister is to scupper demands by Labour MPs for a majority elected second Chamber".

As one of the guardians of our rights, will the Leader of the House confirm that, should this House vote for a majority of those in the other place to be elected, he will thereafter bring forward the appropriate vehicle to put the House's wishes into effect?

Mr. Cook: Personally, I am very keen that we achieve a commanding majority for one of those seven options. Frankly, I cannot abide the prospect of continuing with the issue into another Parliament. I want to get rid of it in this Parliament, and it is in the interests of this Chamber that we do so. What will happen after the votes on 4 February, as the House has already agreed in terms of the Joint Committee's remit, is that the Joint Committee will work up a detailed proposal on the basis of the expression of view in this House and in the other place. I hope that we will give it a clear mandate and a clear steer on what it should work on.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the Government will have to take equal note of the votes in both Houses? Will he make it plain that all members of the Government, whether in the Cabinet or not, will be able to exercise a free vote as well as Back Benchers?

Mr. Cook: I have no doubt that all members of the Government will express their view and that, on many future occasions, their views will be raised with me by those on the Opposition Front Bench, but it is implicit in the fact that it will be a free vote that Government members must be free to express their view. If we were to reach a collective view, we would no longer have the free vote that I seek in this House.

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: I have a speech to make, which I would like to turn to at some time, but I shall give way.

Mr. Arbuthnot: Has the right hon. Gentleman just restated the principle of free votes? It is an important matter if he has.

Mr. Cook: Not consciously, and I am sure that if I have done so unconsciously it will be drawn to my attention swiftly.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: I cannot resist.

Mr. Bercow: I was rather worried by the way in which, presumably consciously, in responding to the intervention of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight), the right hon. Gentleman said that he hoped that there would be a commanding majority in this House for one option or another. Will he confirm in terms, as my right hon. Friend hoped he would, that the wish of this House will be reflected in subsequent legislation and eliminate from his reply the weasel word "commanding"?

Mr. Cook: I do not intend in any way to be weasel in the use of the word "commanding". On the contrary,

[Mr. Cook]

I hope that I was demonstrating that what we want to see is the settled will of the House. I hope that those who want reform of the second Chamber will not repeat the mistake that we have been through in the past of being too unwilling and too inflexible to find the centre of gravity on which we can all agree. We must emerge from the seven options not with one that has a narrow majority of one or two over the others; we must establish which one of the seven is most likely to reflect the settled will of this Chamber.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: No. I will proceed.

The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks referred to the fact that there was some support in the Chamber for unicameralism. Early-day motion 529 records that 90 Members regret that they are not to be offered the Guy Fawkes option of doing away with the House of Lords in its entirety. I understand their impatience with the never-ending saga of reform, but before we send out for 36 barrels of gunpowder, I remind them that right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber fought the last election on a manifesto commitment to make the second Chamber more representative and democratic. We do not have a mandate to abolish it and it would not be proper for us to toy with abolition without first seeking the support of the electorate—which would mean no progress for the rest of this Parliament. I urge all right hon. and hon. Members who do not want the House of Lords to continue in its present form—including all those who might privately prefer to do away with it—to express their preference for a better second Chamber by choosing between the broad options that will be before us.

Pete Wishart: As the right hon. Gentleman said, this is a matter for the whole House, not just for the Labour party. He has failed to give an adequate explanation for not providing the option of abolition. Can he explain further why we are not being allowed the option of abolishing the House of Lords?

Mr. Cook: Because it is a self-evident fact that only members of the Labour party are bound by the Labour party manifesto. It is repeatedly a distressing experience of mine that other right hon. and hon. Members do not feel bound by the Labour party manifesto. My life would be much simpler if they did.

The options flow from the Joint Committee's recommendations. It would not be proper for me to interfere or second guess what those options should be, but they logically follow from the remit that we gave the Joint Committee—approved by this House—which instructed it to come forward with proposals for reforming the second Chamber, not doing away with it.

Norman Lamb: One likely outcome of the votes is that this House will vote in a very different way from the other place, with a strong majority for a substantially elected second Chamber. Given the importance that the Government place on the primacy of this House in any future arrangement, will the Leader of the House and the Government give more weight to the outcome in this House than to that in the other place?

Mr. Cook: One reason why the Joint Committee urged upon us this general debate on principle before the vote was so that both Houses could retire to their respective Libraries and study what was said in the other place. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will take the opportunity of this debate clearly to record the balance of views on a reformed second Chamber, so that the other place may take it into account when it votes. After the votes, in the first instance the matter will go to the Joint Committee, and we look forward to its advice. As Leader of the House, I shall pay particular attention to the views of right hon. and hon. Members. That is partly why it is so important that our decision on reform should reflect commanding and clear evidence of the settled will of this place.

Another point raised by the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks concerned a mixed membership of elected and appointed Members. I offer some comfort to those who are troubled by the idea of a mixed membership. As the Joint Committee observed, the House of Lords has always had a mixed membership. It has happily rubbed along with a mixed membership of hereditary and life peers for half a century. The current House of Lords is a rich kaleidoscope of Members—[HON. MEMBERS: "Very rich."]—They embrace hereditary peers, some very rich; life peers; bishops; and law lords, some of whom are even richer than hereditary peers. They include peers who take a party Whip and a substantial number of Cross Benchers who take none. Nor would it be unusual to have a second Chamber with a mixed membership. About one third of all second Chambers around the world have a mixed membership of elected and appointed members.

The Joint Committee Chairman has just reminded the House that the Committee set out five principles for the second Chamber's composition. It would be difficult to come up with an option that meets all five principles without the result being some form of mixed membership. The first two principles are legitimacy and representativeness. In a democratic society, it is commonly held that legitimacy flows from the accountability and authority that arises from election. No doubt that explains the public's response to consultation on the White Paper, when 89 per cent. called for a second Chamber in which at least a majority of Members were elected.

It might be helpful to remind the House of how we ended up with the current process. It is easy for me to remember because every step along the way is imprinted on my memory. The White Paper's proposal for an elected proportion of 20 per cent. did not command public confidence because it was seen to be too little. Personally, I am deeply sceptical whether we shall capture public confidence by the simple device of removing from the package even the 20 per cent. that was to have been elected. I noticed that yesterday's YouGov poll found that a mere 3 per cent. of respondents favoured an all-appointed second Chamber. That is a slender base on which to build a major constitutional settlement.

Respect for the principle of election is so powerful in our nation that even the hereditary peers have adopted it to fill a vacancy among their ranks: as a result of the death of Viscount Oxfuird, there is to be a by-election. The essential qualification for candidates is to be have been born a hereditary peer. The right to vote is confined to those who are already peers. So that the choice will be popular among the circles in which hereditary peers move, *Country Life* is helpfully carrying out a poll of its readers on who they would like to see elected. I understand that the runaway front runner is the Duke of Devonshire. That may be democracy, but not as we know it. It seems to me that we will have difficulty carrying the public with us unless our reforms introduce a more substantial democratic element on a rather wider franchise.

Some of my colleagues are concerned that if we let any elected Members into the second Chamber, it will start to get above itself—and the more elected Members, the more uppity it will get. Yet as the Public Administration Committee pointed out, three quarters of second Chambers around the world are wholly or largely elected. Almost invariably, the second Chamber remains the subordinate Chamber—and remains the second Chamber in systems of parliamentary government where the Administration is formed from the majority in the first Chamber.

It is possible to keep a democratic second Chamber subordinate by law and convention; I do not believe that it is sustainable to keep a second Chamber subordinate by denying it legitimacy. That not only weakens the second Chamber, but undermines Parliament.

The Joint Committee pointed out other qualities desirable in a second Chamber. They include independence from the party machine, particularly among Cross Benchers; and the expertise brought to its deliberations by Members who have achieved distinction in professions outside politics. The Joint Committee makes the point that if we are to preserve independent Members in the second Chamber and experts with distinction in other walks of life, it is desirable not to make election the sole route of entry. All of us in this Chamber have difficulty comprehending why that should be the case, but it is a fact of life that only a minority of the population relish standing for election. It would be a mistake if we were to close entirely the door to the second Chamber to people who have acquired a lifetime of expertise but are not attracted to submitting themselves to the roughhouse of the electoral hustings.

The royal commission, the White Paper and the Public Administration Committee all concluded that 20 per cent. of seats in the second Chamber should be filled by independent appointment from outside political parties. As the last of those reports pointed out, a wholly elected Chamber would leave little or no room for people who are independent of party.

Mr. Forth: Has the Leader of the House just talked himself into our policy, which is an 80 per cent. elected, 20 per cent. appointed House?

Mr. Cook: No. I am too long in the tooth to talk myself into the Conservative party and I am not sure that I would be entirely welcome. I was referring to the common ground between all the published views—including the Government's own White Paper—that there should be a 20 per cent. independently appointed element. That does not of course exclude others being appointed on a party political basis and does not necessarily mean that 80 per cent. would have to be elected.

The next stage will be for the Joint Committee to work up a more detailed package. As this debate will help to inform the Joint Committee's future deliberations, I want to take this opportunity before I conclude to invite it to reflect further on a couple of the observations that are included in the report, the first of which is its proposal that the reformed Chamber should comprise about 600 Members. I am glad that the Joint Committee said that it will give that further consideration. I have my doubts as to whether it is desirable to have a second Chamber that is broadly the same size as the first. Personally, I suspect that many members of the public will take some convincing that we require a cast of more than a 1,000 for the membership of the Commons and Lords added together. I fully understand that some temporary increase in the membership of the Lords may be inevitable during the transition process, but I would tempt the Joint Committee to think more boldly about an eventual reduction in the size of the second Chamber. In every other country with a bicameral Parliament, the second Chamber is smaller than the first, usually significantly so. Indeed, there are only five second Chambers in the world with a membership of more than 200.

My second reservation concerns the Joint Committee's conclusion that the period of membership of the reformed Chamber should be 12 years. That strikes me as on the generous side. In the White Paper, we noted that the longest period of membership of any second Chamber was the nine-year period for the French Senate. I can see merit in a membership period that roughly corresponds to two full Parliaments, but I am not attracted to setting a new world record for length of membership of a second Chamber. As this was one of only two matters on which the Joint Committee divided, I am encouraged that some of its members are not attracted to that outcome, either.

Let me end, however, on a point on which I am in enthusiastic agreement with the Joint Committee. Its interim report commences with the warning that, for a century, attempts at reform of the House of Lords have foundered on the lack of agreement on what should replace it. It is a sad lesson of the century since the Parliament Act 1911 that the greatest enemies of reform have often been those most committed to reform. The more strongly Members feel about the case for reform, the more passionately they are inclined to demand agreement to their version of reform. If the current attempt is to succeed, it is essential that all those who want reform show flexibility in supporting whatever option can command the greatest support as the centre of gravity.

It is for Members themselves to decide which option of no matter how many options they are willing to support. I would hope, however, that we can all agree that what is least acceptable is the eighth option of no reform at all. This House now has the chance to set in hand the steps that will lead to a modern, representative second Chamber. I beg all Members to make sure that in two weeks' time, we establish the option that will secure the most support in this House, command the

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broadest possible confidence among the public, stop us arguing over which option for reform, and enable us to get on with delivering reform of the House of Lords.

2.53 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am delighted to follow three such distinguished speeches from three such distinguished parliamentarians. If I may say so, I was particularly struck by the insights and the amusing references in the speech of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague). He is a classic example of what comes when one is released from the responsibilities of leadership. Perhaps I should suggest to his colleagues that the more who are put into that position in the near future, the more contributions of that weight and clarity will be made in the House.

Because I agree with so much of what was said by the Leader of the House and the right hon. Members for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) and for Richmond, Yorks, I want to underline one or two points and provide some nuances in terms of the issues that have yet to be addressed. I hope that the House as a whole recognises the truth of what the right hon. Member for Copeland said. At the moment, an absurd bagatelle creates the membership of the second House of Parliament, which is extraordinary. The Leader of the House referred to the amazing by-election that is taking place. If we were to describe to anybody else in the world—let alone a visitor from Mars—how a legislator is currently appointed to the second House of Parliament, they would think that we were completely barmy.

Incidentally, the Leader of the House was wrong in one respect. In terms of the electorate and qualification for leadership, membership of one political party is required. That is also slightly curious, given that the particular party in question does not seem to enjoy huge support in the country. If that is democracy, it is a very curious form of it.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Does the hon. Gentleman think it worth bearing it in mind that the absurd rules to which the Leader of the House referred were put on to the statute book by the Government on a three-line Whip?

Mr. Tyler: I was about to illustrate that by pointing out one reason why that happened. Sadly, in the case of the demise of the hon. Gentleman's noble Friend Lord Oxfuird, it happened because we waited so long for this next stage. Many of us feel that we have waited rather too long, and that is a matter of regret. However, I think that the Leader of the House shares that feeling, so I do not want to rub in that point.

The Leader of the House rightly placed great emphasis on the extent of agreement that exists in the House, across the country and to a considerable extent across parties. This is a wonderful opportunity to make progress, and we simply cannot miss it. It contrasts dramatically with the situation in the late 1960s, when there was no real "centre of gravity", to use the Leader of the House's own phrase. However, I was concerned when, in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), he did not take the opportunity to emphasise the pre-eminence of this House in taking this decision. This House has twice had a mandate for reform—not just from the Leader of the House's party, but from my party. Of course, in recent months the position of the Conservative party has also been clarified.

Those who argue that we must arrive at a new constitutional settlement that self-evidently gives pre-eminence to this House, and which secures and maintains it, must therefore surely argue that the vote in this House on 4 February must be seen in a different light from the vote in the other place. Apart from anything else, turkeys that vote for Christmas are not always totally objective. I hope that when we reach that point, the Government, the Leader of the House and the Joint Committee will pay due regard to the respective interests and mandates of this House and of the other place.

I was also interested to hear the Leader of the House say that there is no collective Government view. I do not know whether that means "collective" in the sense in which the term was used in the good old days of socialism, but it is clear that things are different now. It would appear from the article in *The Times* to which reference has been made that the Prime Minister takes a different view from the collective view of his party and his Cabinet. I hope that at some point we will get clarification as to whether *The Times* or the Prime Minister is completely off message.

It is a curious fact that, if this is true—I am prepared to accept that *The Times* may have got it wrong—the Prime Minister is taking a different view from his own White Paper, from the royal commission and even from his Lord Chancellor. In terms of an elected component, the Lord Chancellor wants all or nothing: he is prepared to accept not only nothing, but all, so it is said. If it is also true that the Prime Minister is ignoring the advice of the Public Administration Committee—which, as its excellent letter to us pointed out, unanimously believes that it is certainly possible to design a mixed-membership House—and of the Joint Committee, the views of which the right hon. Member for Copeland has expressed clearly, this is surely an extraordinary situation.

Perhaps the Prime Minister simply has not read the Joint Committee report; after all, he has other considerations at the moment, so I would not blame him for that. However, I hope that it will be made absolutely clear today that what the Leader of the House said has to be right: this is a free vote with no collective Government view, that the Cabinet does not have a collective view, and that the Prime Minister is not dictating the terms of that view.

The report is unique in the consideration of the issue. It is the first time, I believe, that there has been such a broadly representative body, chaired, as the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks said, very well indeed by the right hon. Member for Copeland, and it has produced a unanimous report. Yes, there were two small votes, but there is no minority report. There is no mass dissension from the theme of the report. It is the first time that that has happened in the history of this long saga.

It is agreed that a hybrid mixed-membership second Chamber is possible and, to a large extent, desirable. As the Leader of the House just said, the second Chamber has had a mixed membership for many generations, so there is nothing new about that. Those who favour a 100 per cent. elected House—there are men and women in this House and in the general public who believe that to be the desirable aim—should recognise that we proceed in this country by evolution, not on the whole by revolution. Even if a 100 per cent. elected House is their long-term aim, I hope that they will not discard the possibility of a major move in that direction. That would give an opportunity and hope to those who do not want to move at all.

Mr. Clelland: Does the hon. Gentleman suggest that, if the House voted for a partly elected second Chamber, it would inevitably lead to a wholly elected second Chamber?

Mr. Tyler: No, I suggest nothing of the sort, but, as a long-serving Member, the hon. Gentleman knows that no Parliament can commit a future Parliament. We cannot say that there will never ever be a fully elected House. What I am saying is that those who wait for perfection wait a very long time and hand a weapon to those who want to remain with total imperfection. That is important. It may be that the Prime Minister floated the idea that the second Chamber should remain as it is simply to spur those of us who believe that the status quo is not acceptable to move on. I hope that that will be the position of the House.

I want to deal with two myths. The first, to which reference has already been made, is that strengthening the second House of Parliament automatically weakens the first. I draw the attention of hon. Members to the excellent letter from the members of the Select Committee on Public Administration. It is not a zero-sum result. We can create an improved situation for our House and for the other House if we see it as a total parliamentary improvement in our ability to scrutinise both the legislation and the executive action of the Government of the day. The Committee wrote:

> "Reform is not a zero-sum game in which advances for one chamber are inevitably threats to the other."

I hope that all hon. Members will take that to heart.

It is extremely important to emphasise the point made by the Chairman of the Committee that a great deal depends on the type of appointment and the type of election. I hope all hon. Members have examined paragraph 53 of the report, in which we say that we want the two Houses to be distinct and complementary, so the method of election needs to be distinct and complementary. One of the few matters on which I disagree with the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks is that I do not believe that if the elections for the two Houses are held on the same day, where one election is by definition to create the assembly that will appoint the Government and the Prime Minister of the day, that will be a healthy context in which to elect the other House to do a quite different job. We still have to think that through carefully. A distinct system and a distinct day for a distinct purpose will help to differentiate the two Houses, and I believe that to be extremely important.

I believe that the second Chamber can perform an excellent complementary role to that of the first, and I believe that by making sure that those distinctions are adequately covered by the detail, we can make real progress to achieve that purpose. A former member of a former Administration, the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks, made an interesting comment about the nature of our responsibilities in terms of the Government of the day. I shall quote him, as I thought that his remarks were an admirable summary of the point. He said that a Government with authority do not need to legislate with impunity. I hope that I repeat his words correctly, as that view comes from experience in government, not just on the Opposition Benches.

Mr. Hague *indicated assent.*

Mr. Tyler: The other myth is the myth of cost. I suppose that we in the House should not be surprised that the media reacted to the Joint Committee report not by considering the major constitutional issues, but by going on about how many hundreds of thousands or millions of pounds it might cost to introduce an element of democracy into Parliament. For goodness sake, what do they want us to do? Do they want us to be more effective, or just cheaper? There is an extremely important issue here that we need to address this afternoon.

The Leader of the House said that a House of 600 would be over the top. I entirely agree. I have expressed that view in Committee and I hope to continue to do so. That figure was a notional possible long-term aim, rather than a transitional short-term necessity that we could remove as soon as possible. It was based on the anticipation that there might have to be a considerable number of appointed part-timers. The two are not necessarily synonymous, I agree: very often, the part-timer may not be appointed, and the appointed Member may not be a part-timer. However, the assumption was that, if there were a large number of appointees, the workload of the second House would require a big House. That applies only if there are a large number of appointees.

Having made that decision, we could not differentiate between the two types of Members in terms of the way in which they are paid. Imagine an elected Member saying, "Look, I am a full-timer in this job. I need a salary comparable to that of House of Commons Members. They are getting £50,000-plus"—this is in a few years' time—"so I must get £40,000-plus." We cannot differentiate between different types of Member, or at least I hope that we will not, so once the elected Member has £40,000-plus, all the appointed Members, who may be part-time, will also demand £40,000-plus. Whatever the total number of appointees, 600 Members will necessarily mean a very expensive House.

However, the opposite applies. The larger the number of elected Members, the smaller the House can be, because it is anticipated that more of them will be full-time.

Let us suppose that, as the Leader of the House suggested, there is a House of some 300 or 400 Members at most. The cost would then come down. I have some figures to illustrate the point. If 80 per cent. of a larger, 600-Member House were appointed and each of them

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were getting £40,000, the total bill would be £24 million. If one reduces the size of the House by having more elected full-time Members, the bill immediately comes down.

Even in the terms that we set out in the Committee's report, the media have completely misunderstood the point. The more elected Members, the cheaper an effective second Chamber. I hope that we can now dispose of the myth. The expensive option is clearly a continuation of the current flawed patronage system as a component of the second Chamber.

Mr. Tom Watson (West Bromwich, East): Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that there should be 400 Members paid £50,000 a year? Is he including their secretarial and research allowances in his proposition?

Mr. Tyler: I am sorry if the hon. Gentleman misunderstood my point. If we have a smaller House because the Members are elected and full-time in the main, it will be cheaper. There is no way that we could differentiate in salary between the elected Members and the appointed Members. Everybody is agreed that if Members of the second Chamber are to be on equal terms, we cannot make such a distinction. I personally believe that our elected second Chamber need be only 100 strong. If the Senate of the United States of America can manage with 100 members, I see no reason why we should not have 100, but I accept that, with that number, it will be difficult to get the mix of appointed and elected Members that some hon. Members wish to achieve.

Mr. Stephen McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): The hon. Gentleman says that a smaller but fully elected House would be cheaper, and he bases his assumptions solely on potential salary figures. Has he read paragraph 59 of the report, or does he recall discussing that in Committee? Would he care to comment on the figures quoted there—£85,000 as opposed to £380,000 per Member to support elected Members? I think that he will find that that comes to rather more than the figure that he just gave the House.

Mr. Tyler: The hon. Gentleman misses the point. It would be possible to have a very cheap house only with retention of the status quo. I suspect that he may be one of the dinosaur fraternity and wishes to retain it.

If there is any elected element in the new second Chamber it will inevitably set the level of remuneration for everybody. Therefore, a larger number of appointed members will necessitate a higher-cost second Chamber. We do not want democracy on the cheap, but we want it to be cost-effective. The most cost-effective House would clearly be one that is predominantly elected and therefore enabled to be a smaller House.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyler: I am about to conclude, and I am aware that many hon. Members wish to speak.

The votes on 4 February will clearly be extremely important. We have had a reassurance from the Leader of the House that his party at least will have a free vote. I understand that the Conservatives will have a free vote. I should emphasise that my party will have a free vote. We ~~are rather~~ more united, I suspect, than the other two parties. There will, I hope, be one or two dissidents, just to demonstrate that I am not exerting any undue influence on my colleagues. We believe in the main that, as we have said for a very long time, the elected component should be 80 per cent. or more. That is an absolute minimum. We hope that it will be a smaller House. It would be largely democratic, but it would also be more hard-working.

When we hear people enthusiastically endorse how Cross Benchers bring so much to the House of Lords in its present form, we should bear it in mind that they are not good attenders or good voters. Therefore, it is important to recognise that if we are to expect a second Chamber to exercise a degree of effective scrutiny of legislation and executive action, we need more members taking an active part in its activities.

Sir Patrick Cormack: On the one hand, the hon. Gentleman argues for a House a hundred strong but on the other hand, he argues for more people than presently take an active part to take such a part. Maths is not my greatest subject, but I think that he needs to follow the national curriculum more closely than he has.

Mr. Tyler: I am sorry, but the hon. Gentleman has completely lost me. I think that he has lost the plot. What I have been arguing is that the more elected members there are who are effectively full-time legislators, the more likely it is that one will gain good cost-benefit from them. Whether or not he agrees, he cannot deny that it is a fact.

The Select Committees, both of our House and the Joint Committee, have very carefully studied all the material brought before the two Houses over many years. They have unanimously recommended that a mixed-membership House can be a practical possibility and bring a real step change to the quality of the work we do collectively in this building in holding the Government to account.What is more, the Committees have both identified a centre of gravity—a centre of gravity that crosses all party boundaries and to a large extent, as the Leader of the House emphasised, is also reflected among the public at large.

Unlike the 1968 debacle, when Mr. Foot and Mr. Powell managed to combine forces—the most unholy alliance, surely, in the history of Parliament—the two parliamentary Houses will, I hope, be able together to make real progress now, because there is no excuse on grounds similar to the situation then, as we have a degree of consensus, a centre of gravity, on which we can make real progress. I hope that we shall now make it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Before I call on the next speaker, I remind the House that Mr. Speaker placed a 10-minute limit on all Back-Bench speeches from 2.30 this afternoon, so that will apply from now on.

3.14 pm

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley): I thought that the issues before us today were quite clear until the Liberal spokesman intervened. I am really confused now. I shall try to get back on to a straight line.

I first confess that my preferred option is the revolutionary one. I support abolition. If a unicameral system works well in Sweden and in New Zealand, as I saw recently, and now also for domestic legislation in Scotland, why should it not also work here? That option is not currently on the agenda, however. For those of us who favour abolition, the next best option is, paradoxically, a fully appointed chamber—

Mr. Fisher: What about a fully elected chamber?

Mr. Foulkes: I shall come to that; it is what I am going to talk about.

I favour a fully appointed Chamber as the next best option, provided that the method of appointment is clear and transparent, as the Committee recommends. May I underline to the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) that to say that is not to support the status quo.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) that any element of election to the second Chamber is inevitably a threat to the primacy of the House of Commons and will undermine the position of individual elected Members. Just as we can learn from success in Scotland, as we have on pre-legislative scrutiny—as the Leader of the House knows—so we should also learn from the mistakes there. I am thinking, for example, of the list MSPs, a system now universally criticised. List MSPs, elected through party lists in eight regions of Scotland, cherry-pick the high-profile issues; they challenge the position of constituency MSPs, and indeed MPs, and build up a profile and a platform to stand against constituency MSPs in their constituencies.

Elected members of the upper House—let us call them senators for the sake of argument—would do the same. Those senators would interfere in the work of individual MPs, and if they had been elected more recently, as the Liberal spokesman suggested, and on a superficially fairer electoral system, as the Liberals would argue, they would claim a more recent and stronger mandate than the individual Members of Parliament. Members who vote for an elected second Chamber will be creating a huge rod with which to beat themselves. Such masochism may be heroic, but it is also daft.

Mr. Forth *rose*—

Mr. Foulkes: I give way to the daft—to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the right hon. and charming Gentleman.

Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that somehow the Americans have rubbed along not too badly for 200 years with two different chambers, the upper one of which has rather more recently become directly elected, largely because of the difference both in constituencies and terms of office? Is that not now very much on offer?

Mr. Foulkes: One of the main reasons for disaffection with the democratic process in the United States is the gridlock between the Senate and the House of Representatives.

The Commons as an institution—not just as individual Members—will be challenged by the upper House, which could claim new legitimacy and new authority. Since it is also the majority party in the Commons that forms the Government, as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said, imagine the constitutional turmoil that could arise, especially if the second Chamber were to be elected more recently and by the system advocated by the Liberals.

We may imagine that we can keep asserting that the Commons is supreme, but huge possibilities of both legal and political challenge open up. If we are to have a second Chamber, it should be complementary to, and not compete with, the Commons. If the vast majority of its members were chosen through the new open and transparent mechanism, we would ensure representation from all walks of life or backgrounds or parts of the country. And paradoxically, a better gender balance and fairer representation of ethnic minorities would be more readily obtainable through an appointed system than has so far been the case with elections.

I agree that some discretion should be left to the Prime Minister and to other party leaders to make direct nominations, as at present, to maintain flexibility of action. It is right to spell out the fact that the role of the second Chamber should also be different from that of the Commons, reducing its powers to thwart the wishes of elected members but clarifying and perhaps enhancing its role in debating, advising, reporting and scrutinising the work of government.

In reality, we have a straight choice between election and appointment. The compromises of part-election are the worst option, with the invidious outcome of two classes of members—elected and appointed. My right hon. Friend said that we had it at present with hereditary Members. There would be an entirely different division and there would inevitably ultimately be pressure for a fully elected option.

Therefore, I urge the House not to be lured by the false and misleading argument that democracy would be enhanced by having two elected Chambers. In my view, it would lead to an undermining of the position of individual MPs and to a constant battle between the two Houses, with resultant constitutional chaos. We should do what we know to be right, and not what is seen to be politically correct.

3.19 pm

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): I rise to make the case for parliamentary democracy. In this Chamber, that should be as easy as making the case for early release to the residents of Wormwood Scrubs. However, I have the feeling that, as the debate goes on, we will find that there is considerable dissension from the basic principle on which innocent people might believe we were all elected to this House.

I begin by making it clear that I am as big a radical as the right hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes). My ideal would be a 100 per cent. elected upper House, but I shall not devote too much of my limited time to that option, as I am a realist. I agree with all those who say that we must not allow the best to be the enemy of the good when it comes to sensible reform. Therefore, I would also support an upper House in which the elected proportion was 80 per cent., or even

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60 per cent., if necessary. However, for the reasons that I shall give, I would be very disappointed if the proceedings in this House, which will guide the Joint Committee's work in the future, resulted in an upper House that was anything less than 80 per cent. elected.

Surprisingly, given that my view is so radically different from that of the right hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, my motives in advocating a largely elected upper House are to strengthen Parliament's control over the Executive. In the public interest, that should be our only guiding motive underlying this debate. I agree with all those who say that it is rather urgent that we address this matter. I do not believe that people are refusing to vote because there are too many elections or because they are weary of politicians and have lost interest in the issues involved. The perception of the electorate is that Parliament matters less and that the Executive are all powerful. People are troubled by the belief that there is little that they can do by way of democratic elections that will have a significant effect on their daily lives. That is why parliamentary reform is a matter of some urgency.

It is inescapably true that, in the years that I have been in the House, the power of the Executive has greatly increased. Modern Executives are much bigger and more all-embracing than they used to be. I regret to say that the power of Parliament—or at least of this House of Parliament—has steadily lessened. There is no conspiracy behind that: I am not saying that anyone intended that to happen, and I do not want to make a party-political point. I have been a member of the Executive longer than I have been without office in this House, but there is no doubt that today's House of Commons is far weaker in its influence on Government and on public affairs than the one that I joined. We need to deal with that matter.

I accept that dealing with the problem that I have set out involves reform of this House as much as of the upper House. That is outside the scope of this debate, but hon. Members have unknowingly allowed too much control over the process of holding the Government to account to pass out of their hands.

In many respects, I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague). This unaccustomed outbreak of unity among Opposition Members should not alarm Labour Members, as there are plenty who disagree with both my right hon. Friend and me about reform of the House of Lords. I agree with my right hon. Friend that the failure of the Leader of the House's recent and well-judged attempt to give back to the House control of the composition of its own Select Committees at least was extremely unfortunate. However, that debate is for another day.

I reject the idea that an elected and therefore stronger upper House will somehow weaken the Commons yet further. Again, I do not have to repeat at great length the arguments against that idea, as only one strong dissenting view has so far emerged. I have never understood the proposition. A stronger upper House would complement this House. The Commons is not being asked to give up any of its privileges. If it wishes, it can entrench its own supremacy, and underline existing conventions and relevant legislation by insisting that the Commons alone can determine levels of taxation and public expenditure. We could leave the upper House with a delaying power only, which could be overridden by the Parliament Acts and which would not amount to an absolute power of veto on legislation. That would be quite sufficient. The fact that Governments would be formed according to their majorities in this House would make it clear that the Commons is paramount in the nation's affairs.

I am sure that the right hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley is an assiduous constituency Member. However, I thought he sounded a little concerned about the risk of personal competition if a more assiduous representative of constituents in his part of Scotland were elected to the upper House. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman has nothing to fear, but Members of this House might benefit from a little competition occasionally. It is not unknown for some to follow the Whip so faithfully and to be so loyally dependant on the patronage of their leaders and the docile following of supporters in safe seats—which certainly exist in parts of south-central Scotland—that the quality of representation declines. A little competition in that respect would do no harm.

Mr. McCabe: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clarke: No, it is not an important enough point.

I emphasise that we are looking for a stronger Parliament. We should not resent the suggestion of stronger competition between the two Houses. The problem facing us is that the necessary checks and balances that ought to exist in a modern constitution and parliamentary democracy are not at present strong enough in this country. The Government have waddled into a situation in which they find that they are reforming far more than they intended. We should take advantage of that and push on to ensure that we produce an elected and stronger upper House—within the lifetime of this Parliament, if we can hold the Government to that.

I agree with those who have said that a stronger upper House needs the legitimacy of democracy, but I also accept that we must guard against the danger of the tyranny of the majority. That danger can arise in a parliamentary democracy, and it is one of the problems that exist at present. I wholly approve of the electoral system for the Commons, but it greatly exaggerates the parliamentary support for the party with the largest percentage of votes. The party system means that Governments strictly control their followers, from whom they derive their power. As regards the checks and balances in the British system, it is difficult to explain to an American, for example, how on earth such amazing presidential power—without clear parliamentary check—is put in the hands of our Prime Minister. People have referred already to the emergence of a presidential system.

The way to avoid that, if one has an elected second Chamber based on elections in which parties will undoubtedly play the major part, has already been answered by others. It is necessary to have a different form of election. It is necessary for it not to coincide with the parliamentary election. It is necessary for the elected membership to rotate, with, for example, a third retiring after a given interval.

Although I agree with all that, I was one of those who voted in the Committee against people being too nervous and proposing that there should be tenure of 10, 12 or 15 years. That strikes me as excessive caution. If we had undertaken these reforms a generation ago, would people elected on the political issues current in 1988 retain democratic legitimacy? They would probably have changed half their opinions on those issues by the time they were debating them in 2003. However, a different form of election is certainly required.

We should also consider the situation if the two Houses were in conflict. It is important that there is a system whereby, usually, no one party is in command. I look forward to that; it is the key to the American system and constrains what would otherwise be an impossible presidential system. That would change the political culture in this country. There would be genuine search for agreement and not our current ping-pong, with the convention that the upper House always gives way—although it usually would.

From the give and take that would have to take place between the two elected Houses and the Government would come an altogether more responsive and genuinely pluralistic and democratic system, to which I look forward. I hope that we decide on the options before us and that we give a steer to the Committee. The Committee will have to return with more seriousness to many other issues; it was not unanimous on everything, and for example I agree with everything that has been said about the possibly excessive size of the House. A clear steer is needed so that we can maintain a timetable that produces a result in the foreseeable future—certainly by the end of this Parliament.

3.30 pm

Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I want to talk about a word that has already surfaced many times in the debate and is much used by both proponents and opponents of reform: legitimacy. Those who oppose reform, especially those who oppose election, argue that election is not the only route to legitimacy. That argument deserves to be taken seriously and, if there was time, we could develop it to show that there is truth in it.

I want to set out the problem with that argument, as it goes to the heart of what we are being asked to decide. That requires me to describe what was for me a defining moment. We have many such moments in my party, but this was one of my recent ones. The context was the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001, which we passed with great haste—rightly so. However, I had doubts about some aspects of the measure and felt that we might not be taking sufficient care with it. As we trooped through the Lobbies, abolishing habeas corpus in an afternoon, one of my colleagues said, "Never mind, the Lords will sort it out for us."

The Bill went to the Lords and it did indeed sort it out for us. It did a magnificent job to make sure that the legislation was better, but when the Bill came back to this place our friends in the Whips Office contacted those of us who had had doubts. The call that I received was memorable. As it was thought that I might misbehave again, I was told, "Those people aren't elected, you know", to which I replied, "No, they are not elected but I think that they are right—furthermore, I didn't know that it was the view of the Whips Office that they should be elected."

I ask those who use the legitimacy argument—especially those in the other place—to think about it from this end. They should think about the type of second Chamber necessary to enable it to perform its proper role in our parliamentary system. If the second Chamber can be routinely rolled over using the argument that "they're not elected, you know", we may as well pack it up. The unicameralists may be right. However, they and we have to address the fact that on any test our system of Executive power is the most concentrated of any system of parliamentary government and that it has got worse. The power of the Executive has increased, is increasing and ought to be diminished. Either we know and believe that, and want to do something about it, or we do not. That power comes through party—of which we are all part—and patronage, but it has changed our system fundamentally over the past half century or so.

We must either redress the balance and do something about that power by using reform of the second Chamber as one part of the package, or not. The Public Administration Committee, which I have the honour of chairing, concluded that it is possible to find a way through by adopting a mixed system. We can be open about the dangers of going too far in certain directions. I concede that it would be possible to construct a wholly elective system that made matters worse rather than better. We might simply have a system of election that was appointment by a different name—through party list systems. If we do not attend to the nature of those elections to ensure that they produce different people from those in the House of Commons, elected differently and for different terms, we shall run into that difficulty.

Some say, however, that we must remember that if we want to secure legitimacy—not that of individuals, which is not in question wherever they come from—the institution must be put on a different footing. There is no question in my mind but that the Select Committee concluded that there should be a mixed system that recognises that there is a place for election and a place for appointment, but in a balance that secures the legitimacy of the institution. That is crucial.

Some people are not comfortable with the options now being offered. Some people may prefer a system of indirect election, with which I have some sympathy. If I were to choose my second preference, it might be the scheme recommended by the Bryce commission, which suggested that the House of Commons should become an electoral college—in the present circumstances, that might include Members of the devolved legislatures in Scotland and Wales—that it would elect 75 per cent. of Members of the House of Lords and that the other 25 per cent. would come through a joint committee of the two Houses. That would be an improvement; there would be more legitimacy through that route, although not as much as the mixture that we recommend would produce.

The mention of Lord Bryce in 1918 reminds us how long we have been going round this circuit. It would be most extraordinary if a Government with constitutional reform as one of their centrepieces—indeed, they have delivered major constitutional reform—and with the current majority did not manage to reform the second Chamber. What a failure of historic proportions that would be.

[Tony Wright]

The Leader of the House has issued a challenge to the House of Commons. In a sense, he wants to take the decision away from the Executive and say, "Come on House of Commons, it is up to you. Rise to the challenge." The question is whether the House will rise to the challenge. We shall find that out, at least initially, in a week or so.

The Select Committee on Public Administration has shown that, if the House wanted, we could have a mixed second Chamber, with 60 per cent. elected and 40 per cent. appointed Members, in 10 years. That could be achieved in a way that works through arrangements suitable for that purpose, but it will be done only if the House of Commons recognises that it has both an opportunity and a responsibility to put that process in place.

3.38 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): We all listened with great interest to my friend and neighbour, the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright). In his opening remarks, he gave as good an argument against elections as I have heard for quite a long time because the whole scheme that he proposed would rule out that power of party and patronage that inevitably comes with elections.

We all have to thank the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) for the way in which he introduced this debate. We have heard some scintillating speeches—most of all that made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague)—but I beg the House to think of the future of Parliament and what will best serve us and those who send us here.

Over the past seven or eight months, a group of us from both Houses and all parties and generations have been meeting regularly as what we call the campaign for an effective second Chamber. We are not status quo merchants, but we strongly believe—this belief has united the group—that the country would be better served by a wholly nominated, all appointed second Chamber.

There is a very respectable case for a largely or entirely elected Chamber, but that would involve drawing up a new constitution and redistributing powers between the two Chambers. If we are to attract men and women of sufficient calibre and quality to stand for election, they must have the opportunity responsibly to exercise real power.

That is not a course with which our group would agree. We would agree with the general conclusions of the Joint Committee that the present role and powers of the House of Lords are about right, and that the conventions governing its relations with this place are about right. Indeed, the Joint Committee chaired by the right hon. Member for Copeland recommends fairly emphatically that the second Chamber should not be given any new significant or additional power. The Joint Committee's report lists the five requirements, which I will not repeat. A close reading of that report indicates that a reasonable degree of consensus was reached that the present second Chamber has those qualities, some of them in good measure.

That echoes to some degree the fifth report of the Public Administration Committee, chaired by the hon. Member for Cannock Chase, which stated that the considerable virtues of the present second Chamber should be preserved. Among those virtues, it listed the less partisan debating style, the quality and expertise of House of Lords Committees and its vital role in scrutinising legislation, much of which, as we all know to our cost, leaves this Chamber completely unconsidered. Many others in the House and around the world have commented on the quality of scrutiny, particularly of European legislation, which is widely acknowledged to be of a thoroughness and quality unique in the whole European Union.

Therefore, as we consider the Joint Committee's report, we must remember that we are not debating the Chamber that existed five years ago, with an inbuilt Conservative majority and the right of hereditary peers to sit in the Chamber. That has gone, and those debates are over. What we are considering is a Chamber that is largely composed of people who have been appointed since the Life Peerages Act 1958. Since that date, some 984 peers have been appointed, and no one who scrutinises those appointments with any degree of care, thoughtfulness or objectivity could for a moment dismiss more than a handful as cronies. For almost half a century, many able men and women, from differing backgrounds with different skills, have become Members of the House of Lords. The Joint Committee cites examples from the public services, science, medicine, academic life, the voluntary sector, business and industry—one could add the armed forces and the arts—all of whom have been recognised by appointment. The people who have taken part in debates have brought their expertise—often a current expertise—to them.

Since 1958, and particularly since 1999, we have gradually replaced a council of elders with a council of experts. I often think that Lord Winston perhaps best exemplifies what the House of Lords is all about. He takes the Labour whip, but he informs debates with a tremendous amount of experience, and the quality of his contributions—although I disagree with many of them—is immense. A large number of those experts, however, do not take a party whip, and the Joint Committee makes complimentary reference to that fact.

The Public Administration Committee has said that the main cause of widespread disillusionment with our political system is the establishment of virtually untrammelled control of the House of Commons by the Executive. It went on to stress the need to ensure that the dominance of Parliament by the Executive, and by the party political machine, is reduced. Indeed, the hon. Member for Cannock Chase alluded to Dunning's famous motion in his speech:

> "The power of the Crown—

or, in this case, the Executive—

> has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished."

Who can suggest seriously that that worthy objective could be achieved by having an elected House of Lords? Who can suggest seriously that many, if any, of those appointed for their expertise would seek election? Elections would be strongly influenced, to put it mildly, by party considerations. That is why the Select Committee wants open lists, long terms and no right to re-election. However, it seeks to replicate by election what already exists while making its own aims incapable of realisation by replacing the present system of appointment by party patronage.

Elections would inevitably bring conflict, and the right hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) referred to that. Other colleagues who represent Scottish and Welsh constituencies have attended our group and told of us their experience. Even those of us with English seats have Members of the European Parliament elected under the dreadful system of closed lists, and we know what it is like when people are on our patch and do and say things that are wholly incompatible with the good of our constituents. I am experiencing precisely that in my constituency at the moment. What legitimacy can my Member of the European Parliament claim when, in my constituency, only about 20 per cent. of people voted in the last European elections? If the elections for the upper Chamber do not take place on the same day as the general election, we will run the risk of a derisory turnout. What sort of legitimacy does that give?

If the purpose of the exercise is to secure a second Chamber as different as possible from the Commons, can it make sense for the most fundamental change to be the one most likely to reproduce the partisan structures that exist here? Given their constituency or representational functions, what time would the elected Members of the second Chamber have for scrutiny? I have already referred to the fact that much of the legislation churned out by Government is not considered in this House, and those Members would have the right, as the Joint Committee makes plain, to expect the same facilities that we enjoy. Whatever the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) says, the costs would be enormous. It would be an extremely expensive, but far less effective second Chamber.

If a second Chamber were elected or largely elected and enjoyed the powers and functions of the present House of Lords, it would be far less well equipped to perform the functions that are performed well at the moment. The hon. Member for Cannock Chase talked about the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 and there are many more examples that we could give from the past five years and, indeed, from the period of Conservative government in which the House of Lords put right legislation that was defective and imperfect in the extreme. Of course, it made mistakes, but any elected or non-elected body will make mistakes. However, the quality of debate and decision in that place has been of a high order. To throw that away would be—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order.

3.48 pm

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North and Sefton, East): I join those who have congratulated my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) on the work of his Committee even though I do not agree with its conclusions in their entirety. I also congratulate him on the lucidity of his speech and on the balanced way in which he made his case.

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House referred disparagingly to early-day motion 529, of which I was the author. I shall therefore respond to some of the points that he made. He seemed to suggest that the option of abolition that my right hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) and I support should not be a matter for consideration. Indeed, it is not one of the seven recommendations in the Joint Committee's report. I accept that early-day motions are not always the strongest indicator of feeling in the House, but this one attracted the support of 90 Members. I believe that that number is sufficient to make the case for finding the means to debate in two weeks' time the option of abolition that some of us believe at least deserves to be debated.

As a Back Bencher, I hoped that I would be able to table an amendment or motion to enable that opinion to be expressed, but those who know the procedures of the House far better than I do have advised me that that will not be possible because of the way in which the debate will be set up. I do not claim that every hon. Member who has signed the early-day motion agrees with me on the particulars. Indeed, some of them have made it clear that they do not. However, I should like my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to reflect on the fact that 90 Members have signed it. Although I do not expect him to respond to me today, we all think that we should have the option to vote on an amendment or motion that mirrors our views. It is true that many of us might vote for other options as well.

I take slight issue with the way in which my right hon. Friend dealt with the matter. On the one hand, he generously reminded me that we are to have a free vote. I am grateful to him for that. On the other hand, however, he reminded me that it is a manifesto issue. It seems that my right hon. Friend is giving with one hand and, if not taking away with the other, at least putting a hand on my arm before I move it. Like all hon. Members who have spoken, I am realist and do not expect that I will succeed in abolishing the House of Lords by the end of this Parliament. Indeed, I accept that I may never do so, but I should at least like the opportunity to vote in the way that I think is most appropriate.

I am obliged to justify the terms of the early-day motion. I shall not enter into the abolitionist argument because my right hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley put it succinctly and well. The other part of it refers to the fact that the House is not as effective as it should be in a number of respects and it calls for greater reform of the way in which we do our business before we consider how the House of Lords should be reformed, if at all. That is a serious proposition. In his new guise, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) championed the rights and privileges of the House of Commons. I always listened to his speeches carefully when he held high office and he regularly changed his mind. However, he made the serious point that the wider public do not think that we conduct our business effectively. His lapse in logic was that we must reform the House of Lords. My argument is that if we are serious about the problems in the House, and I acknowledge that they exist, let us sort them out first before moving on to decide the most appropriate way of reforming the House of Lords.

We have made a good start on reform of this House. We are better at pre-legislative scrutiny. Some Select Committees are starting to be aware of their role in that. Let us make it a more regular occurrence so that the

[Mr. George Howarth]

excellence that is built up in those Committees is used more effectively on every measure. Just as we shall debate this issue within the next few weeks and vote on it, so we shall discuss Iraq, what has happened, and decisions by the Government and United Nations. I doubt whether there will be enough time for everyone who wants to speak to do so. That may be a criticism of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, but the same thing has happened under all Governments. When the Conservative party was in office, huge discussions took place and important issues were determined, yet people waited for hours and never got to say what they felt needed to be said on their constituents' behalf. If the Chamber is going to debate and reflect on the great issues of the day, the way in which it operates must be reformed.

I began by saying that the House could operate effectively in a unicameral system. I still hold that view because nobody has convinced me otherwise. Before we set about reforming the House of Lords we should reform the way in which we conduct our business. The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) talked about confidence, and from the confident position of a reformed, functioning House of Commons we can go on to discuss the House of Lords. If we do not do so, frankly, we are not credible.

3.56 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), who has just talked himself out of elevation to the upper House by revealing himself as a unicameralist. The difficulty with his argument is that it would result in our never tackling the House of Lords. If the challenge is to reform the Commons first, we would leave the House of Lords semi-reformed. The Prime Minister would be delighted with that argument, as there would be a strong case for inaction.

When we have these discussions, there is always a risk of portraying the debate as a two-dimensional contest between us and the other place—if one gains, the other must lose. The constitutional contest is not between the Commons and the Lords, but between Parliament and the Executive. In that contest, we are partners, not rivals, and the key issue is the way in which we each perform our task better to hold the Executive to account. The prime question is whether the legitimacy and effectiveness of Parliament as a whole would be enhanced if some Members of the upper House were elected. I believe that it would. In passing, I agree with comments about proposed size—a Chamber of 600 is far too big—and I was delighted to hear from Committee members that that matter will be addressed.

On composition, I was surprised and alarmed to read in *The Sunday Times* and *The Times* today of the Cabinet's recent apparent conversion to a wholly appointed second Chamber. That would be a change in the Government's previous policy of a 20 per cent. elected Chamber, but it would show astonishing disregard for the views held in the House. Having been told by the House that their proposal of 20 per cent. was not enough, it would be wrong of the Government to retreat to zero instead of advancing beyond 50 per cent. The two most recent reports on the subject by Lord Wakeham and the Public Administration Committee were unanimous that there should not be a wholly appointed Chamber. A consensual solution is unlikely to be achieved if one starts by rejecting the common ground reached by those reports.

The Leader of the House made a plea for flexibility, and I hope that he will use his persuasiveness to impress on the Prime Minister the need for flexibility if we are to achieve a proper solution. My judgment is that roughly one third of Members in the new House of Lords should be non-political and appointed, and the balance of two thirds should be political and elected. I am not in favour of a 100 per cent. elected Chamber for the reasons that we have heard about—it would exclude many people who do not belong to a political party and do not want to stand for election, but who add enormous value to debates in the upper House. No single party should have a majority in the upper House. A one-third bloc of Cross Benchers would in effect mean that the Government of the day would have to win the argument to win the vote, which is as it should be.

I want to deal head-on with the three main arguments sometimes used to criticise that solution: the Lord Chancellor's argument that oil and water do not mix; the British Rail argument that that solution produces the wrong sort of politician; and the rival mandate argument.

On the argument about two types of Members and their alleged incompatibility, as we have heard, the House of Lords has had two types of Members for more than 40 years: those who got there by accident of birth; and those who got there by achievement after birth. It is difficult to think of two more diverse sources of arrival into the upper House, plus the bishops and Law Lords. We can debate the legitimacy of the hereditary element, but we cannot say that it did not mix with the life peers. Indeed, when the hereditaries were abolished, the life peers were some of their staunchest defenders. Of course, there are other models: the Inner London education authority, which had directly elected and borough-nominated members; the assemblies; and the Scottish Parliament. I am old enough to remember aldermen in local government. So it manifestly is not the case that a body can work only if all its members arrive through the same door.

The British Rail argument is that electing two thirds of Members will produce the wrong sort of politician. There is a view in the upper House that "We do not want the rough trade from the other end of the building up here." A year ago, Lord Wakeham said in his speech on this matter that elections would produce

> "a second Chamber that was a clone of the other place, full of professional politicians".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 9 January 2002; Vol. 630, c. 582.]

I am not quite sure how he classified himself in making that comment. The late Lord Longford made the point less tactfully three years ago:

> "We would get the dregs."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 610, c. 955.]

I think that that anxiety is misplaced. Behaviour in our House is less a function of the sort of people we are than of the place in which we operate and our role as Members of Parliament in a highly political, dominant Chamber to which we have to be re-elected. When we move from this charged environment to the calmer one at the other end of the building, our behaviour changes. Perhaps the best examples are those of Lords Wakeham and Hurd. If my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Patrick Cormack) were elevated to the upper House, he would be absorbed into that environment with no difficulty whatever. When we are in our current environment, we behave as Members of Parliament, but in the more reflective environment of the upper House, where Members do not have to be re-elected and Whips have a slender grip on discipline, people behave differently.

I find nothing inherently suspect or inappropriate about people who want to stand for re-election being Members of the upper House. If they are elected on a rolling basis for a fixed term, nor will there be very many to elect at a time, so there will be no shortage of quality candidates. Crucially, if they do not have to be re-elected, they will not have to emulate some of the characteristics of this House to which Members in the other place take such exception.

My last point concerns the rival mandate argument, which alleges that, if we have a predominantly elected second Chamber, it will challenge the supremacy of this Chamber. However, the second Chamber is clearly defined as complementary and, in the end, subordinate to this one. Its powers are given to it by this House, which is pre-eminent, and they cannot be unilaterally changed. There is an argument that that settlement might somehow be subject to moral challenge and that there would be tension between the two Houses if the upper House were elected. I strongly disagree. Here, we are all elected for one Parliament on the same day after a vigorous campaign on the basis of a party manifesto. We are elected to the pre-eminent House that sustains the Executive and produces the Prime Minister, and we submit ourselves for re-election.

None of those conditions would exist for the upper House if it were to be elected on the basis suggested by, for example, Lord Wakeham. Many of its Members would not be elected at all and would have no mandate. Those who were elected would be elected at different times and on different mandates, and it would be impossible for one party to control the upper House if it were elected on the basis that I have outlined. The notion that electing some or even most of the Members could lead to the conversion of the upper House into a rival assembly where one party claims a mandate is unsustainable. Yes, the upper House should be given greater legitimacy in its existing role, but it does not follow that it will acquire a claim to a greater role.

I believe that the right way forward is to seek to reach agreement, but if that fails, to make progress on the basis of what this House decides, but at a pace that does not cause too much turbulence and respects the rights of life peers to remain in the upper House for as long as they want. In other words, there should be a gentle transition to a predominantly elected upper House. Put in those terms and approached with understanding, I believe that a settlement can be reached.

4.4 pm

Joyce Quin (Gateshead, East and Washington, West): So many powerful speeches and telling points have been made that I am glad that my time is restricted and I can concentrate simply on picking up some of them.

The contribution of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) reminded me that serving on the Joint Committee was an interesting and entertaining experience. Our deliberations seemed to cross every known political divide, and old ideological divisions counted for little.

However, the speech of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) reminded me that the Labour party's view on the matter has changed. Although I thoroughly dislike the facile applications of the labels, "old Labour" and "new Labour", I confess that I feel more attached to the old Labour policy of 1992 on House of Lords reform than to the proposals that the Government presented subsequently.

I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House confirmed that there would be a free vote and that the matter was for the House of Commons to determine.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe said of his motivation for wanting an all-elected House, which I also support, that it would help affirm the House's authority against that of the Government and the Executive. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright), who chairs the Public Administration Committee, made the same point. I am sorry if I prevented his escape from the Chamber by referring to him.

My motivation is more basic. We are considering a House of Parliament that is part of the machinery of government and our democracy. The Government and the House of Commons get their authority from the people, and it would therefore be wrong to deny the people a say or influence in the composition of the second Chamber of Parliament. For that reason, I believe strongly in the principle of election. It confers legitimacy, about which my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase made so many interesting comments.

I do not agree that election will automatically lead to competition with the House of Commons. I am comforted in that belief by examining second Chambers around the world, which appear to live within the powers that they have been granted. They cannot change those powers unilaterally. No second Chamber in any system of government that I know about can automatically increase its powers at the expense of the primary Chamber. Achieving any increase—or, indeed, any change—in powers is normally a lengthy process that requires the wholehearted agreement of both Houses of Parliament and the Government of the country.

Several colleagues discussed whether a unicameral system was a good idea. I agree with the Joint Committee's collective view about the importance of two Chambers. I also agree with many of the comments that the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks made about that. My right hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) is right that some countries work well with a unicameral system. However, they tend to have smaller populations and it is probably easier to feed views into the political system, perhaps because of size or other mechanisms.

Most populous countries have second Chambers. An interesting example can be seen among the countries that hope shortly to join the European Union. As far as

[Joyce Quin]

I am aware, only one has two Chambers, and that is Poland. Poland is the largest of those countries in terms of population, which reinforces my point.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley suggested that a good title for Members of the second House would be "Senator". I hope that that title will not be conferred on them, because I believe that it would add to the unhelpful analogy and comparison that is sometimes drawn between the Chambers of this Parliament and the system in the United States. The United States system, which frequently becomes gridlocked, is very different from ours. It is based on the separation of powers, and both of its Chambers have more or less equal powers, in a way that I do not imagine will ever be the case here. Indeed, one of the striking aspects of the reports on the reform of the House of Lords is that they all felt that we should consider its existing powers for use in the future. In the United States, the upper House is in many ways the senior House, partly because the terms of tenure are a little longer there than in the House of Representatives, which changes every two years—not something that I would want to see in either of our Houses of Parliament—and partly because the two Houses have equal powers. The fact that Senators have a longer term of office therefore gives them greater clout and influence within the overall political system. For that reason, I think that comparison of our two systems is unhelpful.

I would like to see a wholly elected House, but I am not against some kind of compromise, perhaps along the lines that my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase mentioned. It was a compromise that received unanimous support in his Committee, and has been the theme of many other studies carried out on the issue. I hope, however, that we shall not run away from the idea of election altogether. I agree with the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks that it would be completely unrealistic to try to interest the electorate in voting for a second Chamber when they would, in effect, be voting for only 20 or 40 per cent. of its Members.

Many hon. Members have referred to their worries about low turnout. I was glad that, in the course of its deliberations, the Committee agreed with my suggestion that we should look imaginatively at the elections, and that consideration should be given to having full postal ballots, for example, as they have dramatically increased the local government election turnout in my part of the world, and to combining the elections with other elections.

The principle of election is important. I am glad that there is to be a free vote in the House on this issue, but I would appeal to my colleagues who are Ministers to reflect on the fact that the Government have done a great deal to bring about constitutional change in this country. That change has been enormously beneficial, but let us not falter now. Let us deliver a reformed, democratic second Chamber that will stand the country in good stead for the long term.

4.13 pm

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire): It is not a question of faltering now. The problem is that we have no idea where we are going. This is another of the Government's constitutional reforms that was started without any idea of the knock-on effect that it would have on the other parts of our constitution, or of what to do next. It has become a commonplace to say that the train left the station without anyone having any idea of its destination. The problem with this train is that both of its drivers jumped out of the cab as it was hurtling along the tracks. The Leader of the House and the Lord Chancellor, both of whom were trying to drive the train in different directions, suddenly decided to leave the entire problem to the Joint Committee.

The Joint Committee, frankly, does not know the answer. I pay tribute to its Chairman for his admirable job in managing to reconcile a group of very diverse people with very diverse views. Although the Lord Chancellor, in an extraordinary interview on "Today" at around the time of the new year, described the Committee as a genius, I am nevertheless afraid that that is not how it is likely to turn out. There will be problems that the Committee will not be able to resolve.

What shall we do if the House of Lords disagrees with the House of Commons on the solution that we come up with? I expect that to happen. I expect there to be a stalemate between the two Houses, and I expect the Prime Minister, observing that stalemate, to be very happy and to say "Now I will leave it to the Committee to sort out".

Today's edition of *The Guardian* suggests that for Labour not to reform the House of Lords when it has such a large majority in the House of Commons would constitute a truly epic national failure. That is right, but it takes no account of the extent to which the current settlement suits the Prime Minister. The House of Lords may give the Prime Minister occasional pause for thought, although I suspect that following the introduction of carry-over that will decrease; but I very much doubt that the House of Lords has ever given the Prime Minister a sleepless night.

Thus the Prime Minister is leaving the whole matter to the Joint Committee—that genius—to sort out.

Mr. Forth: Might the situation be even worse than my right hon. Friend suggests? Might the Prime Minister be tempted simply to abolish the remaining hereditary peers in order to play to his party gallery, in a rare moment of attempted popularity, and then to set up the so-called statutory appointments commission and say "That's it. Sorted. End of story"?

Mr. Arbuthnot: That is clearly possible, but the Prime Minister would be taking the blame himself. I suspect that he would rather leave it to the Joint Committee. So there he is, leaving it to the Joint Committee in the fervent hope that we get nowhere.

That will not do: we need to sort out some of the problems left by the mess we have been in. There are problems, for instance, to do with the relationship between the regions and the House of Lords. The right hon. Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Joyce Quin) emphasised the need for regional representation in the House of Lords, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) correctly said that that representation had been diminished by the reforms that have already taken place over the past few years. What about the different tiers of government that we are beginning to amass? We are being increasingly governed as day follows day.

Mr. Clelland: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that if Members were elected to the second Chamber they would represent not regions but constituents—and, particularly under a list system, political parties?

Mr. Arbuthnot: Yes. They would represent political parties, they would represent people, they would represent regions. They would represent all sorts of entities. It would be an answer, to an extent.

The real difficulty with the Committee's remit is that it was asked to look only at the composition of one of the Houses, whereas it should have been asked to look at the settlement as a whole, because there will be trade-off effects. If, for example, there is a hybrid House of some sort, what will be the knock-on effects on the other parts of that House? If the House of Lords becomes more representative, it should surely follow that the House of Commons can be reduced in size. Actually, that ought to happen anyway—this House should have 300 or 400 Members, not 650—but there ought to be trade-off effects in the whole Palace. The Joint Committee has not been asked to consider that. Some argue that the new House of Lords could usefully contain elements binding our tiers of government together—drawing in, for instance, aspects of European and Scottish representation—but we have not been asked to consider that either.

I have moved a long way since the debate began. I signed the early-day motion suggesting that the House of Lords be largely elected. As has been pointed out, there is something to be said for democracy. However, the Joint Committee strengthened in my mind the view that, in reforming the House of Lords, we run the risk of losing the great talent and experience that, through systems that have evolved through the ages, we have managed to build.

Therefore, I shall vote for a fudge. It will not be a happy fudge. It will not be a sensible fudge because we are not being asked a sensible question and, if one is asked a silly question, sometimes, one has to come up with a silly answer. I am sure that we shall do exactly that.

4.20 pm

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): I do not think that the right hon. Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot) should be so pessimistic. We are embarked on a period of constitutional reform that started when we were elected in 1997. I am delighted about that. People said that the Joint Committee would kick reform of the Lords into the long grass. They were wrong. We have shown them to be wrong. The process is unstoppable. I do not think that the reforms will stop there, so he should not be too disheartened. I agree that the size of the House of Commons should be reduced, as should the size of the House of Lords in due course, but neither of those things are achievable quickly.

The process is very important. We will be judged harshly by history if we do not get it right. What I would like to say more than anything else is that we must continue that process by giving thought to the options produced not only by this House but by the other Chamber and come up with a compromise.

It will be a compromise. As a number of hon. Members have said, it should be the best one available to us. We should not hold on for ever for the very best, because, as people have pointed out, that has led us to stalemate. We should try to get the best solution that we can, preferably before the next election, and I think that that is possible. But if it is not, as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said, it should be carried over into the period after the next election.

No Government, including—I hope that this does not happen—a Conservative Government elected at the next election, could resist the pressure for reform because we have taken such profound steps. One of the next things we must do is to remove the remaining hereditary element from the House of Lords. That is clearly the road on which we are embarked.

On the issue that was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright), it troubles me a lot that we spend far too little time on some of the underlying issues, which are either taken for granted or get muddled. There are certain assumptions about legitimacy, democracy and liberty. Those concepts not only overlap but come into conflict with each other.

When we talk about legitimacy, we normally talk about the legitimacy of Government. When we ask whether a Government are legitimate, what we mean in the parlance of modern times is whether that Government can be put in place and removed by a democratic vote, which is normally assumed nowadays to be all adults voting in free and fair elections. We do not normally mean by legitimacy that every Chamber of every House must be elected. If that were the case, many countries that we all regard as democratic and free would not be democratic and legitimate. Legitimacy comes from the ability to put in place and remove a Government by democratic vote. It comes from a number of different sources, which may or may not include a democratic voice.

The other issue that is fundamental is the concept of liberty or freedom. I say this particularly to those interested in getting rid of the second Chamber altogether. Freedom is not democracy. Democracy can abandon people's freedom. I remind some of my hon. Friends that there are umpteen examples of that throughout history. Some of them are too easily taken in by the United States constitution. Let us face it, that was a continuation of the English revolution, written by people who came from this island and who were imbued with the arguments of that time. There were many good things about it but why is it so difficult for progressives in the United States to get rid of the death penalty? The answer is that governors, members of both houses and certain members of the police are elected. Significantly, Illinois has just abandoned the death penalty under a governor who is not standing for re-election—an act of retirement.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase made the case well in respect of the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 but there are worse examples. Adolf Hitler and Mussolini were elected. Members of two democratically elected chambers in the

[Mr. Clive Soley]

United States repeatedly voted for the death of no fewer than 90 million north American Indians—and did so consistently for 100 years. If one is in the minority, democracy can be the enemy of liberty. People who are interested in the welfare of minorities should bear it in mind that, at times, all of us need to be in a minority to be reminded that a majority can behave tyrannically.

The second Chamber must have legitimacy but of a kind wider than mere direct election. It needs to be a protector of the constitution and—this is profoundly important—to stand up for minority rights from time to time. A properly appointed, strongly independent sector in the House of Lords is important and I want that to continue.

Over the next couple of weeks, I hope to persuade my right hon. and hon. Friends to focus on my belief—on which I strongly disagree with the Lord Chancellor—that hybridity is a sound principle and that it is a good idea to have a hybrid second Chamber. We ought to look at a balance of 60:40. On that basis, one could not only have legitimacy but protect the strong independent voices from science, various professions and other areas that have made a great contribution through their appointment under an independent system. Vitally, we could also have members of the second Chamber who are there by appointment through a party political route. Political parties are vital to modern democracies. I do not know of any modern democracy that can work without them. It is proper that there should be an element of appointment by political parties in the second Chamber.

One aspect that has been debated far too little in this Chamber is that we have proceeded on a course of parliamentary and constitutional reform since Labour's election in 1997. In a way, the most profound part has been the devolution of power to Scotland, Wales, London and increasingly—I hope and expect—the regions. One of the second Chamber's most important tasks is to bind together the devolved United Kingdom, which is why I want it to include some representatives of the regions.

At present, the Chairs of the Assemblies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are already Members of the second Chamber by chance. They told the Joint Committee that they and their regions find it valuable to sit in the second Chamber. I would like us to consider making sure that, by ex officio appointment, the Chairs of the regions take seats in the second Chamber—which is not dissimilar to what the Spanish are doing progressively as they introduce regions. Another way is indirect election.

I acknowledge all the points that have been made about elections not being wildly popular at times but that arrangement would allow the elected membership to be drawn from the regions. Billy Bragg made proposals that are a bit different from the norm but election from the regions could be achieved in a number of different ways, so that the regions have a voice in the second Chamber, helping to lock the United Kingdom together. Such a structure could work.

If we go down the road of 100 per cent., or even 80 per cent., election, those elected will campaign strongly on the basis that they are as legitimate, if not more legitimate, than Members of the Commons. That would be inevitable, particularly if the electoral system were different. Nor do I believe the argument, advanced by the Liberal Democrats, that it is somehow possible automatically to block people by saying that they cannot stand. Preventing them from resigning from the second Chamber and standing again would be ruled out by the European Court of Human Rights.

I ask Members to look at the 60:40 option, and at the possibility of indirect election or appointment, so that we can establish a good hybrid second Chamber that acts as an effective safeguard for our constitution and our basic freedoms, but also has all the legitimacy that comes from such a structure.

4.30 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk): It is worth reminding ourselves that we have completed a very important first stage in the reform process by getting rid of the bulk of the hereditary peers, and the Government deserve considerable credit for that long overdue achievement. The fact that their programme of constitutional reform has often appeared somewhat incoherent probably reflects conflict within Government, but on this matter progress has been made. However, it is now essential that the process be completed. The job is just half done, and there is clearly a risk of the whole issue being kicked into the long grass.

The second stage has already taken far too long, and the White Paper was a misconceived diversion and a waste of time in the reform process. The proposal for a 20 per cent. elected mix was a non-starter, and the cynics among us might conclude that the Lord Chancellor was seeking to shift the debate and opinion away from a wholly elected House to get people to debate a much lower percentage of elected Members. In his latest intervention, just after Christmas, he suggested that opinion is

"polarising around whether there should be an all appointed or an all elected House"

Again, that smacks of dark motives at work. I am not sure where he finds such opinion, but I suspect that it is among his fairly small circle of friends. However, such opinion is not matched by that expressed in this debate, and certainly not by that of the public. The YouGov poll that has already been referred to shows just 8 per cent. support for a wholly or substantially appointed second Chamber.

As has already been alluded to, there is a real risk that differences of view between reformers will be used as a justification for delay. It is therefore incumbent on all of us who favour rapid completion of the process and a wholly or substantially elected second Chamber that we find common ground quickly, ready for the vote in a week or two's time. We must not allow small differences to create a roadblock in this process.

After the disappointment of the White Paper, the Joint Committee process got the operation back on track. It is worth stressing that this report, which I very much welcome, was unanimous, and it is impressive for that reason. It is clear that there is broad agreement on the role, functions and powers of the second Chamber, and it is through the design of those elements that we can deal with anxiety about maintaining the pre-eminence of this House within Parliament. It does not constitute a coherent argument to say that giving the second Chamber greater legitimacy through democracy will take away the pre-eminence of this place.

The report recognises that the present second Chamber lacks legitimacy and suffers from unrepresentativeness. However, it clearly performs its legislative functions pretty well in revising legislation. Reference has been made to the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Bill in 2001, and there have been many other examples. Those who argue for a unicameral system have to face the fact that, without that check and balance, we would have a lot more defective legislation on the statute book. The second Chamber has provided that important check and balance. The challenge, therefore, is to preserve the best of what it currently offers, while giving it real legitimacy. As the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) made clear, the importance of the process lies in strengthening Parliament as a whole, not in taking power away from this place and giving it to a second Chamber. We need to strengthen the effectiveness of Parliament and its ability to hold the Government to account and pass good legislation.

I shall consider briefly the five qualities identified in the Committee report. The report asserts that three qualities are already present—expertise, independence and no domination by any single party. The missing elements are legitimacy and representativeness. By representativeness, the report does not mean democratic representation. It seems to be referring in a narrower sense to gender, age, ethnic mix, representation of the regions and so on.

There is a somewhat disturbing suggestion in the conclusion of paragraph 47, which says that if the second Chamber were just made more representative of the nation, it would somehow gain a new legitimacy. As the Leader of the House made clear, legitimacy cannot come from appointment. Legitimacy flows from democracy. That is the element missing from the five desirable features of a second Chamber. A House wholly or substantially elected is the essential precondition for legitimacy.

But that is not enough. Very low turnouts would damage legitimacy. Imagine the turnout with a 20 per cent. elected element. One might choose to vote if a friend were standing, but beyond that, even I could not see much point in going along to register my vote. In the Cook-Maclennan report, the two tasks demanded of a Joint Committee were to produce recommendations for a democratic and a representative second Chamber.

As regards the other qualities mentioned in the present report, if there were a 20 per cent. minority, or perhaps a 40 per cent. minority, appointed by an independent commission, thereby providing an element of independence and expertise, I believe that that mix would meet the demands of the majority of those who want reform. Furthermore, elections based on a proportional system would, in almost all conceivable circumstances, result in no one party dominating the second Chamber.

I was pleased to see specific reference to the single transferable vote, which would give power to the citizen in determining the elected Members of the second Chamber, not power to the party machine. We must avoid at all costs any possibility of the closed list, which has been used in the European elections. It is an abomination and unacceptable to anyone who believes in a democracy in which the citizen has real power.

A mixed membership could achieve all the qualities that the Committee demanded. With reference to numbers, 600 is ludicrous. It would place the UK Parliament second only to the Chinese national people's congress. That would still be ahead as it has 2,970 members, but no other country would get anywhere near the size of our Parliament.

In conclusion, we have a massive opportunity that we must grasp. The greatest risk is for reformers to disagree among themselves. There are dark forces, we are told, that are seeking to frustrate reform. We must not let that happen. When the Government consider the votes that come out of the debate in a week or two, I urge them to give priority to the view of this House. If the Government assert that this House is pre-eminent within Parliament, it must be the will of this House that predominates in the reform process.

4.40 pm

Alan Howarth (Newport, East): When the King of Naples wrote to Lord Holland asking him if he would kindly furnish him with a written constitution, Lord Holland replied, in Burkeian, terms that that would not be possible, commenting

"You might as well ask me to build you a tree."

The Joint Committee has not included in its menu an organic option, and we have embarked upon the genetic re-engineering of our constitution in the expulsion from the House of Lords of the majority of the hereditary peers. A voice is hardly heard these days in support of the status quo. It is clear that we must proceed, whether serendipitously or schematically.

The repeated attempts over the past 100 years to design a rational reform of the second Chamber have, as we all know, not led to a thorough conclusion. It matters very much that this time round we should be successful in pursuing this matter to a sensible conclusion.

I wonder whether there is the consensus, or whether there will be the political will, to do so. But, given the inadequacies of today's House of Commons in holding the Executive to account, arising because of lack of time, and more profoundly because of the professionalisation of the House of Commons, it is ever more important that we should have a second Chamber that is legitimate, capable and confident, and that can make some impact in mitigating the elective dictatorship. That, by the way, is the key argument against an option that the Joint Committee did not offer to us: abolition and unicameralism.

The Joint Committee was right to start with consideration of the role, powers and duties of a second Chamber and of its relationships with this House and other institutions of Government. Judgments about the principle of selection to the second Chamber, its size and the tenure of its members should arise from that consideration, rather than the other way round.

There is at least an extensive consensus that the powers of a reformed second Chamber should be much along the lines of the present powers of the House of Lords. That is a tribute to the impressive work that their lordships do, debating, scrutinising, revising,

[Alan Howarth]

delaying—there is a case, as the Wakeham report and the Government themselves suggested in their White Paper, for rather increasing the power of delay of a reformed second Chamber—and advising the Government and this House.

The Joint Committee has set forth a list of the attributes that it believes should characterise a second Chamber fitted to carry out these responsibilities: legitimacy, representativeness, the absence of domination by one party, independence and expertise. I think that those are the right benchmarks.

How would a fully or partially elected second Chamber match those benchmarks? Election would confer degrees of democratic legitimacy, according to the proportion of the members who were elected. But it would not follow that election would confer representativeness in very important senses. I share the pessimism that others have expressed about the improbability that there would be a high turnout in the elections to a second Chamber whose powers are expressly intended to be modest and that would not furnish an Executive. It is unlikely that the party activists who would put themselves forward for election would be representative of society at large. Being party members, they would not escape the powerful influence of the party machines, and since, given the tendency of this House, it is very likely that they would be career politicians, it is unlikely that they would command the expertise that appointed members can bring to a second Chamber.

Jim Knight (South Dorset): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Alan Howarth: No. I apologise, but time is short.

The decline in the membership of political parties and people's disaffection with our political processes also mean that it is unlikely that enough people of real ability will be found to populate a reformed second Chamber.

Do we really want a second Chamber that contains a smaller proportion of people with real expertise and authority to speak on various subjects than is the case in the present House of Lords? Do we want a second Chamber which, to the extent that it is elected, is a pale imitation of this elected House of Commons?

I should expect politicians in an elected second Chamber, if they were worth their salt, to aspire to build on their democratic legitimacy to achieve greater powers. I disagree with those of my hon. Friends who say—and I think that I paraphrase only a little crudely—that elections are good and that we should therefore have more of them, but that they would not put up with a second Chamber that would frustrate the will of this elected House of Commons when it came to abolishing fox hunting. That is not the way that the dynamics would drive.

My apprehension is that, if we were to have a second Chamber that was even substantially elected, it would not be long before the two Houses clashed and found themselves at an impasse. We would then be in the position of the US, where in practical terms it is well nigh impossible to carry forward any substantial programme of legislation or reform on domestic policy.

Moreover, it is a terrible idea that elected Members should represent the same electors in two Houses of the same Parliament. That can only confuse people and undermine the position of the constituency Member of Parliament. I agree with the Attlee Government in their 1948 White Paper, which held that a reformed second Chamber should be complementary to the House of Commons, and not a rival to it.

How would a reformed and fully appointed second Chamber match the benchmarks set by the Joint Committee? An appointments commission could be charged with the responsibility of forming a second Chamber that was truly representative of the range of interests in our society. It would have regard to occupations, to functional constituencies, business—both employers and unions—public services, academia, the professions, the armed services, the voluntary sector, and the arts.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North) *rose—*

Alan Howarth: It should also be charged with forming a second Chamber that was inclusively representative in terms of gender, race, faith, minorities and the regions. The second Chamber would have to contain a component of spokespersons put forward by the Prime Minister and by party leaders. They would make the case for the policies of Government and the Opposition parties and make sure that legislation and major policy were scrutinised. Apart from that, however, we should seek to create a second Chamber that was a party-politics free zone.

The Government propose in the White Paper that up to half the members of the appointments commission should be politicians. I disagree with that, and with their assertion that it is unrealistic to suppose that a House of Parliament can be immune from party-political influence. We can and should seek to design out most political patronage in a reformed second Chamber. The appointments commission could be fully appointed on Nolan principles, so that it was politically disinterested. Its task, set by Parliament, would be to create a composition for the second Chamber that was representative not in the sense that politics produces representativeness, but in the complementary sense that I have indicated.

The appointments commission would identify the functional constituencies, and they would propose who their members should be. There might or might not be elections within the functional constituencies, but we need not be prescriptive in that respect. The legitimacy of such a second Chamber would arise from its very representativeness. The Chamber would not be dominated by any political party, but would be independent. By definition, it would be expert—indeed, its expertise would be more contemporary than that of the present House of Lords.

Norman Lamb *rose—*

Alan Howarth: Such a second Chamber would not presume to challenge the primacy of the democratically elected House of Commons. It would indeed be a modern reaffirmation of the ancient principle on which the House of Lords was constructed. It would be a council of the Lords spiritual and temporal, the powers of the land, advising the monarch as the executive.

We might even continue to call it the House of Lords.

4.50 pm

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury) *rose*—

Norman Lamb: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Could you remind hon. Members that if they take an intervention they can have extra time? I think that the rule is that one is allowed to take two interventions and one receives two extra minutes. That might facilitate debate.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is correct, but it is up to the individual Member to decide whether to allow the intervention.

Mr. Key: I hope that that intervention did not count against me, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I shall argue the case for a largely elected House of Lords from a different perspective. There have been representatives of the people of Salisbury in the House of Commons since 1265, although the nature of that representation has changed radically over the past 800 years. Indeed, the Wiltshire representatives summoned to Runnymede to witness Magna Carta were not elected by anybody, but they represented the people of Wiltshire nevertheless. By 1346, eight Members of Parliament represented what is now my constituency. That continued until 1834 when the county constituency of Salisbury was constituted, with one Member of Parliament.

That perspective illustrates the importance of looking forwards not backwards, because the nature of representation will change. What really matters is that the people of this country are represented and if that means extending democracy, I am all for it. Perhaps after 100 or 800 years, people will have a different view, but I shall not be here to worry about it. I have served nearly 20 years in this place and I doubt that I shall be here for another 20.

It is significant that so far no one has paid tribute to the work of the hereditary peers. My constituency may be different from others—indeed it is—but for the majority of my 20 years in this place, no fewer than five working peers from my area attended the House of Lords on a daily basis. They brought an enormous amount of wisdom on subjects from local government to agriculture and I regret their passing. No doubt the same could be said of other parts of the country.

The work of the hereditary peers deserves credit. It also underlines the fact that we need a second Chamber. About 60 per cent. of the Members should be elected, with 20 per cent. appointed and 20 per cent. ex officio. What matters is legitimacy in the eyes of the electors. That will give the second Chamber its strength.

The current system of election to the European Parliament enormously devalues democracy. I very much reject the idea of breaking the link between a Member—a person—and the people whom he represents. The current system does not make that link possible and it would be regrettable if we were to adopt that form of election.

I want to concentrate on religious representation in the second Chamber. The bishops and other religious leaders play an extremely important part in our constitution. I am wholly opposed to theocracy and wholly in favour of our political parties remaining secular. I do not want to be a Christian Democrat or a Republican on United States lines, with an agenda written for me by southern Baptists, for example.

We should not underestimate the significance of the representation of the bishops and other religious leaders in the upper House. I drew up a list of my bishop's areas of expertise and daily practical experience in two counties: it included, education, employment, health, housing, heritage, defence, foreign policy, moral and ethical issues, justice, international development, finance and pensions, rural affairs, farming, the Home Office, constitutional affairs and urban deprivation. We must not write off the experience and the unique role of the bishops of the established Church. The contribution of other religious leaders in the upper House has also been dramatic, by bringing fresh thinking and giving us a fresh dimension on, for example, inner-urban problems and rejuvenation.

Part of the legitimacy of the upper House comes from the geographical dimension, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) pointed out. The regions need to have some representation on a county basis or a wider regional basis because I happen to believe that, in spite of the Government's wishes, we will not see regional government in most of the regions of England and, if we do, it will mean very little. Perhaps the north-east will be a success story, but the south-west will not even get as far as a referendum, on my reading of how things look. So the upper House can provide a regional dimension that we might otherwise lack. As we have strategic regional authorities, covering issues as diverse as planning, transport, culture and housing, we need to recognise that fact and give them a voice in the second Chamber.

Finally, in considering the future of our constitutional arrangements, we should not be frightened of change. Looking over of the 800-year history of the Members of Parliament for Salisbury, they have undoubtedly contributed in their different ways. In the dark, dingy and sleazy days of the 18th century, Old Sarum in my constituency became a byword for a rotten borough. That constituency, which had two Members of Parliament and five electors, was sold to the then Prince of Wales for £50,000, and he sold it back to the Government interest a few years later at a remarkable profit. That way of doing things seemed appropriate at the time. So I am glad to say that nothing is written in stone when it comes to how people are represented, but the time has come to move forward and the way to do so, given where we are, is to increase democratic representation in a strong second Chamber.

4.56 pm

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): I congratulate the Government on setting up the Joint Committee because I firmly believe that, as far as possible, we should try to seek cross-party consensus on the constitution. The greatest consensus between the parties and even between the Houses is on the supremacy of the House of Commons. I urge that the supremacy of the House of Commons should apply in deciding the proportion of elected Members of the House of Lords.

[Mr. Malcolm Savidge]

Given the possibility that the House of Commons will support a predominantly elected second Chamber and that the House of Lords will support a predominantly unelected one, and given the rumours, which the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) referred to in his very entertaining and cogent speech, that Downing street might favour a completely appointed Chamber, it is very important that the Executive should not use a vote in the House of Lords to undermine or dilute a vote in the House of Commons.

The supremacy of the House of Commons can be asserted in various ways, partly because of the general acceptance to which I have referred not just in both Houses of Parliament, but among the public; partly because of the historic tradition, as is chronicled in the report; and partly through statute, such as the existing Parliament Acts. However, it would not be right to assert that supremacy because of the relative illegitimacy of the other House, for two reasons. First, however illegitimate the other House, its Members might not recognise that they are illegitimate—just think of some of the arguments that the hereditary peers used to use. Secondly, the more illegitimate it is for the other House to overrule the House of Commons, the more illegitimate it is for it to interfere in any way.

What about a wholly appointed upper House? We should remember the Lord Chancellor's wise words in 1997:

> "I think it would be very important to avoid the perception of the biggest quango in our nation's history."

Some people say that the Appointments Commission is the solution to that. I am sorry, but I do not quite follow the argument that a quango ceases to be a quango if it is appointed by a super-quango, or that the problem of having an assembly of the great and the good is solved if that assembly is appointed by a committee of the very great and the very good.

It has been suggested that the committee of the very great and the very good would probably be heavily influenced by the assembly of the great and the good. That would be a recipe for a self-perpetuating oligarchy. People might say that the upper House could thus be made more representative. However one balances race, creed, gender or all the other different factors, one cannot help but believe that a House appointed by a tiny committee would be unrepresentative. It would be a clique, and it would be liable to represent an elite of the wealthy and successful in this country.

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): On that point, does my hon. Friend think that the so-called people's peers were a great success? Did they reflect a balanced series of appointments to the House of Lords?

Mr. Savidge: No, they are not a success; they demonstrate exactly my point.

Mr. Clelland: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Savidge: No, I must proceed because of time.

Apart from anything else, why should a small group choose the representatives of 60 million people? We have just heard that we got rid of Old Sarum, where seven people elected two MPs, and Dunwich under the sea, where 14 did.

Mr. Key: Five.

Mr. Savidge: Sorry, it was seven on the date that I looked it up, but I accept the hon. Gentleman's point. I say to those whom I would dare to call the forces of conservatism: do they really want to go back not just centuries but to a different millennium?

Should the Appointments Commission appoint party appointees? If so, what right does it have to choose who represents the parties? On the other hand, can one imagine a better way to create meaningless ciphers than to allow the party leaderships to appoint and re-appoint people? The more I read through the royal commission report, the White Paper and the various other appointment proposals, the more I return to Churchill's famous dictum that

> "democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time".—[*Official Report*, 11 November 1947; Vol. 444, c. 206.]

What we need is election, but not the Conservatives' original proposal for a first-past-the-post system in counties, which would simply increase the landslide in landslide elections, and would disadvantage the minor parties even more. The advantages of the present system of election to the House of Commons are that it provides the constituency link and clear majorities, and it avoids giving excessive power to minority parties, which happens most notably in the Knesset. The weakness of our system is that a party can gain a very large majority on just over 40 per cent. of the vote. Usually—this was not the case in the previous Parliament—a party's popular support slumps during mid-term. Until we have fixed-term Parliaments, Prime Ministers will be able to choose a favourable time for an election, so a party can have a longstanding large majority based on the support of only about a third of the public.

To balance that, we should have a second Chamber that creates greater equity. On that point, I agree with the White Paper: party membership should aim to reflect party strengths in the country. The best way of doing that is proportional representation. I accept the point made by the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) that a party majority would be possible under that system, but only if that party had more than 50 per cent. support in the country.

Surely expertise is best ensured by improving the Committee system and bringing in relevant expertise, especially for pre-legislative scrutiny. On length of term, I agree with the Leader of the House and the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) that 12 years seems too long. The size of the second Chamber should be reduced. If we have a reduced-size Chamber that is elected on a PR basis with large constituencies, and it is made absolutely clear that Members do not have constituency duties in our sense but legislative duties—and that they will not get the budget or the support to have constituency duties—we would not have the nightmare that was being conjured up by my right hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes). The problem in the Scottish Parliament to which he referred was a result of list MSPs being treated—stupidly—as though they were super-constituency MSPs and given special assistance to interfere in constituencies. That is not necessary. The experience of the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Patrick Cormack) is an exception: most of us find that MEPs do not frequently interfere in constituency business.

Mr. McCabe: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Savidge: I am sorry, but I do not have the time.

I favour a 100 per cent. elected upper House, and one that is elected on a proportional system so that it balances the current system for the House of Commons. Its powers would be limited de jure to those that are exercised de facto by the current House of Lords. I do not believe that it would rival this House or that that would lead to constant battles with this House. I refer to the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House and my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Joyce Quin). Many other elected democracies have elected second Chambers and do not face the nightmares that were conjured up by my right hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley and my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley).

Despite my preference for an upper Chamber that is 100 per cent. elected on a PR basis, I recognise that compromise may be necessary. I also recognise that, in this building, constitutional change often moves almost as slowly as the lifts.

5.6 pm

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): The most worrying thing about the debate has been the impression given by the great majority of speakers that, if we go ahead with the reform plan, great advantages will result, democracy will be strengthened and we will not face any new problems. As the majority appear to believe that, I hope that they will think about the issue and ask themselves how reform will make things any better.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who is unfortunately no longer in his place, said that the new system will strengthen our democracy and give us more control over the Executive. However, let us consider the last two days in Parliament. Last night, we had the wonderful debate on herbal foods. There was great discussion but, even if the Conservatives had won the vote, nothing would have happened. The directive would have to apply in any event. What the blazes of a difference would an elected House of Lords make? Last Thursday, the splendid Minister for food told us all about the agreement on fishing that was reached in the European Union. About 20 Members asked him all sorts of questions and demanded more action, but we could do nothing. What difference would an elected House of Lords make?

We must also ask ourselves what is wrong with the current position. The power is here in the House of Commons and the House of Lords might ask us to reconsider an issue, and its suggestions are often sensible. However, the most that it can do in extreme circumstances, if it thinks that there is a threat to freedom or liberty or something agricultural, is to say that it wants to halt a measure for a year. If we change the upper House and make it elected, how will that strengthen our democracy, particularly if its elections have taken place more recently than those to this House? It will say that it has the power that we do not have.

We have introduced many constitutional changes recently without thinking them through. Sadly, they have brought about far more problems than advantages. If we go ahead with the plan, we will simply create a costly nonsense that will further undermine our democracy, which is already dying. That can be seen from the continual reduction in the percentage of people voting in elections. For example, the turnout in the European elections was 25 per cent. and the figure of about 60 per cent. for the general election was down on the previous one. What is even more worrying is the effect on young people. I have the impression that they have switched off from democracy.

In the old days, our strength was that the people who came to this House made laws, passed the taxes and were answerable directly to the people. If the people did not like us, they could chuck us out. The people had real control. Our other strength was that, although the House of Lords did not have any power, it was a wholly independent body that could ask us to think again. Things have changed. We often fail to talk about or even understand the fact that a massive amount of power has gone from the House of Commons because of our European arrangements. We can no longer decide a huge number of things but, instead of facing up to the issue perhaps by reducing the number of Members of Parliament, we have set up whole new armies of politicians and the people are not sure who is responsible for what.

Hon. Members should ask themselves what their constituents would do if some members of the Government got their way and we had Euro MPs who were elected one way or another, and one never knew exactly who belonged to what party. In addition, our constituents will have MPs, an elected House of Lords answerable in some way to their area, people who are elected to regional governments and councillors. If we create the nonsense of a massive democracy, with all kinds of governance, there will be less and less power to share around.

We also have to ask about the cost. Surely we are all aware that although we do not have elected assemblies in England, we have regional government and it is costing a fortune. We know that an elected House of Lords will cost a fortune, and it will be a total disaster. *[Interruption.]* Someone seems to disagree. Surely not.

Mr. Bryant: Many hon. Members would disagree with everything the hon. Gentleman says. However, on the specific contention that an elected second Chamber would cost an inordinate amount, surely that depends on the number of Members, how much they are paid and how they are resourced. That is not written in stone.

Sir Teddy Taylor: I accept that, but what good will come from the reform? What damage are we doing to

[Sir Teddy Taylor]

the House of Commons? If the hon. Gentleman is a real democrat, he should be worried that the views of his constituents do not have the slightest effect on most of the decisions that we used to make. He knows that is a fact because of the European factor. *[Interruption.]* It is not funny but desperately serious. If we think about the amount of money that is spent on destroying food and all the crazy things demanded by Europe, we should be worried, but of course what we think does not matter.

What is the problem with the House of Lords at the moment? It is a strength to the House of Commons. Although it considers our issues, it does not have the overall power to interfere. If we go ahead with the mad plan of creating a 60 per cent. elected House of Lords, we will create a body that is a threat to the House of Commons. If it is elected more recently than us, it will claim to have greater authority and that will be a nonsense for our democracy.

We should all say that our basic duty is to defend our democracy. When we find people switching off from politics and not having the slightest interest in elections and the rest of it, we should ask what is going wrong. More elections and more highly paid elected people, allegedly representing constituents and trying to make decisions on things over which they have no control, will further undermine democracy. How can those hon. Members who want the new House of Lords say that it is democracy if three out of four people do not bother to vote? How can it be democracy if the same thing happens with elected regional councils? Is it a triumph for democracy if only one in five people bother to vote in elections for the House of Lords?

The worst thing of all is the creeping nonsense in the report. Instead of proper direct elections, we will have party lists. Rather than independent people coming to Parliament, we will get people whose sole task is to please their party leaders so that they get up to No. 1 or 2 on the list. Slowly but surely, we are destroying our democracy, freedom and liberty, and undermining what people have fought for many years to achieve. If we go ahead with the nonsense proposals for the House of Lords, we will make things worse, not better, and less representative. We will spend even more money on a democratic system, the powers of which are fading away.

5.14 pm

Mr. Calum MacDonald (Western Isles): Much of the debate has focused on the basic question of the role and function of the upper Chamber. That is an appropriate starting point. Indeed, the Joint Committee report began at the same place. If we want the Lords to be a powerful upper House along the lines of the American constitution cited by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), sharing responsibility for determining and initiating legislation, or helping to decide and control the Government of the day, without doubt it should be directly elected. Only elected and mandated representatives of the people should determine questions of government and legislation.

However, it is not at all clear that a majority of Members want the upper House to have that role. The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) made it clear that his motive for wanting direct elections was to bring about a more powerful upper House that was better able to challenge the Commons. If all the Members of an upper House, or a majority of them, were directly elected, his prediction about the future relationship between the two Houses would prove much more accurate. Some of my hon. Friends and, indeed, the Leader of the House made the point that, in many bicameral systems, the powers of the two chambers are relatively stable. The situation here is very different for two reasons. Most bicameral systems operate within the context of a written constitution that sets out clearly the chambers' respective powers. We have no such constitution—the powers of our Chambers have evolved over time and will evolve further if there is a directly elected upper House.

The other big difference is that, in almost every other bicameral system, the same principle of election applies to both chambers. Almost always, both are elected through a proportional system of representation. Here, there will be a unique situation in which the Chamber will continue to use a first-past-the-post system of election and the new Chamber will inevitably use a proportional system of election. The Conservatives are deluding themselves if they think that there will be anything other than a proportional system. Such a contrast or conflict would inevitably mean that, in five, 10 or 15 years, either the Commons would have to adopt a proportional system, which I personally favour, or the Lords would assert itself as the true representative voice of the people. Instability is inevitable if we go down the route of a directly elected second Chamber.

To return to the role and function of the upper House, the majority view is that it should remain, as the Joint Committee said, strictly limited. That role is important, but it should remain limited. The upper House is engaged in the necessary but secondary task of scrutinising and revising legislation. In effect, it is an enormous and rather grand scrutiny committee—it is like an audit commission examining legislation passed by Parliament. We should be clear about the role of the upper Chamber because selecting people to perform a scrutiny or audit role is very different from selecting people to produce legislation, or determine public policy and the shape of a Government.

The Joint Committee was therefore right to stress in its report the importance of three key attributes if an effective upper Chamber is to hold the Commons and Executive to account. The first attribute is an independent viewpoint; the second, expertise; and the third, legitimacy. Those three qualities are essential in an effective scrutinising and auditing upper Chamber. I have heard no one argue in favour of direct elections on the ground that that would make Members of the upper House more independent-minded and therefore better able to scrutinise the Commons. On the contrary, the new directly elected Members of Parliament at the other end of the Corridor will be exactly the same as the existing directly elected Members of Parliament here in the lower House, as they will be party loyalists for the most part. They will have a great natural reluctance to act against the party Whip and will depend on party authorities for their present and future political careers. Likewise, nobody has yet argued in favour of directly electing Members to the upper House on the grounds that they will provide a perspective, range of experiences or expertise that is different from those already provided by directly elected Members in this Chamber.

Mr. Forth: Is it not perfectly possible that, if the elected Members of an upper House had completely different constituencies and terms of election and a different electoral cycle, and if there were no Ministers in the upper House, so that they did not have to worry about careers or Whips, the result that the hon. Gentleman doubts will occur could be achieved?

Mr. MacDonald: I do not accept that view. Such Members would be no more independent than directly elected Members of this place, and no different in type. Extending terms or introducing different constituencies or even electoral principles would not change the type of person who got into the Chamber next door.

Neither the independent scrutiny of legislation nor the breadth, quality and diversity of public debate would be enhanced by establishing what would be a replica Chamber of "Mini-Mes" at the other end of the Corridor. There is only one serious argument for creating a new army of directly elected Members of Parliament: the accepted need to give the upper House the appearance and substance of democratic legitimacy. That important point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright), but direct election is not the only way of bestowing democratic legitimacy. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe spoke about the over-mighty Executive, and if direct elections were the only way of achieving accountability and legitimacy, there would be arguments for establishing a directly elected political Executive such as that which exists in many other countries.

Quangos were also mentioned. Most quangos have more power and more money to spend than the upper House, but there is no clamour for directly electing them. There is no such demand because people accept that the democratic legitimacy of quangos and the Executive derives from their accountability to this directly elected House of Commons.

There is no reason why the relationship between the upper Chamber and the House of Commons cannot be built around the same principle. That could be achieved in a variety of ways, some of which have already been mentioned. My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase mentioned the Bryce commission of 1918, which proposed a system of indirect elections in which the House of Commons would be involved. Such elections might be conducted on a regional basis, or there could be a system of genuinely independent appointments or a mix of those methods. I hope that there would also be a role for the assemblies and Parliaments in the different regions and nations of the UK, but whatever the final mix, the fact that the composition of the upper House would be decided and monitored by this House would be sufficient to achieve the democratic legitimacy that it rightly wants to see there.

On the question of whether there should be a compromise in which 20 per cent. or 40 per cent. of Members are elected, I share a view that has already been expressed: asking people to turn out and vote to elect 20 or 40 per cent. of a Chamber that is essentially limited in power is ludicrous. No rational voter would engage with such a system.

In conclusion, I believe that the solution lies in a system of indirect election or genuinely independent appointment that is accountable to the House of Commons. It would have democratic legitimacy and would, above all, maintain the expert, independent, authoritative and different voice that we want in an effective upper Chamber.

5.24 pm

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): I share many of the misgivings that the hon. Member for Western Isles (Mr. MacDonald) expressed about an elected second Chamber, which I oppose. We have heard many interesting speeches, but almost all have a ring of familiarity. Nearly all were made in the previous debate on the House of Lords and they will doubtless be made again. I fear that my speech is about to fall into that category. Whatever the achievements of the Joint Committee that the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) chaired, it does not appear to have changed anybody's mind. The Committee members who spoke in the debate and were so anxious to hear the House's views on their proposals have not hung around to listen to them.

Joyce Quin: There are exceptions.

Mr. Maples: I exempt the right hon. Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Joyce Quin). I thought up the line when she was absent from the Chamber and I could not resist using it.

I believed that I was in a small and rather beleaguered minority in opposing an elected House of Lords, which reflects the zeitgeist, but I took comfort today from an article in *The Times*. It reported that the Prime Minister was joining my side—or, at least, that I was about to be on his side. I shall put renewed effort into the cause because the Prime Minister's presidential style of government has given a new meaning to the phrase, "one man, one vote". If he casts it in the way in which *The Times* reports, our cause is won. Indeed, he will not need me to help him on his way.

An elected House of Lords is a bad idea because it will challenge the authority of the House of Commons. That is inevitable. It already has considerable powers that it does not exercise, for example, to delay Government business and oppose business in the governing party's manifesto. If it is elected, there is no reason to abide by self-restraining conventions. It is highly unlikely that a group of 300, 400 or 500 elected politicians will issue the self-denying ordinance of not becoming interested in subjects above their station about which they are supposed to show no curiosity.

On some occasions, the democratic legitimacy of an elected House of Lords could be greater than ours, for example, at the fag-end of an unpopular Government who were about to lose the next election and used their dying days to ram through an unpopular measure. The House of Lords might be right to oppose it; it might have the public on its side and be more representative of views outside. That clash would come—in a month, a year or 800 years. I suspect that it would happen before 800 years had passed.

Mr. Savidge: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Maples: I want to finish the point. My right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague)

[Mr. Maples]

rightly said that unless we accept that an elected House of Lords will be stronger and more assertive, we should not embark on that course. Sooner or later, the Government in the House of Commons would have to negotiate with an elected second Chamber to get its business through.

Mr. Bryant: They do that already.

Mr. Maples: Not for long, because of the Parliament Acts and the self-denying ordinances.

We must ask a few more questions. What sort of people would be elected to the second Chamber? They would comprise those who cannot get into the House of Commons. The intelligence and ability hurdle for entering the House of Commons is not of Olympic proportions. The people who cannot even surmount that hurdle—those who cannot get selected or elected—will run for the second Chamber.

We must also consider who would vote for the second Chamber. The council tax in my county of Warwickshire is on average £1,000 a year and one third of the electorate bothers to vote in county council elections. The county council has genuine power: it runs the education system and social services. A second Chamber will hold little interest for electors, especially if elections are conducted on the basis of proportional representation. The numbers that turn out to vote will resemble those for parish council elections.

We must also consider the sort of people who will be elected. Under a system of proportional representation, we will get a bunch of party politicians. A party list is guaranteed to weed out independents and mavericks. The few independents and mavericks in this place get in by slipping through the net. However, they will not slip through the net of a party list, which will be full of professional party hacks who are not good enough to get in here.

Those elected will get ideas above their station. They will want secretaries, researchers, salaries and office costs allowances. Soon they will want a pleasant building with an atrium and rented trees suitable to their status. They will then, heaven forbid, begin to clutter up the Pugin Room, where they will give their constituents tea. We will not be able to get in there. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] That is the clincher.

The Joint Committee set five criteria: legitimacy, being representative, no dominance by one party, independence and expertise. They are mutually incompatible. How can a party list provide independence and expertise? It might grant legitimacy, however, and mean that the elected person is representative. At present, we have a good deal of independence and expertise in the House of Lords, and, I agree, precious little legitimacy or representativeness, but we are living in cloud cuckoo land if we think that we are going to get all five by some magic formula. We will not get that; we will have to settle for one system or the other.

We cannot have a part-elected House. It must be either elected or not. We could leave it roughly the way it is, although I would take out the remaining hereditary peers and detach it from titles. I do not care what we call it; it could be called the House of Lords or not. I certainly have enough of the moderniser in me to see that there is absolutely no legitimacy in hereditary voting rights in Parliament. If, however, the House of Lords is to have limited powers, as is proposed, nominations are the way to go. I hate the idea of an appointments commission. The idea that we are reforming the second Chamber by taking away hereditary voting rights and putting the rights of nomination into some super-quango of the super-good and great is anathema to me.

I would like the Prime Minister to have that right, because he is accountable to this House and to the public. Traditionally, there has been a kind of self-denying ordinance on the exercise of that power, too, in that many in the House of Lords are people of genuine distinction, and the Opposition parties get a few people in there as well. I want this power to be out in the open where we can see it being exercised. No Prime Minister is here for ever, and one of the ways in which they destroy their reputation is by abusing their ability to put people into the House of Lords. Two or three of them have done this. I am not saying that the present Prime Minister will fall into that trap, although he has appointed some pretty odd people, but we need to see that power out in the open. I find it absolutely inconceivable that we should accept the idea of some quango with a couple of retired permanent secretaries, a diplomat, the master of a university college and the senior partner of McKinsey and Company, for example, deciding who will have the right to vote on legislation. I would rather have someone who was democratically accountable to this House, namely the Prime Minister, making that decision.

If, as I suspect will happen, the Prime Minister and I lose this argument—or, if not the argument, at least the vote—and end up with an elected second Chamber, I would like to make a suggestion. If we want to make it really different, let us have no Ministers in there. Let us make a rule that there should be no Ministers and no party patronage. There would then be a really good chance of the upper House behaving more like one of the American Houses of Congress and being a genuine check on the Government. It would be a genuine House of Parliament that could scrutinise the Government and whose Members would not be worried about their careers or what the Whips might tell them to do. That would provide something different. It would be my second choice, but it would almost be worth paying that price.

I say to those hon. Members who are in favour of a second House: do not elect a pale imitation of this one, with people who are half as good, who are hacks, elected on some party list, while getting rid of all the independents, the mavericks and the people who really know about things. Let us at least create a House that will scrutinise the Government.

To return to my main point, I am happy to remove the hereditary peers, but, apart from that, I would like to see the House remain pretty much as it is, with pretty much the same powers as it has now. A change to an elected House will lead to a demand for greater powers, but if we want to keep it as a revising Chamber we should do so. I do not know who first said that to every great problem in politics there was an answer that was simple, obvious and wrong, but this is a case of that.

5.33 pm

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge): There seems to be a preconception among some hon. Members that elections confer legitimacy whereas appointments do not. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples), because I hope to show that an appointment system can satisfy all the five points relating to desirable qualities described in the report, while elections would not. I shall remind the House of those five qualities: legitimacy; representativeness; no domination by any one party; independence; and expertise. To those, I would add a sixth, which I was surprised to find missing from a report that seems to have been dominated by Members wanting an elected House: accountability. That is not on the list, but I would add it to the qualities needed in the system that I propose, because it is an essential element.

I am not going to be told that I am somehow not a democrat because I oppose elections. As has been pointed out in this debate, we are not a 100 per cent. pure democracy in the United Kingdom. In fact, we believe that democracy is so important that we should not dilute or devalue it by applying it to every aspect of public life. It is reserved for decision-making bodies such as local government, the devolved Assemblies and the House of Commons. They are the democratic institutions. In my view, a second Chamber of Parliament should not be put into that category. As has been said, people would be reluctant to come out and vote for such a Chamber if they were not electing a Government, so we would have all the problems of low turnout and dissatisfaction that apply to other institutions now.

I should explain why I oppose elections, because I count myself as a democrat. Elections for a wholly elected second House would inevitably be fought along political lines, whatever electoral system we might invent for it, and it would therefore divide along political lines. In other words, we would be creating another House of Commons. Much loved though this institution is out there, I see no great demand among the electorate for the creation of another House of Commons.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Does my hon. Friend accept that the present House of Lords—largely appointed, admittedly, by means of a system for which no one here has argued—divides on political lines? Does he not believe that any future appointed House would find itself doing broadly the same?

Mr. Clelland: Not always. My hon. Friend should have let me finish: I am going to suggest a system for appointments that may prove attractive to Members who favour election but who are not too blinkered.

We are faced with the possibility of another set of elections to fight and finance. I find no great appetite in the political parties, or indeed in the electorate, for either prospect. We are faced with the possibility of yet another tier of national politicians representing the same people in the same Parliament—MPs who will have fought on the basis of a manifesto and who will have a mandate. Regardless of any attempts to gerrymander the elections, they will have a mandate and they will have constituents to look after.

Mr. Bryant: How does my hon. Friend deal with the fact that the Labour party manifesto committed us to a more democratic and representative House of Lords?

Mr. Clelland: I hope that, if I am given an opportunity to do so, I will demonstrate that that is what we will have.

With an electoral system, the interests of party politics would undoubtedly dominate in the second Chamber. Frustrating and defeating the Government would take priority over scrutiny and good, considered advice. Such a system would be a recipe for parliamentary gridlock—as other bicameral arrangements around the world have shown—and for bad government. Moreover, as has been said, there is the issue of office costs, allowances, secretaries, salaries and so forth.

Members should also bear it in mind that, out there in the constituencies, two or more MPs may represent the same electors—MPs in the same Parliament too busy scoring points off each other to look to the needs of their constituents. That will apply particularly when elections are approaching, on both sides. We can imagine an Opposition Member using this place to try to embarrass opponents.

What of the five qualities in relation to for elections? Elections cannot guarantee no domination by any one political party. They cannot guarantee independence or expertise. In my view, a partly elected second Chamber would be even worse: it would have all the disadvantages of an elected Chamber, which I have just mentioned, while creating two classes of Member. We can imagine the cries of "Foul!" when elected Members are outvoted by unelected Members. It would be only a matter of time before there was a demand for a wholly elected Chamber, if indeed a majority were elected in the first place. That would, I think, become irresistible.

What, then, do I propose? I want the same as the Members who want elections. I want an end to the hereditary system, and an end to a Chamber dominated by patronage. I want all five of the desirable qualities, plus accountability, in the second Chamber. So why am I going to vote for an appointed second Chamber?

Let me make it clear to the Joint Committee that in voting for that I will not be voting for the status quo. In fact, I am disappointed that the Committee showed so little imagination in considering methods of appointment. I am also sorry that indirect elections did not figure in the final recommendations, although they were mentioned in the report.

I must emphasise that, in promoting and voting for a fully appointed Chamber, I will not be supporting the methods of appointment suggested in the report. I want a wider structure for the appointing bodies. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) should have given way to me earlier, for I would have agreed with him. The idea of an appointments commission has been tried and found wanting: all that we got were people like the commission's members. That suggests that, given such a commission, the composition of the second Chamber would be in the hands of those who appointed it. We would have patronage by the back door.

[Mr. Clelland]

The problem, as I see it, is that we started from the wrong place. We should have decided long ago what we wanted the second Chamber to be for. We should have decided what it should do before deciding who would sit there and how they would get there. The Joint Committee went some way towards dealing with that question, but it needs more consideration.

I agree with those Members who say that if the second Chamber is to become more embroiled in the legislative process it should be elected, but if it were to do that it would just become a duplicate of the House of Commons. What would be the point of that? Members may as well vote for abolition rather than creating another House of Commons.

There is a role for a properly constituted second Chamber, not as a check on the Executive, as has been suggested—that is the job of the Opposition and Back Benchers in this place—or as a duplicate of the House of Commons, but as an advisory, deliberative and scrutinising Chamber where debates on matters of national importance can be held in full public view, informing and educating. There would still be a role for the second Chamber in the legislative process but not directly. It could suggest amendments, as it does now, but we would not be obliged to consider them. Members in this House would pick them up and move them in this Chamber. We would get far less of what we get at the moment, which is a lot of political posturing and trying to upset the Government's programme. We would get meaningful, helpful amendments that commanded much more respect in the House of Commons.

To achieve that, we must have Members who command respect and are generally recognised as having expertise and experience. How can we assemble those experienced, knowledgeable, respected individuals, independent yet at the same time representative? It can be achieved by widening the responsibility for making appointments, by calling for representatives from bodies such as the Confederation of British Industry, the Trades Union Congress, religious and voluntary organisations, devolved Assemblies, local government and political parties, too—they are an important part of the national system.

The representatives would have a fixed term of office, following which they would either be replaced or reappointed, one third at a time. That would produce a Chamber that had legitimacy and representativeness. It would not be dominated by any political party. It would have independence and expertise. Its Members would be accountable to the appointing body that sent them there. It would be different from the House of Commons, a second Chamber preserving the primacy of the elected Commons but commanding respect in the country and among Members of Parliament.

Such a process of appointment has important advantages, as has been pointed out. Appointing bodies can be required to ensure proper representation of women and ethnic minorities, something that elections have failed to do and will continue to fail to do.

Julie Morgan: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Clelland: I do not have time.

We can be assured that the appointing bodies will wish to ensure that representatives are knowledgeable, able and can articulate their interests in the second Chamber. That will ensure that it is an effective and useful tool in our democracy. It need not be entirely divorced from the electoral process. Appointing bodies such as the devolved Assemblies may want to appoint representatives by way of indirect elections. In that sense, indirect elections could be introduced into the system.

Once the Government have tabled the motion to deal with the issue, which they have not done yet, it may be possible to table amendments to give clearer guidance to the Joint Committee on alternatives such as those that I have described. If not, I appeal to colleagues on both sides to vote for an appointed House, but on the clear premise that the Joint Committee must examine the contents of the debates, not just the results of the votes, and come up with a more imaginative and diverse system of appointments than is currently the case or is on offer in the report before us.

5.43 pm

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): I apologise to hon. Members, especially those on the Front Benches, for having missed some of the debate. I have been on Committee duty scrutinising the Government without much effect on the Communications Bill. That is relevant to what we are discussing.

It has been dispiriting and disheartening to listen to much of the debate. It was disappointing to hear so many Members advocate an appointments system of which Caligula would have been proud, and turn their backs on a truly democratic opportunity to reform the bicameral system of Parliament.

Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National party are firmly committed to the view that democracy must pervade any representation in this Chamber or the other place, so both parties have turned down opportunities to nominate while the present Gilbert and Sullivan farce continues in the House of Lords. We hold firmly to the principle that all Members of the second Chamber must sit as the result of an electoral process. If one is a democrat, one cannot believe anything else. We sit in this House as the result of an electoral process. Our legitimacy and accountability would be washed away if there were any suggestion of appointment from above by the great and good or of this place serving as a retirement home for people from the TUC or public bodies. That is a sure-fire way of creating a poor second Chamber for review and scrutiny.

We are not debating a bicameral system but a multi-cameral system—with the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, Northern Ireland Assembly and Greater London Assembly and with regional government for England yet to be introduced. All those chambers provide some scrutiny and, in some cases, legislation.

In reforming the House of Lords, we must address a multi-cameral, semi-federal system. Plaid Cymru wants the abolition of the other place and its replacement by a very different second Chamber. The Scottish National party does not even see the need for a second Chamber in Westminster because the Scottish Parliament fills that important role. The present state of devolution in the Welsh context means that much legislation is still rushed through this House—such as with changes to the criminal justice system and terrorism legislation.

A second Chamber can play an important role but it should not be based on heritage, patronage or any type of appointments system. A totally different second Chamber is needed, based firmly on election.

I was disappointed with the Joint Committee's report because the second Chamber cannot be divorced from its make-up, from which flows its legitimacy. At present, the other place provides a convenient excuse for the Government, who can claim that legislation such as the Bill on blood sports has become stuck in the House of Lords, even when that is not true. Ultimately, Government business always gets through. Cronies can be whipped in and independent Cross Benchers can be picked off at will. It is a political urban myth that the other place shows great independence of mind. There are great independents in the House of Lords but on the whole, until recently, its history was one of entrenched conservatism married to the occasional flash of reform.

I agree with the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), that any reformed second Chamber needs teeth to hurt, if not disable, the Executive. That means rejecting one of the Joint Committee's key principles—that the second Chamber must be constructed in such a way that it never has a Government majority. If we accept the principle of election, the Government would occasionally enjoy a majority in the second Chamber but that would be rare.

Mr. McCabe: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that an elected second Chamber should have the right to overturn legislation passed by the Welsh Assembly?

Mr. Thomas: Unfortunately, with its present make-up the Welsh Assembly does not have the power to initiate primary legislation so that situation could not arise.

It follows that, on occasion, any party could have a majority in the second Chamber—that could be the party of government or of opposition. The second Chamber should have much the same powers as now but entrenched more in a closer approach to a written constitution—in effect, a new Parliament Act. It should be able to initiate or amend legislation and to veto secondary instruments. It should also have the right to debate all matters relating to public life in the United Kingdom.

In that context, all those things are subject to the primacy of the House of Commons, and we would need a new Parliament Act to sketch that out. Of course, the Commons would also need to retain complete control over Finance Bills, but more important than delivering some form of in-built non-majority for the Government or the Opposition is the principle of divorcing the second Chamber completely from the Executive and the judiciary. No Member of the reformed second Chamber should be a member of the Government. Elections to a second Chamber should be for a period longer than that for elections to this House—perhaps for a period of two Parliaments—and they should not be constituency-based. Members of a second Chamber do not have a constituency role in this regard. Rather, we should take the opportunity to introduce regional proportional representation and look to what has happened in Scotland and Wales, where PR has changed the nature of the Chambers, particularly by introducing younger people and many more women.

Despite some of the comments made during this debate, such a system would attract independents and prominent individuals to stand for election to a reformed second Chamber. As the experience of city mayors in England shows, it is not always the case that such reforms lead to the Labour party's, or any other party's, getting its candidate in place. We have seen that in London, Gateshead and all over the place in England. The second Chamber will have its element of strong independence.

Joyce Quin: What the hon. Gentleman said is not true of Gateshead.

Mr. Thomas: I accept that correction, but it was certainly true of other places in the north-east.

It follows that the second Chamber should be much smaller—certainly no more than 200 Members—and that its Members should be remunerated for their work in scrutinising legislation and the Executive, but not for constituency work. Constituents are well provided for by MPs, Assembly Members, Members of the Scottish Parliament, and—perhaps increasingly—regional assembly members.

Mr. Clelland: The hon. Gentleman suggests that Members should be elected. Presumably, people will elect them, and people are constituents. We cannot avoid that link. If we are to avoid the link between people and election, where is the democracy?

Mr. Thomas: The hon. Gentleman has to realise that what I am advocating is a regional PR list involving large regions, in which it would be very difficult to deliver such constituency business. We could employ the same convention that exists in this House, whereby a constituent with a problem is simply referred to the Member of Parliament for that constituency. That is what happens informally in the relationship between MPs and AMs, and it could well be done in the new reformed second Chamber. Of course, the final part of the reform is the establishment of a supreme court. We cannot allow Law Lords to remain within that second Chamber.

A completely elected second Chamber is the most democratic option, but I must admit that the principle that all Members should be elected allows some flexibility. It is possible to conceive of the indirect elections to which reference was made, and perhaps the National Assembly or the Scottish Parliament could have a small role—certainly no more than 20 per cent.—in an elected second Chamber. However, I prefer a completely elected second Chamber. Patronage and nomination by political parties is totally unacceptable in the 21st century, as we try to establish a reasonable level of scrutiny of the Executive's performance.

The final element is ending automatic membership of the Lords for Church of England bishops. They should not be barred from standing for election—I should love to see bishops stand for election—but they should not be Members by right.

Andrew Mackinlay: What about a gender balance among bishops?

Mr. Thomas: Indeed. All faith communities should be able to stand for election to a reformed second Chamber. Of course, the Church in Wales has been disestablished for more than three quarters of a century.

[Mr. Thomas]

Such reform would provide a new and very different model from the House of Lords. It is true that it would cost more, but that is the cost of democracy. I understand that the House of Lords has a nice throne and lots of gold; I am sure that we can find somebody to sell that off, which would create a little income stream to provide for the initial establishment costs of a more democratic House of Lords.

We would also need to change the name. This is the House of Commons, and "Commons" means communes or communities. We are indeed "the House of Communities", and I hope that the second Chamber will become either "the Senate", or "the House of the Nations and Regions of the United Kingdom."

5.54 pm

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I feel a heavy responsibility in this debate: I am one of many Labour Members who support a more democratic second Chamber, but one of the few of them who have been called to make the case. I hope that some of my colleagues who share my view will have a chance to contribute to the debate. Down at the other end of the Palace, peers will read the report of our proceedings. They will not know how many Members who would have argued for democracy had they had the opportunity to do so.

It is important that we grab the opportunity to deliver a democratic reform of the second Chamber, not just because it is in the Labour party's manifesto, but because it goes to our sense of ourselves as a nation. For me, the key issue of principle is who chooses our legislature. I do not see democracy as a kind of bolt-on mechanism for delivering good government. It is a value that should inhere in our Government. Strengthening the democratic institutions of governance is a critical part of the process of expressing our values in practice.

When we vote on the options before us, I will not simply vote for my favourite option. I believe that it is incumbent on us to grab the opportunity to find a solution, so I will vote for all the options, however flawed, that offer a substantial element of election in the second Chamber. I am determined that we should not repeat the mistake that has been made so many times before, and lose the opportunity for reform because the perfect reform is not available.

Some have questioned whether the people share our commitment to democracy in this era of declining turnouts. Let me state explicitly that they do. Surveys of political opinion demonstrate a massive interest in politics, particularly following 11 September 2001. Where elections are hard fought, engage people in issues and make it easy to participate, that engagement is reflected in participation. Every time people are asked whether they want to elect the second Chamber, they say they do, in huge majorities—73 per cent. in the YouGov poll today, and 84 per cent. in earlier polls. Even when they were asked by Lord Norton of Louth whether they would prefer an expert on a particular subject to decide on a specific piece of legislation, or an elected Member, people said that they would prefer elected Members.

It is clear that that is what the people of Britain prefer. If we do not make sure that they remain in the driving seat for both Chambers, they will feel that their right to decide who runs the country has been rejected. We will confirm their growing suspicion of the political class.

Mr. Clelland: Does my hon. Friend recognise that the outcome of polls depends on the question that is asked? How does she imagine people would react if they were asked whether they wanted a Chamber full of experienced, knowledgeable people, or a Chamber full of MPs? What does she think the result would be then?

Fiona Mactaggart: That is almost exactly what Lord Norton of Louth asked. He asked in his question, which got the smallest majority in favour of elections, "What do you prefer—a specific expert or an elected person?" and people preferred the elected person. At every opportunity to ask people, they have made it clear that they want election.

There is a myth growing that the Lords are automatically better at scrutiny of legislation. I do not agree. The failures of this House at that function arise not from the fact that we are elected but from our working practices and Standing Orders. I confidently predict that the growth of pre-legislative scrutiny introduced by the present Leader of the House and the other changes that we are making through modernisation will hugely increase the rigour of scrutiny in the Commons.

I am grateful to the Lords for the way in which they pick over the detail of Bills. Some of the changes that they have made to Bills since I have been in the Commons have been changes for which I argued in the Chamber, but too often age and tradition have led the Lords to prevent reforms which are popular, such as the fox hunting ban, or which would end injustice, such as their failure to support the abolition of clause 28.

In the debate taking place today and tomorrow, claims will be made that we fail to scrutinise in this House because of the power of the Whips. But what power do Whips have? They do not have the power of hiring and firing. That is in the hands of our constituents. They have influence over promotion and opportunities to join Committees or study tours. However, such patronage is what underpins the whole existence of the House of Lords; it is at the heart of that place. I do not accept the assurances of some that if we find different methods of appointment, the super-quango route, they will be completely free of it. The opportunity for appointment to the Lords at present is used as just another goody by the Whips. I think that it would still be used even if there were an independent appointments commission.

If amending legislation were just a technical role requiring expertise, the people could choose to elect experts to do it. The power is not technical, and should lie with them.

There are many other things to commend in the Joint Committee report. Like every report on this subject, it concluded that the Commons, with its current mandate and its role in providing the Government, must be pre-eminent. That is one of the reasons—that we provide the Government—why we do not risk the deadlock that troubles other legislatures. But I cannot accept the view put forward earlier today by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) that somehow appointed members are automatically more expert advocates of the liberties of the people. If we look at those bicameral systems that have appointed second Chambers, do we believe that their citizens' human rights and civil liberties are better defended? Let me go through the list: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Bahrain, Belize, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burundi—I have not even got past the Bs. The point is simply made by the list.

Before I conclude, let me share my concern about the size that the Committee report suggests for the second Chamber. I think that 600 is extreme. Other hon. Members have compared it to chambers such as the Chinese legislative assembly, the only one that will be bigger. It is striking that the next largest second chamber is almost exactly half the size proposed—that of Spain, with 324 members. The vast majority of second chambers have around a hundred, or maybe slightly more. We should not make the mistake of having a huge second Chamber. There is an argument for having a large Commons. When we have constituency elections, and that constituency link, our electors can grab us, as they do me in Tesco's in Slough and say "And another thing, Fiona, why haven't you sorted out this?" That is one of the powerful—

Mr. Tyler: Has the hon. Lady recognised the significance of the comment in the Joint Committee's report that

> "A fully elected House suggests a smaller House since members might be expected to be largely full time",

which makes her point for her?

Fiona Mactaggart: Indeed, it does. I hope that at the end of our deliberations the Joint Committee will go back to that question. If we get rid of the embarrassment of an inherited element in the second Chamber, I do not want us to have the embarrassment of an over-huge second Chamber.

I hope that the House of Lords will ensure that the views of the Commons are respected in its vote. I do not think that the debate has been wholly reflective of those views. It is disappointing that so many of the minority of the Commons who do not support elections have been called to speak, because it is inevitable—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Lady has now made that point twice. I remind her that if she wishes to criticise the selection of the Chair she must do so on a substantive motion.

Fiona Mactaggart: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for reminding me of the proper procedure. I will follow it in future.

Inevitably, the decision of the members of the House of Lords will be affected not only by their belief of what is best for the governance of Britain, but by the effect upon their lives. What decision we make about the future of the second Chamber will hugely affect the lives and working conditions of the people who are in it now, not just people for whom election was fine when they were in this place, and who suddenly found that it was not quite what they liked as they went down the Corridor, but also other people who argued compellingly for elections before they themselves were appointed to the House of Lords. Lord Lipsey used to be a clear advocate of such elections, and is an example of someone whose views have been changed by experience. I urge people to listen to the view expressed by the majority in this House.

At the beginning of my speech, I said that I intended to avoid making the quest for the perfect solution the enemy of the good solution. I have a perfect solution for the composition of this Parliament's second Chamber, but I have not put it forward, as we need a solution around which we can unite. The process that is under way gives us an opportunity to make that happen. All of us will have to make sacrifices, but we can make progress towards a modern democratic state in which the power is in the hands of the people. If we miss this opportunity, we may not have another for the next 100 years.

6.5 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): I apologise to the House for missing the early part of the debate. The point that I want to make has hardly been made this afternoon, although it has been alluded to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), the shadow Leader of the House, and by my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples).

We are losing sight of an essential problem with our legislature. We should not spend so much time arguing about the mix between elected and appointed Members in the other place. We should direct our attention to the quality of those Members, and their ability and wish to hold the Executive to account.

The problem with our House of Commons is that too many hon. Members want to become Ministers. It was said that every private in Napoleon's army had a field marshal's baton in his knapsack. In the same way, every young Member of Parliament coming to the House believes that he has a ministerial red box in his knapsack.

Mr. Greg Knight: As you did.

Mr. Leigh: My hon. Friend says that I did. That is true of many of us, although we may deny that ambition. The point was put charmingly by Mr. Speaker when he was bidding for his present post. He said that he had never become a Minister, but also that no one had ever asked him to. Many of us share the genuine and proper ambition of playing a part in governing the country, but what does that mean for Parliament? The Executive is drawn from the legislature, and that means that it has overwhelming power when it comes to getting its will through the House.

How often do hon. Members seriously test the Executive? We have wonderful debates on occasions like this, and free votes on hunting and other matters, but how many first-class debates are there on substantive issues, with Government policy at stake? How often are substantial numbers of hon. Members prepared to rebel against their parties? It is very rare, as too many of us are former or would-be Ministers.

When we consider the composition of the other place, we should not concern ourselves only with the mix. I am a Fabian gradualist in this matter. The consensus seems

[Mr. Leigh]

to be that we should get rid of the hereditary peers. I am a traditionalist and therefore regret that, but that appears to be the settled will of this House. I am prepared to have an elected element in the other place, but the problems with that solution have been set out.

For example, who will comprise the elected element? I believe that it will be made up of people who cannot get into this House. People will probably be elected on a closed list of proportional representation. That appears to be the Executive's favoured way to proceed. There are many devices—lengthy terms of election, or different forms of election—by which we can try to prevent them being party hacks. I support all those options, but the fundamental problem remains. It is that the people who go into the other place will be young 30-somethings or 40-somethings. The other place will have a Whips' Office, and those people will be ambitious to become Ministers.

A model exists for the second Chamber—the American model. That may not be popular with the House. Colleagues seem to reject any argument based on what the founding fathers tried to achieve in the 18th century. Should we spurn the model of the US Senate? Members there are elected for six years, and cannot be part of the Executive. They therefore have genuine independence, which we do not have in this place. It is inevitable that we shall move to some form of election for the upper Chamber, but I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon. Please, let us not replicate what we have here; we must not create a new cadre of young, ambitious politicians. We must try to ensure that there are independent men and women in the second Chamber.

Mr. Forth: May I remind my hon. Friend and the House of the words of James Madison, one of the founding fathers? He said that the idea of the upper House was

"to protect the people against their rulers"

and the

"transient impressions into which they themselves might be led".

Surely, that makes the argument as well as anyone could.

Mr. Leigh: Yes, especially when it is expressed in the fine and eloquent English spoken by so many of the American founding fathers in their debates.

Members of the upper House may be elected, but let us make them genuinely independent. I agree that it is useful for the Executive to be able to appoint technocrats as Ministers in the other place. Sometimes, there is a shortage of people who are capable of holding the position of Attorney-General and suitable people can be drawn in from the legal profession and placed in the House of Lords and made Ministers. I am happy with that arrangement.

However, perhaps the elected element of the upper House should be told that they cannot become Ministers—although I realise that the Government will not give us a final answer on that. We could create an assembly, such as the US Senate, that can advise and give consent, for example, on senior appointments such as permanent secretaries or ambassadors. Such a House would have limited powers; it could scrutinise measures without being too party political. Its appointed Members would be in their senior years, and their personal ambition would be spent. They would want to consider the detail of our legislation.

One of the finest Members of the other place, Lord Renton, has been a Member of this and the other place for between 50 and 60 years. In his 90s, he is still working in the House of Lords, tabling amendments. What a great man. We want more people like him, who are not personally ambitious. We want such people to be the elected Members, not young ambitious politicians who are thinking only of themselves and wanting to become Ministers.

6.12 pm

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), the Chairman of the Joint Committee, and all its members for bringing us their report in a timely fashion. Their critics claimed that the Joint Committee was established to kick the issue into the long grass. The critics have been proved wrong and, instead, the report offers options on which the Committee was able to agree, with the promise of further work to fine-tune and develop the process if the House votes firmly—as I believe it will—for a second Chamber with a majority of elected Members.

The effrontery and brass neck of some Opposition Members never cease to amaze me. In opposition, they plead that we need to bring the Executive under control, yet for 18 years, while they were in government, they did everything possible to ignore the legislature and to ensure that the Executive remained over-mighty. It is good that they have changed their minds.

The Opposition failed to mention, however, that this debate is a sign that the Commons are seeking to establish their power and credentials against the will of the Executive as expressed in the White Paper. Labour Members told their Government that the White Paper was unacceptable, so the Joint Committee was set up. We are holding the debate because this House has concern for parliamentary democracy. That is why we need reform of the second Chamber and democratic elections to it.

I should like the second Chamber to be 100 per cent. elected, but I appreciate that, for the sake of consensus, I may have to settle for 80 per cent. or, perhaps at worst, 60 per cent. If 80 per cent. of hon. Members voted for 80 per cent. of the second Chamber's Members to be directly elected, there would be no need for me to support any lesser option because it would be very clear that the broad consensus in the House was in favour of that proposal.

Much play has been made of the fact that those who do not want the second Chamber to be directly elected want total appointment or most of its Members to be appointed. I am surprised that hon. Members—some of them are my right hon. and hon. Friends—lack the confidence to allow a second Chamber to exist with the powers that it broadly has now while making both Houses of Parliament democratic. I have the feeling that a large element of democracy is being interpreted through the perspective of the benevolent despots of the

19th century, who at the time were regarded as a step forward but who certainly did not have a lot to do with concepts of democracy.

The idea that wholly or mainly electing the second Chamber will somehow lead to conflict with this House is not upheld by history or experience. There can be such gridlock in the United States because its constitution was framed exactly to prevent the Executive from becoming over-mighty. That was a deliberate choice of the founding fathers and James Madison, who, perhaps more than anyone else, can be regarded as the writer of the American constitution, wanted it that way, as the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) has kindly pointed out to hon. Members. However, other second Chambers around the world do not challenge the first Chambers. In fact, the Canadian second Chamber, which is appointed, has proved to be the most difficult for that country's first Chamber.

Mr. Greg Knight: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that temporary gridlock is sometimes a good thing if it leads to better scrutiny and better legislation?

Mr. Griffiths: I do not deny that that can happen, but I am trying to make a point about the opposition to a democratic second Chamber. I do not call it an upper House. In fact, one of the historical problems is that the House of Commons was the junior partner for much longer than it has been the senior partner. The earlier reference to Old Sarum reminded me that the House of Lords owned the House of Commons at one time. We have swept all that away. We have taken about 100 years, from the first Reform Act of 1832 to the legislation under which women over 21 got the vote in 1928, to create something akin to a modern democracy in this country.

A fellow Celt, Lloyd George, was instrumental in significantly reducing the power of the second Chamber, and we now have the opportunity, led by the Leader of the House, who is a fellow Celt, to finish the job that Lloyd George began. Let us set aside the argument about permanent conflict because it is not true. With another Parliament Act, we could ensure that the House of Lords has the job of scrutiny and bringing the Executive to account and, yes, let us ensure that no Minister sits there because that will help that process.

I have also been rather upset by the way in which one or two Members have almost denigrated us in comparison with experts in the other place, which is not fair. There are plenty of experts on a diverse number of subjects on both sides of the House who are as good as any in the upper House. In relation to the experts in the upper House, it is a pity that the Joint Committee did not have an attendance register of the appointed life peers to show us which of those experts were regular attenders and which were not. I am sure that we would find that most of the life peers were not regular attenders. If we want those particular experts, they can be called before Select Committees or Committees considering drafting legislation.

Jim Knight: Does my hon. Friend also agree that if a political party wants to have such experts in a second Chamber, it would be perfectly open to it under a list system to nominate those experts to appear on the list, so that they can be elected as part of the democratic process?

Mr. Griffiths: Yes. With a wholly or mainly directly elected second Chamber, it will be up to the political parties to act responsibly in drawing up their list of candidates to make sure that they achieve representation across the United Kingdom, which will help to reflect the make-up of our land.

Julie Morgan: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Griffiths: I think that I have already given way twice, which is the accepted number of times. May I give way again, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman can certainly give way again, but he will get no additional time for it.

Julie Morgan: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is very worrying that those Members who support nomination have implied that that is the only way of achieving good gender representation? Does not he agree that if the political parties want women in Parliament and in power, they are able to ensure that?

Mr. Griffiths: Under the new legislation, there should be no reason for that not to be done.

The Joint Committee was wrong to suggest 600 Members: about 200 should be an absolute maximum. In that context, the issue of cost should not be a problem. When people talk about the cost of democracy, they are perhaps wavering about the value of democracy. We should push ahead and have a wholly or mainly elected second Chamber and trust in our political parties and our judgment to get the job done. The fact that we have held this debate today shows that we are already making some of the right decisions about bringing the second Chamber into the 21st century.

6.23 pm

Mr. Bill Wiggin (Leominster): The most outstanding contribution in this debate has probably been from my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young), who said that this was a question of Parliament against the Executive rather than the Commons against the Lords. I am speaking on the basis that, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." My experience of the Animal Health Bill was that the other place was extremely effective in holding the Government to account and editing the Bill to such an extent that it became quite—sadly, only quite—acceptable.

Jim Knight: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Wiggin: I am afraid that I have only a short time.

If we elect a second Chamber, the consequence will unquestionably be to introduce competition. If we have elections, we must have something for which the voter must vote. If we elect on the basis of proportional representation, we will introduce compromise to the

[Mr. Wiggin]

system. It would be a huge mistake to introduce election. If we do so on any system apart from first past the post, the whole system will be based on compromise.

Legitimacy is not the key to better government. I agree with the earlier comments that squaring the circle will be impossible. What we need is wisdom. If legitimacy is considered to be more important than wisdom, it will not be long before the Parliament Acts are repealed, and one political party could, after a landslide, occupy both Houses. That would create a risk for the minorities in this country. We must also consider which House provides the best form of government. At the moment, it is clearly this House but, if the system is changed, which House will be the best one to sit in if we want to make a difference?

The most important result of the proposal relates to cost. As Members of Parliament representing our constituents, probably the most significant thing that we can do is to restrict the amount of money spent on the democratic process outside this House. We need to ensure that, when we spend money on elections, it is spent wisely. Establishing an elected upper House would not necessarily provide the wisdom that is so important. It is absolutely vital that, when we are given the choice, we act like Solomon and choose wisdom.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The winding-up speeches must begin at 6.30 pm, so I ask the hon. Gentleman whom I am about to call to respect that fact. I call Mr. Lazarowicz.

6.26 pm

Mr. Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith): I shall speak in support of an elected House of Lords, and, in so doing, I will respond to those arguments that have been made in this House and outside that suggest that we should not have an elected House of Lords because the public would be bored by the prospect and would not turn out in the elections to it. That is a counsel of despair. Of course, we should all be concerned about declining turnouts, but are we accepting that they are a permanent state of affairs in British politics? Are we really suggesting that we could not get the British public to take an interest in elections to the upper House? After all, it will take important decisions that will affect their daily lives. Are we really suggesting that people in Britain are somehow inferior in their intelligence and ability to understand the political process than people in the United States and many parts of Europe who frequently vote for lower Houses, upper Houses, local government, mayors, provincial government, regional government and, sometimes, for many other elected officials—and sometimes also in referendums.

There is a problem with voter turnout, but the question that we should ask is what is wrong with our political process; what is wrong with us and with the system that means that people do not turn out to vote? The answer may not be dramatic. It might not have anything to do with the fundamentals of our democracy. Much of the problem, I suspect, is the result of the way in which we organise elections. We now know from experiments that we can achieve turnouts of as high as 60 per cent. even in local government by-elections because of the use of postal votes. In the summer, I came across a community council in Scotland, roughly the equivalent of a parish council in England, where the turnout was 64 per cent. in the elections to it. The Electoral Commission's recent report on the Scottish elections of 1999 showed that, of the 40 per cent. or so who did not vote in the Scottish Parliament elections, two thirds did not do so because they had commitments at work, faced travel problems or had moved house. It was not that they had chosen not to vote; it is rather that the electoral system does not take account of the way that people live now. That is one of the issues that we must address if we want to encourage higher voter turnout.

One sure way of bringing about greater public disillusionment with the political process would be to replace the hereditary House of Lords with an appointed House of Lords that would inevitably, under any system of selection, be dominated by members of the political class and predominantly by members of the metropolitan political class. They might be joined by a few adjuncts from places such as my city, which sometimes tends to function as an offshore island to the metropolitan establishment. That political class would not face the ultimate sanction of removal from the upper House in the way that we all face removal from this Chamber.

I support a House of Lords that is elected by a form of proportional representation. I do not accept the argument that it might present an unreasonable challenge to the authority of this House. I do not think that it is a bad thing to place restraints on a Government who are elected by a minority, as most Governments inevitably are, which sometimes allow the majority public opinion to hold back the minority voices. My hon. Friends who are enthusiastic about the untrammelled power of the House of Commons and a Government based on a minority of the popular support should remember what happened not so many decades ago when a Government with a big majority in the House and a minority of popular support in the country did not act in a way that we found acceptable.

6.30 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The issue is in danger of becoming a sorry saga. Let us hope that the debate, which has been positive, will save the Government from themselves and put us back on the right track.

I recall the heady days of the Government's manifesto in 2001, to which one or two other hon. Members referred. In it, the Labour party said:

> "We are committed to completing House of Lords reform, including removal of the remaining hereditary peers, to make it more representative and democratic".

It made that commitment to the voters before the 2001 election. In the White Paper that appeared later that year, the Labour party said:

> "The Government will welcome responses to this White Paper by 31 January 2002. It intends to introduce legislation thereafter, incorporating decisions on the issues raised in the consultation."

One would have thought that we were set fair for a move towards reform, which the Government told us was important to them and the electorate, yet a year on we are still debating the principles of the direction that we should take.

We have been arguing about the labours of the Joint Committee for some time and are duly grateful that it has completed the first phase of its work. However, in the same document of November 2001, the Prime Minister himself said:

> "A credible and effective second chamber is vital to the health of Britain's democracy . . . The Government is determined to proceed with this wider reform of the House of Lords."

The introduction said:

> "The Government intends to complete reform of the House of Lords early in this Parliament".

Fine words, but what has happened? In *The Times* today we read an astonishing account, which no one has denied:

> "The Prime Minister is to scupper demands by Labour MPs for a majority elected second chamber by making a statement declaring his opposition to a 'hybrid House': part elected, part appointed."

Even more astonishingly—although knowing the Prime Minister as we now know him, perhaps it is not much of a surprise—it goes on to say that the Prime Minister

> "will make plain that he has always favoured and continues to believe in a wholly appointed chamber."

Where did all the words about democracy come from in the manifesto and the White Paper? The Prime Minister obviously did not read them because otherwise he would not have let them go ahead.

We have come from heady aspirations—words of determination—to where we are now. In fairness, the House has been given the chance to debate the issue yet again, and the Lords will debate it today and tomorrow. We will then have the votes. But what happened to the House of Lords as an affront to democracy, an idea that was bandied around fairly freely before 1997? Are we to believe that a wholly appointed House would not be an affront to democracy? One or two hon. Members had the gall to argue that an appointed House would, mysteriously, be pretty well democratic. Although they have tried hard to explain that, I have yet to come fully to terms with it. That is the sort of argument to which hon. Members have been driven.

However, in contrast to that negative aspect of the debate, the House has demonstrated that it is capable of positive thought. I was encouraged by the tone and content of our discussion. Perhaps to the surprise of many, the House has demonstrated that we have the collective capability to look at such an issue and try to find as much common ground as possible. The Leader of the House made a plea for common ground in the early stages of the debate, and I am sure that he will be as gratified as me that nearly every Member who has spoken said that although they had a distinct preference, they would now be prepared to consider something other than that preference in the cause of advancing the debate. I think that that is new, and I am sure that many of my hon. Friends feel the same. Although they may have strong, fixed views, they want something to happen and, to that end, are prepared to support something other than their preferred option. I expect that that will be reflected in the voting that will take place in about two weeks.

Mr. Foulkes: While the right hon. Gentleman is talking about voting, will he confirm for the avoidance of doubt that Conservative Members will be given a completely free vote?

Mr. Forth: Yes, I am more than happy to do so. Some of my colleagues have asked about that, so I shall remind them of our policy—we do have one—and push my luck even further and invite them to vote the same way as me.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Forth: In a moment, but I want to help my hon. Friend first. For the avoidance of doubt, I shall vote for a 100 per cent. elected House and an 80 per cent. elected House. Unless I hear something persuasive to the contrary in our debate or the debate in the other place, I will probably vote against all the other options.

Sir Patrick Cormack: When my right hon. Friend last addressed the House on this subject, he told us that the party had no policy, but announced one within 48 hours, much to the annoyance of many of us. Will he confirm that some members of the shadow Cabinet take the same line as me and others, that they will have the same freedom, and that he will not attempt by any means to force his extreme views on other people?

Mr. Forth: My answer is yes to all those questions. I am surprised that I am now being criticised by a senior distinguished colleague for our having a policy, which is a new departure. However, nothing in the House should surprise me.

Tony Wright: I cheered up when the right hon. Gentleman said in his new spirit of consensus-seeking that people had changed their position and were willing to support views that they had not supported before in the search for common ground. However, curiously, he went on to say that he will not support the one bit of common ground established by all the surveys—the 60 per cent. option.

Mr. Forth: My consensuality only goes so far. Good Lord, this is enough of a transformation—I cannot reinvent myself overnight. As I said, I am prepared to study our debate, although I have been here for most of it. I want to hear what the Lords say—I hope that we all do—so that we can take a view on it. There is a great willingness to move. Even the Leader of the House said in his opening remarks that he was "80 per cent. in agreement" with my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), which set the tone for the whole day. For example, most people who expressed a view about the size of the upper House—this may not please the Chairman of the Joint Committee and his colleagues—were not happy with the idea of 600 Members. We have had bids ranging from as few as 100 to 300, which is our policy. Although there was not very much support for the Joint Committee's position,

[Mr. Forth]

Members expressed helpful and positive views, and I am sure that we shall find a fair amount of agreement on the issue.

Similarly, in the argument about length of term for Members of a revised upper House, although not everybody was happy with a period of 15 or 12 years, the Leader of the House suggested that he would be prepared to contemplate a term equivalent to two terms in this House, which could be interpreted as eight or 10 years. Again, many Members would coalesce around using a figure of that magnitude to differentiate the term of office of Members of an elected upper House from that of Members of this House.

I also detect movement on the argument about a hybrid Chamber. Although some months ago most hon. Members would have preferred either a wholly appointed or an elected House—that was certainly my position—there is now a lot of agreement about hybridity and perhaps a more relaxed attitude to it, whether the proportions are 80:20, 20:80, 60:40 or whatever.

Sir Patrick Cormack: How could that have been my right hon. Friend's position when the official policy was 80:20?

Mr. Forth: I took that position before the policy was 80:20.

My right hon. Friends the Members for Richmond, Yorks and for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young), the hon. Members for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) and for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright), and the right hon. Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Joyce Quin) all said in terms that they believed that a hybrid Chamber of some sort could be acceptable if we did not end up with their preferred solution. I exonerate my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) in that regard, as he said that he could not quite go that far. None the less, those contributions show the tone of this debate.

Mr. Bryant: I do not know how much the right hon. Gentleman knows about gardening, but will he confirm that hybrids are the strongest plants around and that there might indeed be significant added strengths in a hybrid Chamber?

Mr. Forth: We must be careful before getting into genetic modification, but I shall accept the hon. Gentleman's advice.

What has emerged from this debate is that most hon. Members are prepared to give some consideration to hybridity, but the debate will continue to be about where the majority membership should lie, which is a more difficult issue. Although the percentage that should be elected or appointed is the crux of the matter, a surprising degree of movement has again been evinced in that respect by hon. Members as varied—if I can put it that way—as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) and the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths), who concluded his speech a few minutes ago. There were indications that hon. Members would be prepared to consider the 80 per cent. option or the 60 per cent. option to which the Chairman of the Public Administration Committee has just alluded. We can see that there is a fair degree of agreement.

Unfortunately, such agreement breaks down elsewhere, and it is obvious why. Time and again, Opposition Members heard arguments about the need to strengthen Parliament as a whole, as opposed to the Executive. Not every Labour Member agreed with those arguments, which illustrates a point that has repeatedly been well made and of which I am, perhaps, a living example: the perspective that one has when sitting on the Government Benches is often rather different from that which one has when sitting on the Opposition Benches. There is nothing wrong with that; it happens. Those of us who have moved in one direction or another will have had that experience and will understand it.

However, that does not belie the fact that there has to be a serious debate about our view as parliamentarians on the relationship between the Executive of the day and the Parliament of which we are all honoured to be part. That must be part of our debate about the upper House. We cannot have that debate in isolation. A key aspect of a number of speeches was that, in looking at the relationship between an upper House and our own House now or in future, we must look very seriously at our relationship with the Government. We are the providers and sustainers of the Executive. Although one of our important responsibilities is to scrutinise, examine and hold to account the Government of the day, the fact that we provide and sustain the Government must inevitably compromise that role. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to look to an upper House to give strength and relevance to that role. I hope that that will be part of what we do—a view expressed in a number of speeches. If we can try to avoid a party element or overlay in that respect, so much the better, although whatever we say about it must be informed by who we are and where we sit in the Chamber.

I want to ask the Government and the Parliamentary Secretary, who will wind up the debate, a few questions about where we go from here. Several speakers have alluded to that. Do the Government still have a policy? Sadly, it appears that they do not. I use the word "sadly" because we believed that they had a policy, but now it seems that they do not. It is all very well for them to claim that they had a policy to which no one signed up and that they therefore no longer have one. It is all very well for the Lord Chancellor to say on the radio that he was no genius, could not work matters out and would therefore leave it to the Joint Committee. However, that leaves us a mite rudderless.

The Lord Chancellor also referred to

"the nonsense of a hybrid House".

I hope that he will study today's debate and thus be better informed.

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one reform would receive overwhelming support in the House and in the country? It is that the House of Lords should consist of 0.16 per cent. of elected Members—the Lord Chancellor.

Mr. Forth: The hon. and learned Gentleman is a braver man than me in reducing the Lord Chancellor to 0.16 per cent.

We are entitled to know the Government's view of our current position, our starting point and, more important, our destination. The Leader of the House tried to be helpful by saying that there would be votes in two weeks and reference back to the Joint Committee. However, the Government's terms of reference to the Joint Committee will be crucial. In his opening remarks, the Committee's Chairman told us that it was constrained by the terms of reference that it was given initially. It is therefore important to know the terms of the Government's marching orders to the Committee, if they intend to issue such orders, for events after the votes in the House of Commons and in another place.

It is crucial to know what happens if the House of Commons produces a centre of gravity—to use the Leader of the House's favourite term—which is radically different from that of another place. I suspect that that will happen. If two different views are expressed at each end of the building, what will the Government conclude? Where will that lead us, via the Joint Committee, in future? What is the timetable? Much work remains to be done. After reading the Joint Committee report, one wonders whether we are near any sort of conclusion.

Will there be Ministers in a reformed upper House? The answer is crucial, not only to the constitutional dispensation, the relationship between the Houses and the Government of the day, but to whether we could have directly elected but relatively independent Members in an upper House. Without Ministers, that could happen because there would be no promotion ladder, arm-twisting or Whips, whose position would be rendered meaningless. I should like to add that issue to the list that the Joint Committee will consider. I hope that it will examine it seriously.

I hope that the debate will help the process. Its tone gives ground for optimism, but that could be tempered by the Government's attitude. If the report from *The Times*, which no one has refuted, about the Prime Minister's attitude is accurate, I am profoundly pessimistic about the process. It is up to Labour Members to do their best to ascertain what is happening. If they are unhappy, they should use their influence. We have done our bit in the debate. We must wait and see what Members of another place have to say, but in the end, as always, it will be for the Government to decide where they want to take us, how they will get us there and how they will work with and through the Joint Committee. I hope that the Parliamentary Secretary is about to give us as many answers as he can and that he will not leave us believing that the Government are divided, have no clue about their destination and do not want to get us there.

6.49 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): Our debate has been excellent, good humoured and, at times, humorous. That is not unusual when we discuss a matter that will be subject to a free vote. I am in a slightly unusual position because we are considering a subject about which the Opposition have a policy, whereas the Government have no view, at least on composition. I emphasise that because some hon. Members have drawn attention to a couple of recent newspaper articles, referred to dark forces or to people who want to kick reform into the long grass. I assure them that that is not the case. The Government do not have a view on the vote that we shall have in two weeks' time on composition, but they are certainly of the view that they want to get Lords reform concluded in this Parliament. That was a manifesto commitment, and we shall try to stick to it.

I would like to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) and the other members of his Committee for their excellent work. I also want to thank those members of the Committee who have contributed to the debate this afternoon, as well as non-members who have done so. I am sure that they have all heard the interesting and constructive contributions made by a number of right hon. and hon. Members, including the shadow Leader of the House, which will help them in their further work when we have got over this interim stage of voting on the composition of the upper House.

It is worth noting that, in this debate, a large majority of Members have spoken in favour of a largely or wholly elected upper House. In doing so, they have reflected opinion in the country and the findings of the surveys that have been conducted previously by Members of this House. They have done so from a variety of perspectives—some, such as the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) and the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), from what sounded like a Damascene conversion to the need for a stronger check on the Executive and for more pluralism, as the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe put it. That is very nice, coming from two former Members of a Government who commanded a massive majority not only in this House but in the other place—something that the Labour party has never done. But we should welcome converts where we find them.

The same point about the importance of checking the Executive was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Tony Wright), who has at least been consistent in his concern about the power of the Executive. Drawing on the excellent report produced by his Public Administration Committee, he also extended the democratic argument. The desire to extend democracy has been shared by most right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken in favour of a largely or wholly elected House. They include the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young), my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Joyce Quin), the hon. Members for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), for Salisbury (Mr. Key), and for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) and my hon. Friends the Members for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge), for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths), and for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mr. Lazarowicz).

I have to say that, when I go round schools in my constituency—as I do increasingly, following the introduction of citizenship studies—and when I travelled abroad in my previous capacity as a Minister in the Foreign Office, I have had a problem, in a personal capacity, explaining to emerging democracies in other parts of the world, for example, that I was trying to sell the value of democracy while defending a system in which the membership of one of the two Houses of our Parliament was based solely on appointment.

[Mr. Ben Bradshaw]

The right hon. Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot) called a mixed or hybrid system with a majority of elected Members a fudge, although he said that he would vote for it. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) used a different term, calling it a sensible compromise. He, and a number of other hon. Members, saw an opportunity to improve the regional and, in some cases, the Scottish and Welsh representation in the upper House. Coming from a part of England that is seriously under-represented in the other place, I share that desire.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) and my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) tied their banners firmly to the abolitionists' mast, with, in the case of the former, a wholly appointed Lords as his second preference. He was supported by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newport, East (Alan Howarth), and my hon. Friends the Members for Western Isles (Mr. MacDonald) and for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland), and by the anti-election contingent on the Opposition Benches in the form of the hon. Members for South Staffordshire (Sir Patrick Cormack), for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples), for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir Teddy Taylor), and, I think, for Leominster (Mr. Wiggin), although I was not quite clear whether that was his position. I think that he is nodding in assent.

Much of the opposition to elections, particularly on this side of the House, seems to stem from a fear that a more democratic second Chamber would challenge the supremacy of this place. I have to tell my hon. Friends that that fear was not shared by other hon. Members who spoke this afternoon, or by others who share the desire to maintain the supremacy of this place. Nor was such a fear expressed in the report of the Public Administration Committee, which looked into this matter.

Mr. Leigh: Will the Minister consider the possibility that elected Members of the other place will not become Ministers in order to ensure that independence?

Mr. Bradshaw: That, along with a number of other interesting suggestions made this afternoon, will be first and foremost a matter for the next stage of the Joint Committee's work. Anything recommended in its final report will of course be taken on board by the Government.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Newport, East and my hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge introduced the idea of syndicalism. The Joint Committee might like to take that up as well, but it does involve enormous challenges and complications. That is another reason why it too was not favoured in the Public Administration Committee's report. Interestingly—as far as I am aware; I was not present for a couple of speeches, although I watched them on my screen—no speaker supported the idea of electing a minority element.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire, the hon. Member for North Norfolk and one or two others were troubled by reports that the Government might seek to delay change. Some raised a couple of recent media reports that the Government, or members of the Government, were retreating into favouring an all-appointed second Chamber. I can reassure them that that is not the case. As I said earlier, the Government have no policy on composition, and there will be a genuinely free vote. I must, however, tell those who have that fear, wherever they may be in this House, that the best way of preventing—or avoiding—such an eventuality is for this House to send the clearest possible message in a fortnight, when the options will be voted on.

Jim Dowd (Lewisham, West): I am somewhat confused. There will be seven votes a fortnight from now, and my hon. Friend says that we should send the clearest possible message. How on earth can we send a clear message on the basis of seven votes producing seven results—for if any are identical I shall be astonished—and what on earth do we expect the Committee to do after receiving the seven results if the House gives it no clear direction on priorities?

Mr. Bradshaw: I am sure my hon. Friend knows that Members will have more than one vote. They will not have to vote for just one option; they can vote for all seven.

I was simply reinforcing a point made by a number of other speakers. However much individual Members may favour a particular solution, it is important for them to be willing to compromise a little so that the Commons can send a strong signal of its settled will—not least to make the Joint Committee's further work easier. My hon. Friend is right: if we send mixed messages, or if the results of the votes on the two most popular options are very close, that may make the Committee's life much more difficult.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: Will the Minister confirm that the Government still hope to resolve the issue by the end of the current Parliament? Will he perhaps indicate to the Joint Committee that it might seek to conclude its labours by the end of the present Session, so that that timetable seems realistic?

Mr. Bradshaw: It would be extremely helpful if the Committee could do that—and yes, the Government still intend to wrap up the issue during the current Parliament. I sincerely hope that we can.

This is not the last word on the Joint Committee's report, of course. A similar debate has been held in the other place today. I am sure that Members of this House will want to read *Hansard* to see what was said there, just as I hope that their lordships will pay close attention to our proceedings today and to some of the excellent speeches that were made. We will return to the issue on 4 February. We will have a shorter debate, Members will have a chance to vote on the seven options, and the Joint Committee will note what has been said and resume its work. I look forward to that debate, and hope we can send both the Committee and the House of Lords a good strong signal.

It being Seven o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed without Question put.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made.

That the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Mr Robin Cook relating to Select Committees (establishing a Select Committee on the Lord Chancellor's Department) and the Motion in the name of Mr John McWilliam relating to the nomination of the Lord Chancellor's Department Committee not later than one hour after commencement of the proceedings on the first Motion; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; and the Questions may be decided, though opposed, at any hour and the Orders of the House of 28th June 2001 and 29th October 2002 relating to deferred Divisions shall not apply to them.—*[Mr. Jim Murphy.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

KAVA-KAVA

Ordered,

That the Kava-kava in Food (England) Regulations 2002 (S.I., 2002, No. 3169) and Medicines for Human Use (Kava-kava) (Prohibition) Order 2002 (S.I., 2002, No. 3170) be referred to a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation.—*[Mr. Jim Murphy.]*

NATIONAL CARE STANDARDS COMMISSION

Ordered,

That the National Care Standards Commission (Fees and Frequency of Inspections) Amendment (No. 3) Regulations 2002 (S.I., 2002, No. 3211) and Domiciliary Care Agencies Regulations 2002 (S.I., 2002, No. 3214) be referred to a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation.—*[Mr. Jim Murphy.]*

NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 116(1)(Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

That—

(1) the Northern Ireland Grand Committee shall meet at Westminster on Thursday 6th February at a quarter-past Two o'clock; and

(2) at that sitting:

(a) the Committee shall take questions under Standing Order No. 110 (Northern Ireland Grand Committee (questions for oral answers)); and

(b) at the conclusion of the business appointed for consideration, a motion for the adjournment of the Committee may be made by a Minister of the Crown, pursuant to paragraph (5) of Standing Order No. 116 (Northern Ireland Grand Committee (sittings)).—*[Mr. Jim Murphy.]*

Question agreed to.

Broadcasting (Wales)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jim Murphy.]*

7 pm

Ian Lucas (Wrexham): I am pleased to secure this debate and to welcome my hon. Friend the Minister from his long hours in Committee. I am sure he is glad of the change of scenery. I hope not to detain him too long.

I want to talk about radio and the proposals on access radio in the Communications Bill; to set out the position in my constituency of Wrexham and in north-east Wales; and to explain why community-based access radio is important and why the money must be found to set it up as soon as possible.

Talk-based local radio is a great success story. It is a trusted medium. It encourages debate. It helps local community groups to publicise their activities. It has an especially valuable role for the disabled. It is popular with the elderly, who may live alone and use it for company. Alongside music-based stations, it can create a vibrant community radio sector. The young tend to listen to music-based commercial stations. The rest of us rely on talk-based local radio.

I was brought up in north-east England. I recall the early days of BBC Radio Newcastle, which, along with regional television, was an important part of the region's identity. It created its own personalities and is greatly valued still. The BBC has a prized reputation in local radio, which was at the forefront of establishing its reputation as impartial and strongly based in local communities.

Talk-based radio is so successful that the BBC has 40 local radio stations in England. In Scotland, the BBC sees the value of local news bulletins across the nation, with places as disparate as the borders and Shetland given dedicated time on the airwaves. Northern Ireland has two stations, with Radio Ulster and Radio Foyle serving the community together, but for reasons that I cannot understand Wales is a different story.

The commercial sector focuses on music, the youth market and advertising, but the BBC in Wales is not interested in local radio. It seems institutionally incapable of responding to constituents' demands that they are entitled to as good a service as listeners across the border in England. My constituents are very angry about it.

I wrote to my local newspaper canvassing views on the absence of a local talk-based station for Wrexham and for north-east Wales. These are just some of the responses:

"Why when I listen to Radio Wales do I feel a stranger in my own country?"

"BBC Radio Wales thinks 'Wales' is just Cardiff and the Valleys."

"Since Radio Clwyd finished, there has been a void in people's lives."

"We tune in to Radio Stoke and Radio Merseyside which have a far superior service than Radio Wales . ."

"My wife and I listen to Radio Shropshire, which we think is an excellent example of what local radio should be, closely followed by Radio Merseyside."

[Ian Lucas]

Saddest of all is this:

"I am only one of many I know who do not listen to the radio any more."

Before 1995, Clwyd had its own radio service. Radio Clwyd is still fondly remembered in Wrexham and throughout north-east Wales. It was taken off but the BBC justified its action in 1995:

"Despite the fact that Radio Clwyd no longer exists as a separate entity there is a substantial provision of Clwyd news as an 'opt out' from the main Radio Wales service . . . In fact listeners in Clwyd can hear some more 40 news bulletins a week."

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): I would not contradict the hon. Gentleman's experience, which is that a community will tend to adopt a local radio station and feel empowered as a result. That can never happen if listeners are simply slotted into a station with which they do not feel any connection.

Ian Lucas: That is absolutely correct. Regrettably, the position is even worse now than in 1995. Last year, the BBC removed the opt-out news bulletins in north-east Wales. By contrast with the position in Scotland, Wales has no opt-out news bulletins from the BBC but it provides a single service through BBC Wales for the whole of Wales.

It seems that the BBC in particular has an inability to recognise that Wales is a nation having distinct regions. I began to wonder why my constituents were getting such an inferior service from the BBC. Could it be a lack of money? According to the corporation's annual report and accounts for 2001–02, £18 million was spent on radio in Wales. That compares favourably with Scotland, which received £19 million for a larger population and a wider geographical area. So why does Scotland have six sets of geographically based local news bullets when Wales has none?

Could it be that the regions within Wales were too small? The BBC funds a separate Radio Guernsey and Radio Jersey service, despite listening audiences of 50,000 and 74,000 respectively. Radio Shropshire, which I know well, provides an excellent service to an audience of 361,000—fewer listeners than would be covered by a service for north-east Wales, which has a population of more than 391,000.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the BBC provides Radio Cymru, the Welsh-language news programme in Wales, which better reflects the geographical diversity of Wales? Does he also accept that south Wales has a number of independent radio stations, from Radio Ceredigion to Real Radio and Valleys Radio? Perhaps he should encourage his constituents to put in a bid for the licence for the Wrexham area.

Ian Lucas: I will come to that. Radio Cymru is a national, not a local, radio service. I am making the point that there is no locally based radio service from the BBC in north-east Wales. There is a commercial station but it is music based and focused on a younger listening audience. My constituents—particularly the more elderly—are saddened that they are not served by a community-based talk station.

The BBC is in denial. The corporation tells me that there is no demand for a station in my area, but hundreds of Wrexham people signed a petition, so I beg to differ. Members of Parliament get a taste of the response to a particular issue in their communities. When I wrote to the local newspaper, my letter produced a flood of correspondence by constituency standards. I have received more letters on that subject than on the issue of war with Iraq. There is a definite demand in my constituency for the type of service that it currently lacks. The BBC also told me that there is sufficient local news on Radio Wales for the people of north-east Wales, but my constituents tell me they listen by choice to Radio Shropshire, Radio Stoke and Radio Merseyside instead, because they feel that they get more information about their local community from those stations.

I am not the only person to pursue this issue. Constituents of mine who have been writing to the BBC about this issue for some seven years have contacted me. Mr. Glyn Roberts handed me a correspondence file dating from 1995. It pains me to say this, but it seems that the BBC is simply not interested in providing a local radio service for my constituents. There is a commercial sector in north-east Wales—Marcher Sound is the local radio station—but it allocates limited time to community news. The prevailing tendency in the commercial sector is to get organisations to pay for "what's on" features.

There is also an increasing tendency for commercial stations to franchise national broadcasting. In my own area, between 9 am and 3 pm the commercial station actually buys in a national broadcasting programme, which prevails during that period. So there is little time for discussion of local issues, but the huge demand for local radio to which I have referred remains. The current structure for local radio stations is clearly inadequate. Neither the commercial sector nor the public service sector—in the form of the BBC—is delivering the service that my constituents want, and nor are they getting the response from broadcasters that they would like. I therefore greatly welcome the new proposals in the Communications Bill for access radio, which should be used to fill this void.

A project at the North East Wales Institute of Higher Education—the local university college in Wrexham—is considering applying for a restricted service licence, with a view to providing a local community station. Of course, under current legislation such a licence is valid for only a limited period, unless it applies only to the university or only to the local hospital. So the current system is inadequate, and I greatly welcome the Government's broadening access to local radio through the access radio initiative.

However, it is clear that access radio will have to be funded, and my concern is that the Government might be intimidated by the BBC in terms of going after the substantial funds of public service broadcasters. Such broadcasters use that money to deliver services, but at the moment they are not delivering them. The BBC spends some £4 million a year on BBC 2W, a digital service in Wales that many of my constituents cannot receive, and which very few of them ever see. Indeed, the viewing figures are so low that they cannot be measured, and they are certainly not publicly available. That money could be used to fund access radio. I am rather unclear as to how access radio will be funded under the current system, and I urge the Government to consider the issue of funding from current public service pots.

I want to conclude by pressing two main points on the Government. First, I greatly welcome the provision of access radio, and I am keen that the Government should proceed as fast as possible, because I know that demand for it exists in my community, and that there are those in my community with the skills to deliver it. The current legal and institutional structures for the radio that we need in north-east Wales are not in place.

Secondly, I want the Government to review the £18 million that is being spent on radio in Wales, and at the £4 million that is being spent on BBC 2W, and see whether the public service remit of the BBC is being extended far enough to provide for local radio in the community. As a great supporter of the BBC for many years, I have been disappointed by the lack of responsiveness to my community and to the call from communities throughout north-east Wales for a local radio station. That case is long-standing and has been argued passionately for many years by many of my constituents. The present structures will not deliver what we need. I urge the Government to create the necessary structures, and to let us have the money to create a new radio station for Wrexham and north-east Wales. Please let that be done as soon as possible.

7.15 pm

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Dr. Kim Howells): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian Lucas) on giving us the opportunity to discuss the subject. There is a good story to tell about access radio. I understand my hon. Friend's case. I have always had the impression—I may be wrong—that, from the perspective of Cardiff, north-east Wales is the most remote part of Wales. That is interesting. In many ways, it is a geographical phenomenon.

We have some distinguished Members in the Chamber tonight. I am lucky enough to have been in the House for 14 years, so I remember previous discussions. The issues of north-east Wales are somehow seen as different from those of the rest of Wales. I shall try to explain why. I suspect that that perception has something to do with the traditional economic links that exist with Cheshire, Chester, Manchester and Merseyside, and to a certain extent with the west midlands.

As someone who has always been a news junkie and who watches the media carefully in Wales, I have always had the impression that north-west Wales is different. In a sense, it fits the politics of Cardiff much better. It often involves issues that are dear to the heart of many people who have traditionally—not necessarily now—worked in the media in Cardiff. The issues of mid-Wales and south-west Wales also receive quite a bit of attention. In south-east Wales, we get an enormous amount of attention, and we always have done so. That is partly an effect of population concentration, geography and so on.

The issues raised by my hon. Friend tonight are important. I was not familiar with the comparisons with the number of local radio stations in England and Scotland, and the two in Northern Ireland. There is always a kind of complacency in Wales. After all, we are 2.9 million people. We have had an effective broadcasting industry in south-east Wales, but until recently—until Menna Richards took over at BBC Wales in Cardiff—we have always been a little reluctant to admit that we live in a large geographic area; it is not large compared to England or to Scotland, but it is in terms of population. We have tended to lose parts of Wales in that respect, and not to take advantage of huge technological advances that have been made. We should have done that before now.

My hon. Friend picked on one of those advances—access radio. He spoke, for example, about the possibility of the university college in Wrexham being a home for it. Who knows? It could be elsewhere.

I am lucky enough to have in my constituency one of the 15 pilot projects in Britain with an access radio station—GTFM Radio, based on the Glyn Taff Farm estate, probably one of the most deprived wards in my constituency. It has become an enormous success. It has a very limited signal, and that is a difficulty in Wales, because of the topography, but I am starting to get letters from people who write "I cannot receive the signal. Why cannot I get GTFM?"

Mr. Chris Bryant (Rhondda): And in the Rhondda.

Dr. Howells: They cannot get it, because it has limited power. It is a limited experiment, but a very important one.

I urge my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham to ensure that his constituents, perhaps led by him, put together a good bid for access radio. In my constituency it is run part of the day by the people who live on the Glyn Taff Farm estate and for the other part of the day by students of the university of Glamorgan. There is a mix of talk and music, with sufficient variety to attract people. It now has a very solid audience and is very popular. It has also pointed the way. Those involved want to know how they can make it bigger and how it can be sustained without falling back on the usual problem in Wales—reliance on a benefit culture. It bodes very well for the future. It could well be a way of encouraging entrepreneurial businesses within communities.

I was lucky enough recently to open a local television station in Southampton that has a very strictly controlled, limited signal footprint. I asked how they were obtaining the money to do it and the reply was "For the first time Indian restaurants can advertise on television. They could not do it on a regional level." There are dangers, because these are very much public interest, non-profit-making organisations. We do not want to start taking advertising from very valuable commercial stations, some of which my hon. Friend mentioned. We have to sort that out. We are dealing with it in the Communications Bill.

Clearly, to use the awful jargon that is employed, in the ecology of broadcasting there is a real part for access radio and local radio. The Radio Authority has taken matters forward and has licensed 15 pilot projects covering a wide part of the United Kingdom. I was very surprised to discover from my hon. Friend that there was not one in north-east Wales. There cannot be one in every part of the country. Fifteen pilot projects mean a

[Dr. Howells]

pretty big pilot operation. The pilot projects will report back and we shall try to judge their effectiveness and see how we can take them forward.

I have a feeling that that is the way we must go in Wales. I understand my hon. Friend's disappointment over the way in which he has been dealt with in the past by BBC Wales. For the reasons I set out at the beginning, it is a difficult matter. A guy I climb with is from Mold. Mold might as well have been in Moscow for kids who grew up in the valleys of south Wales; it was a long way away, very difficult to get to. I began to discover north-east Wales when I had to go to Llandudno for Labour party conferences. Some people used to tell me to go right the way round and then back along the A55. They said that was the fastest way. I do not think that it is. In terms of geography, it is an isolated area. It should not be isolated, because it is one of the most dynamic areas of Wales. If we look at any index we shall see that it is an area where industry has grown fastest, where the rates of employment are now very high, where there is a real go-ahead feeling in the communities, and yet I do not think that that has been reflected in the importance it has been given in terms of the broadcasting ecology or whatever expression we want to use.

I think that the motive in respect of local radio has to come from the grass roots. A good case has to be made. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham has spoken to Aled Eirug, who is in charge of news in Wales, and that he has corresponded with Menna Richards and others. I know those people and believe that they want to help. However, the arguments still have to be made. They can be made, and they should be made.

I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham is in the worst possible position in the Chamber, geographically: if I turn around to speak to him, I turn my back on your good self.

I think that broadcasting in Wales will be very different in the future. The explosion of technological innovation has opened up all sorts of possibilities for how people might communicate by radio. We might even start calling it the wireless again—my mother has never stopped using that term, and neither, by the way, has my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

People in Wrexham and north-east Wales must continue to make the argument that they have every right to have the matter of north-east Wales discussed through the public media. They must not depend on articles in the *Liverpool Post* or items carried on BBC Wales' excellent services. They must be able to enjoy the sort of dynamic interaction enjoyed by the areas that my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham described in his speech. There is no reason why that should not happen, and I am confident that it will.

In the Communications Bill, the Government are trying hard to ensure that Ofcom, the new regulator, sees radio as the vital medium that it is. I am one of those hon. Members who gets most of his news from the radio. I do not have time to read the newspapers. As a result, I understand the vital importance of radio, and not just of Radio 4 or Five Live, excellent services though they are. People want variety—music that they can associate with, and the ability to speak to each other across the airwaves. That is the great strength of GTFM in my constituency, and of similar stations elsewhere.

I give my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham this undertaking from the Dispatch Box: I will do everything that I can to help him in his quest to get better radio coverage and services in north-east Wales. I know that many people, in this Chamber and outside it, and in BBC Wales in Cardiff, share his ambition. The problem is not insoluble, and I am glad that we have had the opportunity to discuss it this evening in the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 22 January 2003

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Sub-Saharan Africa

1. **Mr. Win Griffiths** (Bridgend): What plans she has to visit sub-Saharan countries in the next three months to discuss development criteria and objectives. [92204]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): I visit Africa on a regular basis and I have returned overnight from a short visit to Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya. The objective of our development partnerships is the sustainable reduction of poverty. While in Ethiopia, I signed a 10-year partnership agreement to that end.

Mr. Win Griffiths: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Everybody will be aware of her huge commitment to trying to ensure that sub-Saharan Africa is helped to the greatest possible extent. Given the continuing human rights problems in Zimbabwe and its involvement in the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, what more does she think can be done to try to get peace in the DRC, and to get a restoration of human rights and democracy in Zimbabwe?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Zimbabwe has withdrawn its troops from the Democratic Republic of Congo, as have Rwanda, Namibia and Angola, which is progress. Since South Africa became involved, considerable progress has been achieved on agreeing a transitional Government of all the different factions. That Government are not quite in place, and there is still a lot of destabilisation by forces that support genocide in Burundi and Rwanda. We are getting progress, however, and we are doing everything that we can to drive it forward.

In Zimbabwe, everything that a British Government could have done to try to prevent the ever-growing crisis, abuse of human rights, the stolen election and, now, horrendous levels of hunger, has been done, through the Commonwealth and the European Community, without success. The present situation is catastrophic. We are doing all that we can and are a major player in keeping people fed and cared for. My view is that this catastrophe will bring down the Mugabe regime, but at the cost of terrible suffering for the people of Zimbabwe.

Mr. Andrew Mackay (Bracknell): The Secretary of State is absolutely right to describe the situation in Zimbabwe as catastrophic. Is there any possibility of airlifting food to opposition areas, as has been requested by some opposition leaders in Zimbabwe?

Clare Short: No, that is not needed. Of course, the regime's delivery of food is deliberately biased and used politically: food is not brought to those villages and places that dared to vote as they wished. But the UN delivery is not politically biased: it is made according to need, but it is faced with all sorts of political problems, and even fuel shortages, which make it a very difficult operation. In addition, HIV levels are so high that people are very weak. For the UN, the key shortage is not enough money in the international system. We have put in a lot, and I have written to Development Ministers across the world about it. There has been some improvement, but we must keep the pipeline full. I am afraid that the recovery will take a long time.

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): My right hon. Friend will know that the news coming out from Zimbabwe indicates that the position continues to get more critical every day. Many of the people there are suffering from famine, and the regime's treatment of its people is increasingly appalling. What discussions is she having with South Africa and other countries in the region about what they can do to help the people of Zimbabwe get free of the current appalling regime?

Clare Short: As my hon. Friend can imagine, I and other Ministers have had discussions with other Governments across the world and in Africa about what can be done. To date, however, our record is not successful. My energy is devoted to keeping people fed. Seven million people out of just over 11 million people in Zimbabwe are in need of food aid. As I have said, one third of the adults in Zimbabwe have HIV, which, when people are malnourished, quickly triggers into full-blown AIDS, making them sick and deepening their lack of ability to farm. The situation is terrible.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): President Mwai Kibaki is a man whom I have known and admired for more than 30 years. He is undoubtedly the personality best equipped to grapple with Kenya's very serious problems. I congratulate the Secretary of State on visiting him so soon after his triumphant election. Will she use all her influence to make sure that Britain and the international community give every possible help to Kenya, where we could change the situation, whereas we are not likely to have much influence on Zimbabwe?

Clare Short: I agree absolutely with the hon. Gentleman that the recent elections in Kenya were a great opportunity for that country, which has been in continuing economic decline because of the fundamental corruption under the previous regime. The new President is a great hope for the country. Unfortunately, he is in hospital because of a deep vein thrombosis, but I gather that the prognosis is good. However, I met his Government, who have inherited a massive hole in public finances, and they have a determination to reform. I have had meetings with the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the EU and others, and we are going to try to mobilise an enormous international effort to help the country forward, deliver to its people and deliver the reform that Kenya needs.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): Several hon. Members have highlighted the plight of Zimbabwe and the fact that its suffering is among the worst of the sub-Saharan nations. The Secretary of State has said that the Government are doing all that they can, so I am sure that she will agree that, when innocent Zimbabweans face rape, murder, torture, starvation and ethnic cleansing at the hands of their Government, it would be an insult to their suffering if Robert Mugabe were allowed to visit Paris in February as a guest of the President of France. Can she reassure the House that reports that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is planning to waive a veto on the granting of a visa to Mugabe are untrue and that her Government will raise at the European Foreign Ministers meeting on Monday the strongest objections to this breach of the sanctions?

Clare Short: I agree with the hon. Lady that it would be disgraceful if President Chirac invited Mugabe to Paris, but it is rumoured that he intends to do so. I do not know what view the Foreign Office will take on waiving the veto, but my view—it will not be my decision—is that it would not be right.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): One of the most optimistic developments in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa and the whole of Africa last year was the ceasefire in the very long-running war in Angola. I know that my right hon. Friend has visited the country and taken her usual tremendous interest in its problems. Can she assure me that the Government are doing everything that they possibly can to assist that country in this crucial phase in which it is emerging out of war and in which a whole range of issues needs to be addressed for the development of civil society and the economy and to help those who have spent their whole lives as soldiers to build new hopes, jobs and opportunities?

Clare Short: I agree with my hon. Friend that peace in Angola provides great hope for its people and will enable the country's rich resources to be better used. That will help that region of Africa. There has been fighting in Angola since the 1960s, when it began its fight for independence, and there has been civil war ever since. The war is over, but there is desperate hunger and need because of its effects. We support the international mobilisation that is having some success in getting fighters settled and in delivering food to the areas that could not be accessed before. Angola is a fertile country with masses of land and rich diamond and oil resources that have been very badly managed. There is desperate corruption, so there will have to be a big reform effort. However, we are very engaged, as is the international community, and I hope that the Angolan people will be able to look forward to a much better future.

Mrs. Spelman: Many sub-Saharan countries are classified as heavily indebted poor countries and qualify for debt relief. However, only six countries have completed the process of debt relief under the HIPC initiative. That means that 70 per cent. of those countries are failing to meet their targets for receiving debt relief. Of that 70 per cent., three quarters are sub-Saharan countries. Given that the HIPC initiative has missed the target by such a wide margin, will the Secretary of State now agree with Jubilee Research, Oxfam, Christian Aid and many other non-governmental organisations that it is about time that the HIPC initiative was radically overhauled?

Clare Short: No, I am afraid that the hon. Lady does not understand the HIPC initiative. Twenty-six countries are in receipt of debt relief, but are not paying their debts. Countries reach the point at which they are allowed to stop paying when they put in place a poverty reduction strategy and start a process of reform. Only six have reached the completion rate when the debt is permanently written off, but a much bigger number are receiving debt relief than she suggested. Her 70 per cent. figure is simply wrong.

The HIPC initiative has triggered a major effort for reform in some of the poorest countries, and we can all be proud of that. However, it now needs some adjustment. Partly because of the fall in commodity prices and the great rise in oil prices, there needs to be more generous debt relief to get countries to sustainability. There is another technical problem: the debt relief formula limits what countries can borrow, and Rwanda, Ethiopia and Niger are not being allowed to receive World Bank resources under the initiative. That needs correcting.

St. Helena

2. **Bob Russell** (Colchester): When she expects to make an announcement on the provision of an airfield on the isle of St. Helena. [92205]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Ms Sally Keeble): In talks in St Helena with the island's Government last September, it was decided to seek proposals for private sector participation. A prospectus is currently being prepared as a basis for inviting bids from interested parties. The future timetable should become clearer once proposals have been received and assessed.

Bob Russell: I am not sure whether that is good news and represents progress. We will have to wait and see what happens. May I remind the Minister that the island's expectations on this issue drag back for several years? Indeed, when a Commonwealth Parliament Association group of which I was a member visited the island in the summer of 1999, the airfield was top of the agenda then. I urge the Minister to get on and to make a decision one way or another because the island has been waiting years. I detect from her answer that the decision on the matter will be prolonged even further.

Ms Keeble: No, I am sorry, but the hon. Gentleman is wrong. I know from his repeated questions on the matter of his continued interest in it, but since he last asked about it, I think, two years ago, the island has decided in a referendum that it wants the airfield. The financing has been agreed and the prospectus, which we expect to be completed around about the end of next month, is being drawn up. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will keep asking questions about the airfield, but steady progress has been made and there is a firm route forward.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Given the long historical link between the island of St. Helena and the people of south Wales through the coal trade, in particular Barry dock, which was the biggest exporter of coal in the world, and given the lifeline that was provided by the SS St. Helena and the port of Cardiff, will my hon. Friend do all she can to ensure that the island gets the airfield it deserves?

Ms Keeble: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of the sea link. Even when the island gets the airfield, assuming that the financing fits together, it will still be important for it to remain involved in sea freight, which will probably be provided on a commercial basis. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has agreed that we will provide £26.3 million, so substantial progress has been made. We look forward to seeing the prospectus and to the project being carried forward.

Palestine

3. **Helen Jackson** (Sheffield, Hillsborough): What steps she is taking to tackle the humanitarian crisis in Palestine. [92206]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): We have increased our humanitarian aid to help meet the most urgent needs of the Palestinian people, but the cause of the crisis is political and no amount of humanitarian relief can solve the problem. We can only help to keep people going as the levels of poverty continue to grow. The crisis requires a political solution.

Helen Jackson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. She told the House last month that the levels of hunger in Gaza were worse than those in Congo. What discussions has she had with her Cabinet colleagues on how she will endeavour to keep those routes of humanitarian aid open in the event of a war breaking out in the region and on what impact such a war might have?

Clare Short: My hon. Friend is sadly right. Some 22.5 per cent. of Palestinian children under five are malnourished and the acute rate in Gaza is 13.2 per cent. That puts Palestinian children in Gaza between Zimbabwe and Congo in terms of children suffering from acute malnutrition. It is a terrible situation. On the middle east and the risks of military action, my Department is working on all the various humanitarian scenarios, the optimistic as well as the pessimistic. The pessimistic are pretty terrible.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Does the Secretary of State agree with those people who say that conditions in the occupied territories are like the aftermath of a terrible natural disaster, such is the destruction and suffering there? Apart from the immediate aid that she told us about, what discussions has she had with her European counterparts on the European Union-Israel agreement on human rights in Israel and the occupied territories? Are those rights being respected?

Clare Short: I do not agree that the situation is like a natural disaster; it is worse because it is caused by human agency and is continuing. The destruction of infrastructure because of military action is not the only problem. The closures mean that the economy is being squeezed to death. People cannot get out of their homes to work and are getting ever poorer as the weeks go by. It is a distressing and troubling situation. I have not had discussions with my European counterparts—I do not know whether the hon. Lady knows that the European Development Council has been abolished—but discussions are taking place across Europe on whether Israel is complying with the terms of the agreement.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the deliberate grubbing up of olive orchards in the occupied territories is not only illegal but exacerbating the starvation in those regions?

Clare Short: I agree that the situation is very worrying, and, of course, some of those olive trees, in a very ancient and holy land, are themselves ancient. The settlements in the occupied territories are illegal under international law, let alone the grubbing up of the olive orchards. I hope that we can get more energy into the international system to establish a Palestinian state; otherwise, I fear, things will deteriorate.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Given those appalling circumstances, how would the Secretary of State like the Government of Israel to assist?

Clare Short: Catherine Bertini has been on a humanitarian mission to the area and made recommendations for immediate help. The problems include even the blockage of humanitarian resources, and the action taken needs to be pulled back, just to enable people to get back to work. Money that belongs to the Palestinian Authority is not being handed over, although there has been a little progress on that. What we really need is a peace settlement and a commitment to the two-state solution, which is the way through. We need to move forward rapidly.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): My right hon. Friend has always championed the cause of strengthening good governance in recipient countries. What assurance can she give those of us in the House who are keen to see that aid used for the poorest people in Palestine that the money will not be salted away by the Palestinian Authority, which many Palestinians claim is subject to corruption?

Clare Short: There is no doubt that there have been problems of corruption and weak capacity in the Palestinian Authority. We have been involved in reforms in the Finance Ministry, which have been considerable, and in health, education, the economy, trade and the civil service. This claim of corruption is a red herring, which is used to try to damn the Palestinian Authority when what we need to do is get on with the development of the two states. We are doing a lot to reform the authority's structures so that an effective state can be built, and people need to get behind that effort.

Malawi

4. **Mr. Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland): If she will make a statement on the situation in Malawi. [92207]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): More than 2 million people in Malawi are currently in need of food aid, and that figure will rise to 3.25 million—a third of the population—between now and March, after which the 2003 harvest will begin. So far, the rains have been good, thank heavens. My Department's emergency assistance to help Malawi in its current crisis so far totals £34 million. I should say that the aid comes from my Department and British taxpayers, and I hope that they are proud of that.

Mr. Carmichael: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Does she share my concern that President Muluzi's priority seems to be constitutional change to allow him to get a third term in office rather than to address the problem of HIV/AIDS and the food crisis? What can we do to ensure that Malawi does not see the same political interference in aid distribution that we have seen next door in Zimbabwe?

Clare Short: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern about the campaign for the third term which took place as the crisis was developing. It is not for the UK Government to tell Malawi what to do, but we have said that if such a constitutional change is to be made, surely there should be a full and thorough discussion in which all the people of Malawi are allowed to express their view. Since then, work with the Government of Malawi, the UN institutions and ourselves has gone well, and the present organisation for keeping people fed is good. There is no prospect of behaviour like that witnessed in Zimbabwe, but Malawi is in very bad shape, and reconstruction to the point at which it does not have recurrent crises will take considerable time and requires much more reform.

Mr. Iain Luke (Dundee, East): I am sure that the Secretary of State will join me in welcoming the restoration of much of Malawi's grain reserves, which were sold off by the Government—the root cause of the famine conditions in the country. I am sure that she will join me also in congratulating the many charitable organisations, such as TearFund, which are doing a power of work in Malawi to counter the worst effects of the famine.

Clare Short: My hon. Friend is right that the grain reserve was sold off just before the crisis. It is untrue that that was done under pressure from the IMF—that is a false story. It appears that money was corruptly misplaced, and there are inquiries into that. I agree that charities are doing useful work, but so are the United Nations and the British taxpayer. I hope people understand that charities are at the end of the distribution mechanism. The biggest contribution is from taxpayers, and non-governmental organisations help to deliver at the end of the process. Without taxpayers, we would not get through crises like this. Charitable donations are welcome, but the people of Britain should be proud of what they do through their taxes as well.

Tony Baldry (Banbury): It is good news that the Government have been able to give so much money for food aid to Malawi. The other aspect of the situation there is the terrible scourge of HIV/AIDS, with 1 million orphans already. Does the Secretary of State agree that the international community must make a qualitative response to the huge number of AIDS orphans in Africa? Countries such as Malawi simply do not have the sustainable capacity to respond to the needs of their own orphans—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before the Secretary of State replies, could the House come to order?

Clare Short: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was difficult to hear the question, even on the Front Bench. The hon. Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry) was right—the problem concerns not just Malawi, but the whole southern African drought and is complicated by the position in Zimbabwe and Zambia on genetically modified crops. It is deepened by high levels of HIV infection, which has affected one third of the population. People become sick quickly, so they cannot get back to farming and there are more orphans. Recovering from this crisis will be extremely difficult—there has not been one like it before and, with HIV and all the other factors, it will take a long time to recover from it.

Afghan Refugees

5. **Dr. Phyllis Starkey** (Milton Keynes, South-West): What assessment she has made of assistance required by refugees returning to Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran. [92208]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): In 2002, 1.8 million refugees returned to Afghanistan, and more than 1 million are expected in 2003. They have come overwhelmingly from Pakistan and Iran. Each family receives help with transport costs and a little help to resettle from the United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees. My Department is about to send a mission to review progress on the humanitarian situation.

Dr. Starkey: Is my right hon. Friend aware of the concerns—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. It is unfair to the hon. Lady that there is so much noise in the Chamber.

Dr. Starkey: Is the Secretary of State aware of concerns that have been expressed by Christian Aid among others that if the refugees do not receive continuing support they will be tempted to return to the camps in Iran and Pakistan? In that context, what action is she taking to persuade the international community to deal with the $43 million shortfall at the UNHCR and the underfunding of the World Food Programme?

Clare Short: I do not fully agree with my hon. Friend or Christian Aid, if that is what it is saying. In Afghanistan, 5 million people are dependent on food aid, as there has been a fifth year of drought in the south. The refugees need continuing support, but so too does a large part of the Afghan population. The biggest problems are achieving stability outside Kabul so that the economy can start running again and dealing with the drought. The World Food Programme needs more money than has been needed for many years. The UNHCR also needs some more resources, but it is slightly overstating its claimed shortage.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): As my right hon. Friend knows, the Select Committee on International Development is publishing its report on the reconstruction of Afghanistan on Thursday. Does she agree with us that one of the main causes of instability among refugees is the continuing lack of security in Afghanistan and that there can be no proper reconstruction unless we address that?

Clare Short: I agree with my hon. Friend. When the Taliban were overthrown, they were providing arms and money to warlords, who are now strong, so getting stability throughout the country is difficult. There are plans for regional security teams in the big cities, but it would have been desirable if that step had been taken earlier. This is the crunch for Afghanistan—if we cannot get order and security, we will not get economic development and people who are still desperately poor will not have a better future.

Sri Lanka

7. **Mr. Elfyn Llwyd** (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): What recent discussions she has held with representatives of the Government of Sri Lanka on assistance to repair the infrastructure of the country; and if she will make a statement. [92210]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): I have met the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka and members of his Government on a number of occasions since the peace process began. At the Oslo conference in November, I pledged £8 million in assistance from my Department in 2003 for quick-impact projects to support the peace process. In 2002, we provided £2.6 million.

Mr. Llwyd: I thank the right hon. Lady for that reply. Recently, she told me that the Government were providing £2.6 million through the UN to help internally displaced people to be rehoused and resettled. Will she please impress on the Sri Lankan Government the need to remove the 40,000 soldiers who are currently occupying the Tamil homes and homelands in the north-east of the country? In the meantime, will she also have a word with the Home Secretary and ask him whether it is possible to impose a moratorium on deportations of Tamil asylum seekers until they can return home safely?

Clare Short: I think that there is real hope for a successful peace process in Sri Lanka. The war has continued for a long time and has become increasingly brutal. It is good to have prospects of peace in one part of the world; the situation is not secure, but there is real progress. The two sides are talking, we are very supportive of the process and I am very hopeful. I take account of the hon. Gentleman's suggestion to the Home Secretary and I shall ensure that it is conveyed to him. The movement of soldiers needs to be discussed and agreed between the two sides, but we would obviously expect progress in that direction.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [92189] **Mr. Nick Hawkins** (Surrey Heath): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 22 January.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I will have further such meetings later today.

Mr. Hawkins: Reports this morning suggest that the Foreign Office has agreed to a French request to lift the veto on President Mugabe travelling to Europe. Will the Prime Minister instruct the Foreign Secretary to impose the British veto at a meeting next week, as my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary has demanded?

The Prime Minister: We have made it clear that we support the sanctions that are in place against Zimbabwe. I understand that the meeting is to take place on Monday, and no agreement has been reached.

Q2. [92190] **Mr. Andrew Miller** (Ellesmere Port and Neston): May I tell my right hon. Friend—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ask him."] May I tell my right hon. Friend about the hard work that is being done by schools and West Cheshire college in my constituency? Will he assure me that the announcement made yesterday under the heading "14 to 19: Next Steps" relates to a genuine partnership that will help to develop opportunities for that age group? Will he also assure me and the House that it is not intended to be a step back towards segregation and grammar schools?

The Prime Minister: It is certainly not a step back towards segregation in any sense. What it does is provide greater flexibility in the curriculum and allow children who want to make a choice to take a more vocational route in doing so. It ends the one-size-fits-all approach that we have had until now. The other important thing is that it goes alongside the largest investment in education that this country has seen. In constituencies up and down the country, people can see the benefits of an enormous amount of education funding going into primary and secondary schools—all of which is, of course, opposed by the Conservative party.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): How does the Prime Minister expect anyone to support the Government's rag-bag of a higher education policy when everyone knows that it has been cobbled together after a major Cabinet row?

The Prime Minister: Because it provides a huge boost to education funding and allows us to carry on expanding the numbers in higher education. Let us be clear: the right hon. Gentleman has set his face against the expansion of that investment and has said that he is against more students being able to go to university.

Mr. Duncan Smith: It is a fine thing for the Prime Minister to say that he is for more people going to university, but how does he think he will achieve that when he is going to double student debt and put them off at the same time? Why does he not accept and admit that the Chancellor has held the Cabinet hostage on this issue? He may have read the conclusions of last week's meeting, but the minutes were splashed all over the papers. One of his Ministers said:

> "Gordon threw a hand grenade and . . . created havoc."

Is not the access regulator an interfering, social engineering, politically correct waste of time and money? Was that not the price the right hon. Gentleman had to pay to get the Chancellor to accept his top-up fees?

The Prime Minister: That is very interesting. So the right hon. Gentleman is against greater access to our universities, is he? Of course he is. That is why he opposes universities being given the extra money they need. We are putting in a 6 per cent. real-terms rise in education funding; let him say whether he supports that. We are allowing more students from poorer backgrounds to go to universities, because no fees will be paid up front, and maintenance grants are being reintroduced. I favour allowing more students to go to university; let the right hon. Gentleman explain why he favours capping student numbers at their present level.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Access to higher education should be on merit; universities should be independent of Government; and students should not be forced to rack up huge debts, as the Prime Minister intends. Today's muddled university policy has simply failed on all three counts. It means higher student debt and it means more and more regulation, so why—this is the important point for the Prime Minister—are those who will have to pay for this messy political compromise the universities and students themselves?

The Prime Minister: I find that very strange. Let me read what the right hon. Gentleman's education spokesman, the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green), said two days ago:

> "If it's true that the Government is going to abolish up-front fees, and say that everything should be paid back by the individual student afterwards, that's fine by me".

As part of the package, we are proposing a huge increase—6 per cent.—in public spending on universities. Let the right hon. Gentleman say now—he did not before—whether he supports that.

Q3. [92191] **Mr. Nigel Beard** (Bexleyheath and Crayford): The Thames gateway project is widely supported on both banks of the Thames in east London. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the private sector is to have the confidence to plan early investment, key public infrastructure projects such as Crossrail and the new bridge over the Thames, must not be left as indefinite aspirations, but must have credible timetables for their completion backed by firm financial commitments?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the Crossrail link is important. An east-west Crossrail link would play a big part in the development of the region. We have committed about £150 million to the development project work necessary to see whether there is a viable proposal—it must be affordable, too. We are investigating that now. I entirely understand what my hon. Friend says. If we can do it, we will do it, but it has to be a viable proposal.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Now that one quarter of the British Army is being deployed for possible action in Iraq, and given the obvious levels of anxiety among the British public about all these developments, may I put again to the Prime Minister the issue that I raised with him here a fortnight ago: are there now circumstances under which the British Government would not support United States-led unilateral action against Iraq?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that I shall have to repeat what I said to the right hon. Gentleman, just as he has repeated the question. It is better to state the circumstances in which we would support military action. We would support it in the circumstances of a second United Nations resolution and, as I have consistently outlined, when it was clear that there was a breach by Saddam and an unreasonable blocking of the Security Council resolution.

Mr. Kennedy: People again will note that reply. Does the Prime Minister acknowledge that the comments made by President Bush yesterday will not help to reduce British public anxiety? If next Monday in New York the weapons inspectorate says that it requires more time, will the Prime Minister guarantee that he will publicly support it being given the time it believes it needs to carry out the inspections?

The Prime Minister: Again, I have always made it clear—I did so most recently yesterday—that it is important that the weapons inspectors can do their job and have the time to do it, but let us be clear about their job. It is not to play an elaborate game of hide and seek with Saddam, whereby they try to find the weapons and he tries to hide them. His duty comprises two parts: to allow the inspectors access to any part of Iraq and the sites and to co-operate by telling the truth about the weapons that he has and working with the inspectors to destroy them.

On the remarks by President Bush, we all accept that the inspectors would not be back in Iraq doing their work unless the United States, the United Kingdom and others had taken a tough and insistent position.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he supports bringing to justice those responsible for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide? Two and a half years after the Attorney-General received evidence that would enable the Government to indict leading members of the Iraqi regime, including Saddam Hussein, Tariq Aziz and Ali Hassan al-Majeed, why is Ali Hassan al-Majeed in Syria? Will my right hon. Friend confirm that if we had issued an arrest warrant—we could have done that on the evidence that the Attorney-General was given—Ali Hassan al-Majeed, a man responsible for killing 100,000 Kurds, could now be arrested?

The Prime Minister: I am not entirely sure of the answer to my hon. Friend's last point, but I shall ascertain the correct legal position. I am sympathetic to her point about the advantages of making it clear that a judicial process is taking place at the same time as the political, diplomatic and military processes. She knows that the issue is complicated because it has to go through the Attorney-General and the police. She also knows, because we have discussed the matter on many occasions, that they are considering it. I hope that I can come back to her with their conclusions shortly.

Q4. [92192] **Dr. Andrew Murrison** (Westbury): Given that Ministry of Defence anthrax vaccine was found this week on a beach in Dorset, what assessment has the Prime Minister made of the uptake of the Government's vaccination programme among our troops who are being deployed to the Gulf, especially, under the circumstances, the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines?

The Prime Minister: I am not sure of the exact uptake, but sufficient quantities have been made available. I shall write to the hon. Gentleman and inform him of the exact take-up.

David Cairns (Greenock and Inverclyde): Despite strong progress in recent years, does my right hon. Friend agree that people with disabilities continue to face unacceptable discrimination, especially in the workplace? As the Government are committed to further legislation, will he assure us that we will close existing loopholes to ensure that discrimination is eliminated once and for all for those who currently suffer it?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend knows, we are preparing a draft disability Bill. We intend to take forward measures in respect of, for example, work in the public sector and transport. My hon. Friend also knows that, as a result of the Chancellor's measures, disability tax credits will help disabled people get off benefit and into work. Those measures probably form the biggest package in favour of disabled rights and access to work that any Government have introduced.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) said:

> "No one is running the immigration department . . . the Minister has not got a handle on it. It is out to lunch."

Does the Prime Minister agree?

The Prime Minister: Let me make it clear that there has been inadequate and wrong use of the consultation procedures. I entirely understand the concern of my hon. Friend and his constituents. That is why the Minister responsible has tackled the issue.

Mr. Duncan Smith: So the Prime Minister agrees with his hon. Friend. On Sunday, the Home Office announced its new policy of taking over country house hotels. On Monday, it was reversed. On Tuesday, Ministers blamed officials. It seems like another week in which the lunatics took over the Government's asylum policy. In the midst of the shambles, the Home Secretary is incapable of deporting people who may pose a threat to the country. Since the Prime Minister says that an attack is inevitable, is it not essential that we are able to deport such people?

The Prime Minister: As a result of the anti-terrorism legislation that we introduced post-11 September, we are able for the first time to remand in detention without trial people whom we suspect of being terrorists. That is the purpose of the raids and arrests that have taken place over the past few weeks. However, I make it clear to the right hon. Gentleman that, when we introduced those measures in Parliament, Conservative peers and Conservative Front Benchers told us that they were illiberal and contrary to civil liberties. We had to fight to get the measures through the House.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The Prime Minister knows very well that we support the measures to do with detention. We also support asylum for genuine refugees, but every country should have the right to determine whether certain people can live within its borders. It is about defending our own human rights. It is about deportation. That is the key. How can the Prime Minister be so complacent when we discover that Taliban fighters who only a few months ago were trying to kill British soldiers are now living in Britain?

Countries around the world have the right to say no to those who want to destroy their freedoms and way of life. Why cannot Britain do so?

The Prime Minister: Britain can and should. That is why we introduced the measures in the terrorism legislation post-11 September. It was also the reason for the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002. However, I point out to the right hon. Gentleman again that, when we introduced measures providing that any asylum seeker convicted of a crime should be deported, they were weakened by Conservative amendments that said the penalty for such a crime should be at least 10 years.

I shall set out exactly what the Government are doing about a problem that I entirely agree is serious and needs tackling. Under legislation that this Government introduced, we are withdrawing support from asylum seekers who do not claim early. We have put juxtaposed controls across all the ports. For the first time, we have British immigration officers on French soil making sure that unlawful asylum seekers cannot use that route. We have withdrawn the exceptional leave to remain on a routine basis. We are also trying to introduce accommodation centres in different parts of the country so that we can make sure that claims are processed quickly.

It is wrong for the Conservative party to say that asylum is a big problem, and call on the Government to deal with it, and then to oppose the very measures that we introduce.

Denzil Davies (Llanelli): On Iraq, is my right hon. Friend aware that some of us who do not regard the US as the great Satan remain concerned about some of the statements coming out of Washington that seem to seek justification for military intervention that is way outside the ambit of UN resolution 1441? Will he therefore assure the House that, if the inspectors report that Iraq has not failed to observe the obligations of that resolution, the Government will not go to war?

The Prime Minister: The whole basis of our position is that resolution 1441 has to be upheld. That is precisely why I have said that the inspectors must have the ability to do their job. However, I return to a point that I have made before and to which President Bush alluded yesterday. We cannot go back to the situation that existed in the 1990s, when the inspectors were in Iraq for years and Saddam was effectively concealing what he was doing. Saddam's duty is to co-operate fully with the inspections regime, which is not a detective agency: it is supposed to be given the full details of what is in Iraq's programme and then be able to inspect and close the programme down. The duty to co-operate is not only about access to sites, but about being open and honest. Obviously, we will pay full attention to what the inspectors say when they report back.

Q5. [92193] **Norman Baker** (Lewes): I am sure [illegible] the Prime Minister will agree that everything possible must be done to ensure the safety and security of British people, especially at this difficult time. Why, therefore, do the Government allow passenger ferries to carry high-level and intermediate-level radioactive material, as his Transport Minister confirmed in a recent parliamentary answer? Is not that a foolish risk to take with public health and the environment, especially at this time? Will he stop the practice now?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that any material will be carried under the strictest British national rules and European and international rules. The premise of the hon. Gentleman's question is therefore almost certainly wrong.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): My right hon. Friend will know that much of the focus in respect of drug crime has been on the inner cities, but drug crime is a big problem in the suburbs and the rest of the country too. What is being done to deal with drug crime in outer-London constituencies such as mine?

The Prime Minister: We are doing two things: first, we are ensuring that people who need drug treatment are given it; and, secondly, we are making it clear that people who are on drugs and are committing criminal offences should not be granted bail. We must ensure that the courts know full well that persistent offenders in particular who are on drugs should be given treatment or should not be put back on the street.

Q6. [92194] **Mr. Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland): Yesterday, the Malakoff and Moore boatyard in Shetland announced that it would be going into receivership, threatening almost 200 jobs in my constituency—just the first casualties of last month's disgraceful Fisheries Council. When the Prime Minister meets fishing leaders next week, will he be able to offer fishing-dependent communities such as Shetland new money from the Treasury, or will it just be tea and sympathy?

The Prime Minister: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows, we have already offered packages of assistance, and will carry on doing so, for anyone affected by the decision. I understand entirely why he and his constituents will be angry about a decision that affects their livelihood, but he will know two other things. First, the original European Union proposals were changed very significantly from an 80 per cent. reduction down to 45 per cent. Secondly, there is no way in which we can responsibly say that this is not a serious issue to do with the level of fishing stocks. Where jobs are lost, however—this is why I say to the hon. Gentleman that we will provide the necessary assistance for people—we must ensure that people are given the proper protection and ability to find new jobs.

Q7. [92195] **Clive Efford** (Eltham): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to concerns about the rising number of attacks on bus drivers in London? A bus service was withdrawn for 10 days from an estate in my constituency following the stabbing of a driver in the hand. Children are committing these crimes. I call on my right hon. Friend to join me in asking parents to exert more control over their children, particularly when they are out in the community. *[Interruption.]* Moreover, does my right hon. Friend accept that too many people who are involved in these crimes are getting away with them by intimidating and threatening witnesses? Does he accept that the police and local authorities need more powers to deal with such individuals, particularly the minority of parents who will not take any action to protect the community from the activities of their children?

The Prime Minister: Despite the reaction of Opposition Members, the point that my hon. Friend makes is serious and right, which is precisely why the Criminal Justice Bill, which will offer witnesses better protection, and the antisocial behaviour orders that we propose in the antisocial behaviour Bill will make a difference. As a result of the introduction of the measures that we discussed earlier, we have more police on the beat and we are looking to see how we get more police, particularly in relation to transport in London.

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): Will the Prime Minister undertake to look again at funding for the hospice movement in the United Kingdom? Although the Government have said that they are committed to providing greater palliative care for all who need it, the reality is that statutory funding for adult hospices in the UK has declined from 33 per cent. to 28 per cent. of their needs in the last five years, and in my local hospice in the Weald it is only 10 per cent., with the absurd result that, while the local hospital is absolutely full, there are empty beds in the hospice, where, arguably, better quality care can be provided, and definitely at a much lower cost to the taxpayer.

The Prime Minister: On the latter point, it surely must be the case that local health trusts could purchase places in the private sector since they are able to do so, but I do not know enough about the facts of the hon. Gentleman's individual case. He makes a fair point about the hospice movement. Obviously, there is a limit on the amount of public resources and public investment that we can put in, but I am aware, from representations that I have received myself, not just of the good work that hospices do but of the role that they can play in giving palliative care, and it is something that we are looking at. I simply tell the hon. Gentleman that there will be a limit to the amount of money that we can put in.

Q8. [92196] **Mr. Ronnie Campbell** (Blyth Valley): Will the Prime Minister tell the House and the country how much the build-up to the war in Iraq is costing the British taxpayer? Does he think that it is prudent that we are spending that kind of money when the Germans and French are spending billions of euros on the infrastructure of their countries?

The Prime Minister: I think we will probably spend more billions on our health and education services over the next few years than either the French or the Germans, as a result of the strong economy and the investments that we are making.

As for Iraq, we will spend what is necessary to ensure that the threat to the security of the world posed by weapons of mass destruction is dealt with. We have set out a process for doing that, but if we do not deal with the threat of Saddam Hussein, if we allow him to develop weapons of mass destruction and if, as he has done many times before, he threatens his own neighbours, do we not think that we will also be sucked into a conflict, but a far worse and more expensive one this time?

Q9. [92197] **Mr. Robert Syms** (Poole): Is the Prime Minister aware that 4,300 haemophiliacs have contracted hepatitis C as a result of NHS blood products? Many hundreds have died, yet each year the Government reject calls for help. Would the Prime Minister be willing to see a delegation from the all-party group to discuss whether we can give the victims and their families further help?

The Prime Minister: I am always willing to see delegations of Members of Parliament, particularly cross-party delegations, who wish to raise specific issues; but I would have to see this delegation without making any commitment to additional resources. As I told the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), we have to balance these things carefully.

Q10. [92198] **Roger Casale** (Wimbledon): My right hon. Friend knows of the case of my constituent Mary Powell, who, like many parents of children with special educational needs throughout the country, faces serious difficulties in arranging safe transport between home and school for her child. He will share my concern about evidence that has come to light in Merton and elsewhere that when minicabs are involved, neither the drivers nor the escorts who go with the children are being properly vetted by the police. Will he continue to do all he can to strengthen and enforce child protection regulations, so that we have mechanisms to root out poor practice wherever we find it?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to say that there are anxieties, but that is precisely why the Criminal Records Bureau has had to do the work it has done. The turnaround for checking has been speeded up dramatically, but it is important for those transporting children with special educational needs in particulr, to be subject to the right checks.

I know that my hon. Friend is meeting people in the near future to discuss the problem. It is important for us to ensure that the checks are carried out, and carried out as quickly as possible, so that transport for those children can be provided.

Q11. [92199] **Mr. Peter Lilley** (Hitchin and Harpenden): I welcome the Prime Minister's decision to reinstate the measures that I introduced to remove the right to benefits from those who enter this country as business men, tourists or students, but subsequently claim asylum. Does he acknowledge that his mistake in endorsing the removal of the changes I made and the reinstatement of those benefits five years ago contributed to a doubling of the number of asylum seekers? Will he tell us how many extra economic migrants the country has had to admit and pay for as a result of five mistaken years?

The Prime Minister: I do not accept what the right hon. Gentleman says. I would also point out that it is not just the measures on benefit that are making a difference now; it is also the withdrawal of exceptional leave to remain, it is also the juxtaposed controls, and it is also the fact that 70 per cent. of asylum claims are now decided within two months. When we took office—particularly as the right hon. Gentleman's party was prepared to cut the number of immigration officers—claims were taking 12 months to decide. All those things are making a difference.

Q12. [92200] **Paddy Tipping** (Sherwood): Is the Prime Minister aware of the financial difficulties currently faced by CISWO, the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation? Given his direct knowledge of the organisation's work in coalfield communities and with ex-miners and their families, will he use his influence to ensure that the meeting that trustees are seeking with Ministers takes place at an early date?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly arrange for the meeting to take place at an early date, but I would not be able to do so with any conviction that funds in addition to the funds that are already there could be provided.

Q13. [92201] **Mr. Mark Hoban** (Fareham): Can the Prime Minister say why gun crime has increased by 90 per cent. since he took office?

The Prime Minister: It has increased, for reasons that are clear, not just in this country but in other countries. In certain areas of the country, there is a culture of gun crime that must be suppressed. Let me point out two things to the hon. Gentleman. First, overall, crime is down, not up, under this Government, whereas it doubled under the Conservatives. Secondly, I hope that when we introduce measures to impose a mandatory five-year sentence for the illegal possession of a firearm, Conservatives will accept and support them, contrary to the position that they have adopted so far; otherwise, there is no use the hon. Gentleman's saying that there is a problem, but refusing to accept the solution to deal with it.

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): If the weapons inspectors find no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and want more time to look, and if my right hon. Friend is agreeable to giving more time but President Bush is not, who will make the final decision? If they go to bomb, where will they bomb if they do not know where the weapons of mass destruction are?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to my hon. Friend that it is not just a question of the inspectors finding the weapons; it is a question of the duty of co-operation: Saddam has to make sure that any weapons that he has are honestly exposed and shut down by the weapons inspectors. That is how the weapons inspection regime is supposed to work. If the inspectors find the facts in respect of a breach of resolution 1441, it goes back before the Security Council, which should then take the necessary measures. But it is not just about finding the weapons; it is also about making sure that there is full co-operation with the inspections regime.

Higher Education

12.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Charles Clarke): With your permission, Mr. Speaker, I wish to present to the House this afternoon the Government's proposals for the future of higher education in England. I want to begin by thanking my colleague the Minister for Lifelong Learning and Higher Education and my officials at the Department for the excellent work they have done in preparing the White Paper.

I start by stating that our universities are a great success story. Their record on research, on provision of higher education opportunities for hundreds of thousands of young people and on linking university research to economic achievement is outstanding. That record of achievement is acknowledged in a financial settlement for the next three years, which is better than any in recent decades and which I announce today in my letter to the Higher Education Funding Council for England, a copy of which I am placing in the Library.

I want to express my appreciation to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer for an excellent settlement that provides an average 6 per cent. a year increase in real-terms funding over the period of the settlement. I know that the settlement represents his personal commitment to this vital sector of the economy. Under the settlement, every part of the university world will be able to plan for the next three years in confidence, on the basis of a secure future funding stream that is substantial and generous.

However, as we would all acknowledge, our universities need to be able to generate still more resources, irrespective of whether they come from the state, individual students, alumni or employers. I shall address those points later on, but it is a central point of the White Paper to acknowledge that students' share of the overall costs of university education will increase. That said, however, the House needs to understand, as our universities do, that they exist in an increasingly dynamic and an increasingly competitive world.

In our White Paper, we set out the nature of that dynamism and the nature of the competitive challenges that we face. First, our universities have to make better progress in harnessing our knowledge to the process of creating wealth. Secondly, they have to extend the opportunities of higher education to all our population, irrespective of personal and economic background. The White Paper attempts to fulfil both ambitions.

Despite the attractions of inaction, which have perhaps too often led past Governments to avoid facing up to important challenges, the House needs to acknowledge that coasting along, basking in previous successes and shirking the need for reform offers no robust future for our universities. We need to acknowledge that a university system that caters for 43 per cent. of the age group now will be intrinsically different from one that provided for 20 per cent. of the age group as recently as 1990—only 13 years ago.

We need to face up to the fact that international competition from world-class universities in the United States and the growing competition from institutions in China and India changes the terms of trade for the United Kingdom's great, historic universities and that the world of single employment from 16 or 18 to 60 or 65 is gone for ever. Our universities have the principal responsibility for helping our working population adjust to the future.

In this increasingly competitive economic world, knowledge is all-powerful, and so effective working relationships between universities and both public and private sectors are increasingly significant.

In short, in a world of accelerating change, we all need to understand that our society's principal weapon in ensuring that we master change, rather than surrendering to it, is our education system, and principally our universities.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Get on with it!

Mr. Speaker: Order. Mr. Swayne, this is the second time this week that I have had to call you to order. I really think you need a dark room to sit in and wait until the feeling has gone away. You must behave yourself. I called on the Minister to give this statement. He is giving a statement to the House, and you will not shout in this Chamber.

Mr. Clarke: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As a result of this process of change, our universities have to identify more clearly than they do now the way in which they address the great missions on the basis of which they were created: the missions of research, knowledge transfer and, perhaps most important of all, teaching.

Those are the central themes of the White Paper. We start from the basis that over the years the emphasis on research has, for understandable reasons, been at the expense of teaching and knowledge transfer.

On research, we argue that we need still more focus on world-class research. We state that the funding regime should encourage research collaboration, should promote research concentration and should strengthen the highest world-class research in the country. The White Paper sets out how our research funding regime will meet those aspirations.

It means giving extra resources to our very best research departments and world-class universities as well as ensuring that new research will emerge and flourish. Although I have decided not to seek to remove research-degree awarding status from some universities, it does mean that research evaluations will be increasingly rigorous. And we will create a UK-wide Arts and Humanities Research Council to ensure that funding for arts and humanities is given the status that it deserves.

For knowledge transfer this approach means an increasingly close relationship between my Department and the Department of Trade and Industry. Both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and I know that we cannot address innovation without addressing skills, and that we cannot address enterprise without improving the relationship between universities and business. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer established Richard Lambert's review of the university-business

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relationship, and that is why the White Paper commits the Government to setting up a network of knowledge exchanges, primarily focused in universities which are not research-intensive, to develop this relationship.

We have to crack the real British disease—which is that our world-class intellectual research is exploited by competitors from other countries but not ourselves—and we have to make sure that we lead the process of knowledge transfer from research to business both nationally and regionally. A far closer relationship between universities, the regional development agencies and the new sector skills councils is necessary, and the White Paper sets out ways in which this can be achieved.

But the main function of universities must be what it always should have been—high-quality teaching. Today I am pleased to announce that the Government are giving a far stronger focus to teaching, a focus that is reflected in a significant stream of resources within the funding settlement.

We will publish an annual comprehensive student survey of university teaching standards, overseen by HEFCE and the National Union of Students. We will establish new national professional teaching standards, establish new centres of teaching excellence and target pay resources to those universities which reward high-quality teaching. And in addition we will recognise excellent teaching as a university mission in its own right by making the award of university title dependent on undergraduate teaching and degree awarding powers only.

Let there be no mistake: all universities will in future be judged by their teaching achievement as much as by their research attainment. The days of great research accompanied by shoddy teaching are gone.

So it is research, knowledge transfer and teaching which are our universities' historic missions.

Every single university has to make a frank assessment—and publicise it—of its own strengths in addressing each of these missions. Drift will not be acceptable.

The real truth is—and let us acknowledge it—that some universities are strong in research, others in teaching and still others in knowledge transfer, and some in two or all three. Let us not pretend that all universities are somehow the same. Let us tell the truth to the people of this country who pay for universities and want their children to benefit from them. We already have a multi-tiered university system.

On the basis of that assessment, we need to decide what proportion of the age group we wish to encourage into university education. I want to confirm today that the Government's target remains, as we set out in the Department's public service agreement published in 2000 and reaffirmed in last summer's spending review settlement, to increase participation in higher education towards 50 per cent. of those aged 18 to 30 by the end of the decade.

That target is essential because the country's economic future depends on that level of education and training. We live in an increasingly competitive world, within the European Union and outside. I do not understand those who claim to speak in the national interest but do not acknowledge the importance of this target.

However, such a level of participation requires us to re-examine the nature and range of degree courses that we offer. We believe that the bulk of the increase in degree student numbers, from its current proportion of 43 per cent. of the cohort, should come from two-year vocational foundation degree courses—a major contribution to the skills and productivity agenda of this country. The further education colleges, which now provide 11 per cent. of this country's higher education, have a major contribution to make here.

I am pleased to tell the House that a range of employers including, in the public sector, my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Health and for the Home Department, as well as myself, are ready to make such a commitment in principle as employers. I also believe that major private sector employers will welcome and participate in this initiative.

The guts of my proposals today come in the field of access, however. The social class gap among those entering higher education is a national disgrace. Thirty years ago students received full grants and there were no tuition fees. Despite that, students from middle-class backgrounds were three times more likely to go to university than those from poorer backgrounds. During the past 30 years the numbers going to university have more than trebled, but the gulf in access has remained the same.

That vicious statistic has to be reversed. We should in truth acknowledge that that is a long and difficult process, but the elements are clear. We have to improve dramatically the quality of school and college level education in our most disadvantaged areas. That is the centre of the strategy for 14-to-19 education announced by my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards yesterday. We have to transform university access and admissions criteria so that universities make a genuine and balanced assessment of the potential of every candidate.

We have to ensure that all universities address the access issue. I therefore propose to establish an access regulator, working with HEFCE, who will ensure that any university that wants to increase its tuition fee has rigorous admissions procedures, provides bursaries and other financial support and works directly with schools in every part of the country to promote the aspiration of a university education. The regulation will be tough and I believe that most universities will welcome this initiative.

We have to create a diverse university sector that welcomes applicants from all parts of the community, by a range of different routes. That is one of the arguments for a sensitive fees regime, and that is why we are raising the "postcode premium", which gives extra money to universities that teach and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Finally, we have to create a financial regime that encourages access, and that brings me to the final chapter of my White Paper, which deals with student finance. First, we should face up to the truth that genuine university freedom comes through building endowment, rather than any other device. Universities in this country need to build up endowments. There are already substantial incentives for both individuals and corporate bodies to donate to universities, but they are not sufficiently understood and used. The White Paper sets out how, as a matter of priority, we will promote this for graduates, institutions and Government.

Promoting endowments is the right long-term strategy, but it will inevitably take many years to build up substantial funds. The spending settlement addresses the short-term needs but universities must have funding streams that are sustained. The Government will remain the major funder of higher education, but the history of the past 50 years or more, under Governments of all colours, shows the problems when universities have to compete with other priorities, from nursery schools to health. If they have to rely solely or mainly on public sector resources, the result is pressure on staff-student ratios, capital investment and innovation. We cannot risk slipping into that sort of decline.

As countries throughout the world have discovered, requiring students to contribute to the cost of their education is the only realistic alternative. I believe, in addition, that that has the merit of justice. On average, graduates earn 50 per cent. more than non-graduates during their lifetime. It is only fair for students to make some contribution to the costs of the education that gives them significant economic benefits. The alternative funder, the general taxpayer, is entitled to ask in comparison what financial support they have received from the Government to assist their personal educational ambitions. That is why the White Paper that I am presenting follows this approach.

First, my student finance proposals allow universities to vary their fees between £0 and £3,000 a year from September 2006 onwards. I remind colleagues that the figures I propose are significantly lower than some of the early suggestions. The £3,000 cap will be in place for the whole of the next Parliament, rising only in line with inflation. Only those universities that have satisfied the access regulator will be allowed to increase their fee.

Secondly, we will restore a grant for students from the poorest backgrounds. From September 2004, students whose families earn under £10,000 will receive a £1,000 grant, with a proportion of that paid up to family income of £20,000. Altogether, 30 per cent. of students will get the full £1,000 grant.

Thirdly, we will abolish from 2006 the requirement for any student or their family to pay a fee before or while they are studying. Deferred fees will be paid after students graduate, through the tax system, linked to a student's earnings and ability to pay. As with the existing student maintenance loan, no interest will be charged on deferred fees. Any sums outstanding will only be adjusted for inflation so students only pay back the real value of their fee and maintenance loan.

Fourthly, we will continue to exempt around 60 per cent. of students from some or all of the first £1,100 of fees, in the same way as we do now.

Fifthly, we will raise from April 2005 the threshold at which graduates start to repay their fees and loans from £10,000 to £15,000. That change delivers a saving of £450 per year of the minimum payment, which will particularly help graduates when their earnings are lower in the early part of their lives. Finally, we will review the level of the maintenance loan and operation of the parental means test for loans as part of the next spending review.

Those student finance proposals will affect different students, potential students and their families in different ways. It remains the case that the British system of student support will be among the most generous in the world. The fact that we are asking individual students to contribute, albeit after they have graduated, does mean that their potential debt is increased, which, without the wider package of reforms that I have introduced, could act as a disincentive. Taken as a whole, however, my student finance package is positive for access to universities and will reinforce the other measures on access to which I referred earlier.

As I said at the outset, the White Paper that I published today represents a massive step forward in equipping our universities to meet the challenges of the future. They will take their rightful place as the dynamo of both economic progress and social justice. We need now to take the necessary action to put these proposals into effect. I commend them to the House.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement—not that it was as necessary as usual, as many of us have followed with fascination the leaks and counter-leaks of the rows within the Cabinet that have led to today's half-baked compromise.

It was a privilege and a pleasure to be quoted by the Prime Minister at Prime Minister's Question Time. It is only fair that I return the favour by pointing out what members of the Cabinet have said about the policy that the Secretary of State has just announced. The Chancellor described top-up fees as a "ridiculous idea". The Secretary of State for International Development said:

> "it's a really bad idea; I'm against it".

Members may regard those as the usual suspects. Most surprising is the Education Secretary, who said:

> "on top-up fees, I am generally anti".

So the right hon. Gentleman is opposed to his own policy as announced today. In addition, of course, 135 Labour Members have signed the early-day motion opposing top-up fees, and I dare say that we will hear from some of them in a few moments.

It is important to put the statement in context. In 1997, Labour promised that there would be no tuition fees. Subsequently, they introduced tuition fees. In 2001, they promised that there would be no top-up fees. Today, they are introducing top-up fees. One fact is clear from today's statement: no parent and no student will ever again trust any Labour promise on education.

The statement must be measured against three criteria. First, is it fair to all students? Secondly, does it help universities remain strong independent institutions? Thirdly, will it spread opportunity? On all three counts, it is sadly lacking.

Let us take fairness first. The Secretary of State has brought back grants, as the Dearing committee recommended back in 1997 shortly before the Government abolished them, and as we have been calling on Ministers to do ever since. May I clear up one of the Secretary of State's seemingly extraordinary factual claims? He says that grants will be available at the full £1,000 for those whose family income is below £10,000 and that 30 per cent. of students will receive

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those full grants. That seems to be a very large claim. If it is true, it suggests that all his worries about access are irrelevant. He cannot face both ways on that one.

Will the Secretary of State also tell the House what estimate he has made of the effect of the higher fees that he is announcing today on families whose income comes in just above the threshold for grant? He will be aware that a large overhang of debt on families not used to dealing with it may well act as a deterrent to people applying for university. We heard nothing in his statement that would comfort that type of relatively poor family, so will he enlighten us further?

Can the Secretary of State also confirm that the introduction of a regulator to tell universities who they can admit as students is a uniquely interfering and centralising measure that will be condemned by everyone who cares about academic freedom and independence? Will he admit that whether a student gains a particular place will no longer depend just on exam results and academic potential, but on whether the student fits the Government's prejudices on social engineering? Unlike, I suspect, other Members in the House, I have had the advantage of advance sight of the White Paper, which says that the measures that the Government will consider when deciding whether students are fit to qualify under the access regulator will include

> "their parents' level of education".

We now know that 18-year-olds will in future be condemned for the sins of their fathers and mothers in going to university. What an absurd and perverse message to send to young people. The way to improve access to university for young people from poor families is to improve the schools that they go to, not to rig the admission system.

So the Secretary of State's proposals are unfair. However, they also damage the independence of universities. If they are not able to choose students on purely academic grounds, their integrity is compromised. Does the right honourable Gentleman realise how serious that is for the future reputation around the world of British universities? I am sure that they will welcome the extra research money but, if the effect of his announcement is to drive talented students away from the British system altogether to other countries that consider only academic ability and potential, that will handicap those universities that want to compete at a world-class level. Does he recognise what a disaster he may be provoking in our world-class universities? If he does not, why has he taken to insulting them? The most arresting phrase in his rather long statement was:

> "The days of great research accompanied by shoddy teaching are gone."

Would he like to name the great institutions that have gone in for great research and shoddy teaching or, as is the habit of members of the Cabinet, is he just throwing insults around willy-nilly to disguise the inadequacies of the Government's policy?

Elsewhere in the university sector, the Secretary of State will be aware of the concerns of vice-chancellors. One vice-chancellor from Derby said on Radio 4 this morning that today's announcement might help the rich universities get a bit richer, but would leave the rest to get poorer. What does the Secretary of State say to vice-chancellors of those universities which often do an excellent job for their locality and which will not be able to take advantage of the higher fees now on offer, but which will still have to bear the extra costs of the Government's new regulatory burdens with which the White Paper is filled?

Can the Secretary of State further enlighten us about the endowments? I was fascinated to hear him agree that endowments are the best way forward, and it is only fair that he is ditching his policy of the last election. He is betraying that promise, but he is trying surreptitiously to adopt our policy from the last election. I have no problems with that. However, I have read the White Paper and, underneath all these fine words, as far as I can see, all he will do to promote endowments is set up a taskforce. I do not think that that will be up to the job.

On the third key issue of whether this statement promotes opportunity for all, the Government fall into their usual failing. They think that the way to help people is to set a target, regulate everyone to death in pursuit of that target, fiddle the figures until the target is in sight and then declare success before scuttling away. In this case, the key target is the 50 per cent. access target that no Minister has tried to justify on objective grounds. It was fascinating to hear the Secretary of State today trying quietly to wriggle away from it by talking about "moving towards" the target. Given the Prime Minister's expostulations of just half an hour ago, it is a bit rich for the Secretary of State to make it clear that this is no longer quite the target that it might have been.

Why does the Secretary of State not take the chance to drop an arbitrary target that downgrades most vocational qualifications, wastes huge sums of money that could be better spent filling the funding gap that the statement is meant to address and entices students on to unnecessary courses that even the Minister for Lifelong Learning and Higher Education has now taken to describing as mickey-mouse courses. Why has the statement made no attempt to address this most fundamental error of university policy under the right honourable Gentleman's predecessors?

The Secretary of State had the chance today to reassure students and parents, to help universities become stronger and more independent and to make a genuine attempt to spread opportunity. The Cabinet splits on this issue have resulted in a messy, botched compromise that will satisfy no one. The right hon. Gentleman has missed his chance, and the real victims will be students, parents and the universities, all of whom have been misled and sadly let down by the Government.

Mr. Clarke: I am not surprised that the hon. Gentleman's attack did not refer to his own policies. As far as we can establish, he has only two. He has made it clear that he wants to stop expansion of university education and abandon the 50 per cent. target, and he has made it clear again today that he opposes our proposals to boost access for poorer students and for those from less-advantaged homes. His approach and that of his party is a throwback to his party's policies of more than 50 years ago. It will be rejected both by the whole university—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I want the Secretary of State to reply to the questions.

Mr. Clarke: I start with the hon. Gentleman's third point on the spreading of opportunities. His policies make it clear that he is against that, but let me respond—I will answer directly from the White Paper—to his question about the target.

The hon. Gentleman asked why we are committed to 50 per cent. of the population going into higher education. We are committed to that, because every study of any successful economy tells us that that is the way to go. Page 60 of the White Paper sets out the countries that have committed to that target. The figure for Finland is 71 per cent. now; for New Zealand, it is 70 per cent. now; for Sweden, 67 per cent. now; for Poland, 62 per cent. now; for Australia, it is 59 per cent.; for Norway, it is 59 per cent; and so on. If we want our country to compete in the world economic market, we will compete on the basis of the skills and talents of our people. That is why the 50 per cent. target is vitally important.

The hon. Gentleman asked what we were doing for people just above the £20,000 level of family income. The major thing that we are doing is remitting fees up to a family income of £30,000 so that the fees will not have to be paid. Secondly, we are putting off the payment from upfront to deferred. That is significant, because families who live on an income of £40,000 to £50,000, which is a lot in some parts of the country but not so much in some parts of London and the south-east, now have to find £2,000 a year to put each child through university—£1,000 for the maintenance loan and £1,000 for the fee. They will now have to find only £1,000 a year for that; we are halving the amount that we asking parents to pay to ensure that their child can go to university. That is a significant move, and I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman has not taken the trouble to welcome it.

On the access regulator, the point that I want to emphasise above all is that quality and merit are the central aspect of everything that we do. The only people who will be admitted to university are those who have the merit and the ability to benefit. However, the serious flaw in the hon. Gentleman's argument is that he refuses to acknowledge that literally hundreds of thousands of young people on estates up and down the country and from poor backgrounds have that quality and merit. They need to be able to get places in university. That is why we have established a tough access regime. The hon. Gentleman and his party do not care about those people.

I think that I have dealt with the points raised, but I will be happy to deal with any further points in writing.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I thank the Secretary of State for providing an advance copy of the statement and the White Paper. We recognise the difficulty of reconciling competing priorities. We also recognise that the problem was caused by gross underfunding under the previous Government. However, this Government have not solved the problem. Indeed, they have added to it.

The Secretary of State did not mention Wales. What plans does he have to transfer the proposals on student funding to the Welsh Assembly so that it can take responsibility for them, as is the case with the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly?

We recognise that there are some positive aspects to the White Paper. There is a need to re-engineer higher education. Those who say that we can carry on delivering a 1960s model in the 21st century are fundamentally wrong. We accept that there needs to be a greater focus and mission within universities. We also accept the need to concentrate quality research in fewer university departments and to increase the commitment to teaching. We are especially pleased that the Secretary of State recognises the work in further education colleges and their vital role in expanding the foundation degree base, in particular for work-based degrees. So those are the positives. But Labour has been in government for six years. It recognised the problems in higher education following the Dearing report and has had 15 months to plan this announcement. Despite that, the funding announcement is a shambles and a betrayal.

The Secretary of State mentioned the socio-economic gap between poorer and wealthier students. Although that has widened in the past 30 years, the most significant increase has taken place in the past four years, since the introduction of tuition fees. His Department's research says that the fear of debt is turning non-traditional students away from university. In light of that, can he explain why increasing that debt threefold will improve things? Why will the prospect of repaying a student debt at the rate of £60 a month for the rest of a student's life be such a potent lure? Why will poor students get £32 to stay on in a sixth form but only £20 a week when they go to university? That is inconsistent.

Has the Secretary of State recalculated the so-called graduate premium on the basis of 50 per cent. of young people going to university rather than the traditional figure? Has he assessed the impact of his policy on women? There is a 58 per cent. differential between male and female graduate earnings. How can the right honourable Gentleman reconcile his policy when he knows that the debt burden will fall most heavily on women, who will be unable to repay the major debts that they incur during their time at university?

We welcome some students getting golden handcuffs when they leave to go into the public sector, but who will pick up the bill? Will schools have to pay the fee remission for teachers? Will hospitals have to pay it for nurses? Will police authorities have to pay it for police officers? Given that one in four workers work for the Government, will they also be entitled to golden handcuffs?

The most damaging impact of the funding proposals will be felt by our universities. The creation of the new university tsar—"Oftoff"—may be a sop to the Chancellor because he threw his toys out of the pram, but it will do nothing to help students. All it will do is create a massive bureaucracy for our universities. Why cannot the Higher Education Funding Council do the job? It gives the money to the universities. Surely it is possible for it to be responsible for that function. Is there not a strange irony in the fact that the imposition of the tsar is a classic lever of social engineering, yet the

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Secretary of State is proposing to create a two-tier university system that is the antithesis of what he is trying to achieve?

Does the Secretary of State accept that only by charging maximum top-up fees will many universities be able to claim their world-class status? Does he also accept that those universities that do not charge the top-up fees will fall into the category of second-class universities in a two-tier system? Does he not recognise, too, that students will choose their university course not on the basis of what is best for them according to their ability, but on the basis of what they can afford?

Someone said that the White Paper is a defining moment for higher education. It is also a defining moment for the Labour Government. If they push through the proposals, they will never be able to look students in the face again because they will be the first Government to say to the poorest students in the land, "You can only go to university if you run up a debt."

Mr. Clarke: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman referring to the fact that we are trying to reconcile competing priorities. I also appreciate his support for the need to re-engineer higher education and to focus quality research, and I am grateful for what he said about other aspects of further education. I appreciate his considered response.

I have discussed with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales and the First Minister and Education Minister in Wales the possibility of devolving student finance to Wales. It is a complex and difficult matter. No reference is made to it in the White Paper because we want those discussions to continue. There are serious pros and cons to that approach and we need to work those through.

On the general issues, it is important to acknowledge that fear of debt is a significant factor. I also hope, however, that the hon. Gentleman will be good enough to acknowledge that the removal of the upfront fee, the donations and the passage of resources in the form of grant, fee remission and so on are serious considerations on the other side of the fear of debt. Any debt that a student might incur will be offset by remission of fees, which will apply to 40 per cent. of the population; by grant, which applies to 30 per cent. of the population; by parental contribution; by working while at college; and by university bursaries. In addition, many universities will charge less. The honourable Gentleman should take that significant consideration into account when he examines the range of policies.

I also hope that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that a zero rate of real interest payment will make a significant difference both to the overall burden and to the important issue of access of women to university. I appreciate his point on that and there are serious concerns, but those would be worse if a real interest rate were applied.

Fear of debt is an issue, but if we are to provide greater independence at the age of 18, it means that the parent will no longer pay the £1,000 fee upfront. Instead, the student will pay it on a deferred basis later in life. That is fairer. It is true, however, that it also has the direct effect of increasing debt. We estimate the average debt to be in the order of £10,000. A survey yesterday suggested £9,000. We expect that to increase on average to £12,000 or £13,000 as a result of deferring the fee and then to £14,000 or £15,000 depending on what assumptions are made about how many students pay top-up fees and so on. It is an increase, but I hope that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that we have to set it alongside the other measures, although I accept that it is a consideration.

We suggest that the access regulator is located in HEFCE. Deciding, as the hon. Gentleman appears to have done, that forcing students to live at home is the right way forward is the wrong policy for the Liberal Democrats to propose.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Does my right hon. Friend accept that this is an exceedingly difficult policy area in which to please everyone? Does he agree that there are two priorities? The first is to give universities a deal so that over the next 10 to 20 years they are assured of an income and of their independence. The second is to tackle the national scandal of the lack of opportunities for children from working-class backgrounds to stay on at school and enter higher education. I hope that the Secretary of State agrees that the White Paper will be judged on those two criteria.

The White Paper is complex; the Education and Skills Committee has considered these matters in three separate reports. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that the Committee will be given time to consider the White Paper in detail, to comment on it and to give the Government the benefit of the experience that we acquired in preparing those reports, and that notice will be taken of those opinions before a final policy is determined?

Mr. Clarke: First, I can say that I have found this policy area difficult. I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that he seeks: there will be time for the Select Committee to consider these questions. I go further and encourage the Committee to consider them, because its reports, to which he referred, have advanced the discussion of these matters, and it deserves to be commended for that.

It is important to reaffirm that the 6 per cent. real-terms annual increase in university budgets is a major commitment to increased resources. As I said in my statement, I thank my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. Now we must use those resources to achieve the second priority that my hon. Friend mentioned, which is ensuring that we change the life chances of our poorest people.

Our polices on education from age 14 to 19 are critical, but universities cannot ignore their responsibilities. To be fair, most do not want to do so, but we need an access regulator based in HEFCE to ensure that none can do so. There will be a sanction: if a university does not sort out its access and admissions policy, it will not be allowed to charge a higher fee. That will be an incentive, and it is a potential benefit of the top-up fee regime.

Mr. Robert Jackson (Wantage): I congratulate the Secretary of State on a brave and bold policy. Higher education has reached a crossroads, and the

Government are taking the right turning. They are creating a mixed economy in higher education, and that is very welcome. In the last century, one Cambridge college, Trinity, won more Nobel prizes than did the whole of France. Does the right hon. Gentleman share my hope that the new arrangements will make it possible for that college and others to match that record in this century?

Mr. Clarke: I appreciate the support from the hon. Gentleman, whose experience as a Minister with responsibility for higher education informs what he says. I hope that, in this increasingly competitive world, we will be able to achieve that aim. What characterises the hon. Gentleman's contribution to the debate, both publicly in this place and privately, is a desire to discuss the serious issues about the future of our universities. I say to Conservative Front Benchers and to the Liberal Democrats, who are also trying to have a serious debate, that this is a national issue that has to be resolved, and hard decisions must be made. I believe that our proposals are right, but we must discuss the issues properly on their merits—I am encouraged by the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman)—and that is how I want to proceed.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The House will know that I am obliged to take notice of the Modernisation Committee's recommendation that there be an hour for statements. I therefore need the co-operation of the House, and questions must be brief.

Angela Eagle (Wallasey): I welcome the increase in resources and the fact that my right hon. Friend is wrestling with these difficult issues. Does he recognise, however, that many of us on the Labour Benches are very worried about the concept of variable top-up fees and their possible effects on the practical chances of people from poorer backgrounds aspiring to some of the elite universities?

Mr. Clarke: I entirely accept what my hon. Friend says. I know that she speaks for a number of my colleagues, who have expressed precisely the same concern, and that the motive for their concern is the question of access to the elite universities. My hon. Friend will have in her constituency, as I have in mine, estates and areas where the hope of university education is a long way off. The proposals on financial issues and, even more importantly, on getting universities to interrelate with schools in those areas take us a significant way down the path that we need to take.

I cannot hide from the House my acceptance of the fact that the fear of debt, which my hon. Friend mentioned, is a real issue, as I said in response to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis). The question for me is how, and in what context, we deal with that. I am happy to discuss with my honourable Friend and other colleagues the best way of doing that. However, I repeat that finance is not the only issue of access, and we have to consider the matter in the round.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): Will the access regulator have the power to enforce on universities an admissions procedure that compels them to admit students who they do not consider will benefit from higher education—yes or no?

Mr. Clarke: No.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the defence of the status quo simply serves to reproduce the existing inequalities in our education system, and that is why we have to transform the balance of public investment from higher education to primary, secondary and further education? I congratulate him on his courage in tackling this issue. This is the first Government seriously to propose radical changes to widen access to higher education.

Will the access regulator permit top-up fees only when the university concerned has a proven track record of widening access, rather than on the basis of a statement of intent to do so?

Mr. Clarke: I appreciate my hon. Friend's support, and I pay tribute to his work, on the Select Committee and elsewhere, in the debate on these questions. The role of the access regulator will be to establish that any university that wants to consider raising fees has to have in place a process to widen access. The regulator will also have responsibility for monitoring that process against targets set by the university itself, and it will have the right to state that the university is not doing what it said it would do. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating; there will not be a process of clever bidding, but a real test.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): It has to be right that as many young people as possible are given access to education, but they must also have access to training. Given that a sizeable number of graduates are unemployed or doing jobs that do not require degrees while a number of organisations and public services have a desperate skills shortage, is not the 50 per cent. target for universities wrong? Should we not take a more balanced approach to education and training? In other words, is not training more appropriate for some young people than a university education?

Mr. Clarke: All I can say is that I agree. We proposed two-year vocational degrees precisely to meet those concerns. I know from initial conversations that private business will want to pursue that route, and as I said, my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Health and the Home Secretary also support that policy. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman puts his cogently argued case to his Front-Bench colleagues.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): I guarantee my right hon. Friend a warm welcome at Carrow Road on Saturday afternoon. He talks about rigorous research assessment. Will he get rid of the much-maligned research assessment exercise used in universities? When he talks about public and private sector influence on funding, does he mean that both sectors will write off student debt? Many of us would welcome that as a major step forward, especially if it included the private employers who take on our bright young people but do not put much into their initial training.

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's question. I am sure that, at Carrow Road on Saturday,

[Mr. Clarke]

we will cheer the team on together and see them defeat the team of the Minister for Lifelong Learning and Higher Education in the FA cup.

We are talking not about getting rid of the research assessment exercise but about changing it. Professor Gareth Roberts has been leading the approach to that. There are problems in the system, which is why changes are proposed, and we intend to implement Professor Roberts's recommendations.

On public and private, there are a number of public and private employers who wish to give money and pay fees for people when they take them on. We do that ourselves for teachers of certain specialist disciplines, and the Department of Health does it for certain medical and other disciplines. I hope and believe that that will be extended, as it has a major positive benefit for public sector management and helps with the renewal of operations. I cannot give a firm assurance, but we intend to go down that route, which will mean that employers will contribute more substantially.

Adam Price (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for an advance copy of the statement. I am a little slow—I did not have the benefit of an elitist university education—so perhaps he could explain in simple terms why, if it is right for the Government to pay tuition fees in full for students from the lowest income background, even with the reintroduction of the maintenance grant, they are not prepared to do so with deferred top-up fees? Is it not the case that the equality of opportunity that the Secretary of State espouses will not be achieved by deepening the fact and perception of postgraduate debt, which is presumably why his Labour colleagues in Wales disagree with him?

Mr. Clarke: I think that I can help the hon. Gentleman, much as it pains me to do so. We will introduce £1,000 maintenance grants in 2004 and they will run through the whole period. The money will still be there for whatever system we use, but we are ready to consider for 2006 onwards, when the top-up fees come in, the possibility of using that money to pay for the top-up fee component. There is a real debate about the best way of using that resource to target students from the poorest backgrounds, but we cannot make a decision until we have a better idea of how many universities will increase their fees.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy): I heard my right hon. Friend's answer to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr Willis) about the situation in Wales and his explanation for why he made no reference to it in his statement. Is he aware of news which appeared on the Wales section of the BBC website yesterday at 11.15 am, which said:

> "The Assembly will be handed complete responsibility for student finance in Wales".

Can my right hon. Friend provide an explanation, and is he prepared to investigate how that appeared on the BBC website?

Mr. Clarke: I am glad to tell my hon. Friend that I have studied every detail on that website, and can give her some assurances. None of our Ministers and no member of our Department talked to BBC Wales, nor did the Secretary of State for Wales or his Department, nor did the Welsh Executive or its Ministers. After the usual whizzing round for the leak, which is always extremely entertaining, I am now assured that the three bodies that I talked to—the Welsh Executive, the Wales Office and ourselves—are not the source of the leak. The factual situation is not what has been reported on the BBC Wales website, but what I told the House in response to the question asked by the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis).

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire): Does the Secretary of State not accept that there is a significant difference between providing incentives to universities to widen access, which is the present situation, and threatening them if they do not? Does he not fear that the lack of trust in universities that the appointment of the regulator implies will fundamentally affect his relationship with universities, particularly when discussing academic freedom in future?

Mr. Clarke: The concerns raised by the hon. Gentleman are important, and I have discussed the issue with many vice-chancellors. Most vice-chancellors accept and understand the situation, and realise that they have to sort out the massive flaw or damage besmirching the university expansion that has taken place since 1990, and want us to help them to do so. I predict that universities will approach the change positively and constructively, but we are determined that those that decide not to do so will be subject to a full range of sanctions prohibiting them from increasing fees.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): My right hon. Friend is to be commended on seeing off the wilder ambitions of some of the Russell group universities to inflate top-up fees and restrict research study and awards. He emphasised that the core of his argument is about access for first-generation students, so does he accept that many will regard £1,000 as a barely adequate starter grant? Will he give an undertaking to the House that that figure is not fixed in stone? Will he review it regularly and lobby his right hon. Friend the Chancellor for extra funding to increase it to a significant premium?

Mr. Clarke: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. We are conducting an assessment of student maintenance costs to get a true picture of the costs involved. As I said in the White Paper, we will go into the next comprehensive spending review ready to discuss the questions that my hon. Friend has raised.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): The Prime Minister's old university in my constituency needs two things—better funding to compete in a global market and more applications from people from poorer backgrounds. Although the Secretary of State is doing a lot about that, does he not accept that he has created an impossible dilemma? If universities use the top-up debt mechanism to try to get funding, they will lose applications, but if they do so, the regulator will not allow them to use the top-up debt mechanism to raise funding. Has the Secretary of State not created a lose-lose situation?

Mr. Clarke: No, if the hon. Gentleman talks to his vice-chancellor, he will find that his view is closer to mine than his.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I welcome much of what my right hon. Friend has said. What inducements can a world-class university offer a student from a low-income background to accept a place at that university rather than one where their debt may be £9,000 less at the end of the course?

Mr. Clarke: First, I appreciate my hon. Friend's particular constituency interest—she has argued consistently on these points. Good-quality education and good job prospects at the end of a course must remain the key issues that drive our policy, but I anticipate that universities, including the one that she represents, will develop bursary schemes and so on or provide additional assistance. Our aim in establishing an access regulator and providing money for access for people from disadvantaged backgrounds is to increase university resources in that area, both in the current system and any changed system that may be introduced.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): It is a sad day when a former president of the National Union of Students, to obtain the Chancellor's 30 pieces of silver for his policy, has to make life more difficult for poorer students. The Department for Education and Skills suggests that the nation's rate of return from investment in higher education is roughly double the discount rate used by the Treasury. If the rate of return is so great, why was it not possible to deploy more public funds to deal with top-up fees?

Mr. Clarke: Figure 3 on page 18 of the White Paper shows that there were slashing cuts in spending per head on universities under the previous Administration, including during the period when the right hon. Gentleman was a Minister at the Treasury. The Chancellor's commitment, which I announced today, to a 6 per cent. year-on-year real increase in university funding is not only better by a long way than anything achieved by the universities during the period when the right hon. Gentleman was in office, but is a sound basis on which universities can plan for the future and deal with the issue. The right hon. Gentleman is foolish if he wishes to demean that. He should ask the question that Labour Members and I are asking—if universities are to get that cash, how can they use it to achieve the ambitions that we have set out?

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme): Access is a problem, so I shall ask my right hon. Friend a simple question—why cannot we have incentives to improve access without divisive and differential top-up fees and different prices for different universities?

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend may disagree, but the core issue, as I have told him before in the House, is that we have to acknowledge that it is necessary, even on the basis of the generous settlement that I have announced, to put still more money into universities for teaching undergraduates as well as continued professional development and research. We have to look at who should provide that money. It is fair to ask whether people who get no benefits from the state after 16 because they have left the education system and are taxpayers for the rest of their lives should continue to be the sole source of funding for students. I think that students should make a contribution, but there is a legitimate discussion to be had about how much they should pay. To suggest that they should not contribute at all, however, is mistaken.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): The Secretary of State will be aware that a large proportion of Northern Ireland students enrol in English universities either through choice or because they have not achieved the entry grades for Queen's university or the University of Ulster. Household incomes are much lower in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain and many students will fear the threat of incurring large debts. Will he seek to persuade the Government to increase the number of university places in Northern Ireland and to provide proper research funding to our Northern Ireland universities? Will he monitor closely the impact of his proposals today on the future enrolment in English universities of Northern Ireland students?

Mr. Clarke: The financial and educational relationship between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK is complicated, as the hon. Gentleman knows better than I do. I am discussing with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how we might work in these areas. Whether the Stormont Assembly returns or the Secretary of State remains with his current responsibilities, it is important for the Administration in Northern Ireland to make a commitment in the ways that I have been describing. I can see that some colleagues share that view. I commit myself, in case it is of any help, to discussing with the honourable Gentleman's party, and colleagues in Northern Ireland above and beyond the Secretary of State, how we might work together in these areas.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): Is my right hon. Friend aware that my parents were on national assistance, and that with my three brothers, we had full maintenance and full university fees? Had my parents or I been faced with the prospect of having a very large sum to repay almost immediately after leaving university and its effects on having a family or mortgage, we would have regarded his proposals as an increased detriment to access by the poorest people. Is not the answer something that has been mooted but barely debated today: if people who graduate make the most money, they should pay the most tax in a graduate tax over their lifetime in employment? It is the fairest way.

Mr. Clarke: I want to make two points. I acknowledge the debt issues, as I have done in responding to a number of hon. Members. It is important also to acknowledge—I hope that my hon. Friend will do so—that as the proportion of the population going to university expands, significantly different issues arise. The issues in respect of 6, 7, 8 or 9 per cent. of people going to university are different

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from those in respect of an intake of 43, 45 or 50 per cent. On those issues, my honourable Friend should acknowledge that there is a need to look again at that system.

On the overall issues that my hon. Friend raises about the question of the extent to which funding can be provided through general taxation, whether through a graduate tax, income tax or whatever else, that is a matter for the Government as a whole. The issue that is distinct about the fee approach is that the money goes directly to the university rather than being translated through the Exchequer.

Points of Order

1.32 pm

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. This is the second time when a debate that Ministers have urged Back-Bench Members to utilise to raise their constituents' concerns about a possible war in Iraq has been eroded by ministerial statements. Important though they may be and inevitable though the policies may be, they are by no means imminent. If the Government keep their promise to the House that there will be a debate on a possible war in Iraq on a substantive motion, is there anything that you can do to ensure that the time of that debate will not be limited?

Mr. Speaker: Those are matters for Ministers. On statements to the House, I am on record as saying that I want Ministers to come here and explain what is happening with regard to their Departments and policies. I therefore have no complaint about any Minister coming to the House to make a statement.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. From the middle of last week, the contents of the statement that we have just been discussing were extensively trailed and discussed in the media. This morning, on the BBC News website, there was a headline saying "University Funding Shake-up Unveiled". May I once again appeal to you to use your good offices to try to ensure that it is this House that hears first about such important matters and that we do not see the continual trailing and leaking of this vital information before the House hears it at first hand?

Mr. Speaker: I share the right hon. Gentleman's concern about this matter. He has written to me; I shall investigate and report back to the House.

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You have made it clear that you want to maintain an hour-long framework in which statements should be made. Obviously, that is reasonable to the House. However, may I draw your attention to a tendency in the years during which you and I have been in Parliament—the growing length of statements and the replies, rather than questions, of the two Opposition parties? Could there be some control of these over-lengthy statements?

Mr. Speaker: The statement lasted 17 minutes, which is far too long. I am looking for a maximum of about 10 minutes. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] That puts a responsibility on the Opposition Front Bench, as well as the Liberal Front Bench. It is unfair that only about 20 minutes have been available for Back Benchers to question the Secretary of State. I want more Back Benchers to get in and I am grateful for the point of order.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I hate to see the Speaker of this House put under duress by something as imperfect as the Modernisation Committee. I would be grateful if you could advise me how much longer you will have to sit in sway to the Committee and allow only an hour for statements. Hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber needed to question the Secretary of State closely on the matters that he brought before the House today, not least because they had been trailed in the papers so far in advance. Is there any reason why we cannot suspend the 7 o'clock rule tonight and allow the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Glenda Jackson) to have her way?

Mr. Speaker: The fact is that the House accepted the report of the Modernisation Committee and I must pay due regard to its wishes.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): Further to the point of order made by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), Mr. Speaker, I accept your ruling, because you are bound by the decisions of the House. Surely, however, there are occasions when the ministerial statement has to be of considerable length given the nature and complexity of the issue at hand. When a White Paper of the character of that which was introduced today is being presented to the House, regardless of how much of it was trailed in the press, it is only fair that the Minister is given time and that we as a House are given the chance to deal with it, so in matters of that nature, the 60-minute rule is, frankly, unreasonably inflexible.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members can read the White Paper, and Ministers have got to aim for 10 minutes. We do not have stopwatches—I am not in engineering any more—but there is a big difference between 10 minutes and 17 minutes.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. We are about to have a debate in which there will be a time limit on Back Benchers' speeches. The points of order are eating into their time.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I apologise for that. You rightly said that it is important for Ministers to come to the House when they have important announcements to make. Have you had any indication from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister that he intends to come to the House later today to speak about the right-to-buy changes, which will penalise the many because of the abuses of the few?

Hon. Members have referred to the modernisation rules, and my understanding was that written statements dealt with administrative matters, but a major policy announcement has been made. If the Government are going to kick away the property ladder for the poor, this House should have a right to examine the matter.

Mr. Speaker: The important thing is that the Minister has told the House. In this case, he has done that in the form of a written statement. I have no complaints about that.

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight): Further to the points of order made by the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Glenda Jackson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), Mr. Speaker, could you help us on the Back Benches by advising us whether it is possible—and if so, how—to move that the 7 o'clock rule be suspended in cases such as this?

Mr. Speaker: Only a Minister can do that and only with notice, so the usual channels have more powers in these matters than me. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should make a representation to his Chief Whip.

Housing (Overcrowding)

1.39 pm

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision relating to the definition of household overcrowding standards and the housing needs of those living in overcrowded accommodation.

Put at its simplest, the Bill is intended to modernise confusing and outdated legislation, and to strengthen the protection available to people living in severely overcrowded conditions. Additionally, it will place a duty on local authorities and central Government to tackle overcrowding by providing homes that such families so desperately need.

Although the current definition of overcrowding is set out in the Housing Act 1985, it was carried forward from the Housing Act 1957, which itself consolidated a standard that originated in the Housing Act 1935. Overcrowding standards have therefore remained unchanged since that time—despite assurances from the then Minister that the standard laid down need not be regarded as the ultimate ideal to which we should work.

Since that time, and until the late 1980s, the number of overcrowded households fell steadily year on year. In the past decade, the acute shortage of affordable accommodation has meant that many families have found themselves severely overcrowded but with little possibility of a move to larger, better-quality, family-sized accommodation.

Official statistics on statutory overcrowding are not collected, but the survey of English housing provides an estimate of overcrowding based on the number of households living in conditions that are one or more bedrooms below the defined bedroom standard. The survey estimates that around 500,000 households are overcrowded, of which about a third are in the capital.

Overcrowding therefore features heavily in my constituency case load. Just last week I had a case of a family of six living in a two-bedroom housing trust property that is in a very poor state of repair. The family consists of a young woman who has three children. There are two daughters aged five and three and a son aged nine. There are also two other family members—a brother of 17 and a sister of 15. They are not deemed statutorily overcrowded; indeed, they do not even come close. It is not unusual for three, four or five children to have to bed down on mattresses and blankets on the living room floor. Surely it must be unacceptable that families are forced to live in conditions that most of us would consider Dickensian.

Just how low the standards are set can be judged by the minimum size for a habitable room—50 sq ft, which is regularly described on property details as a child's bedroom, although frankly, one could not swing a cat in it. None the less, according to the current standard, such a room can sleep two adults and a child under one year old.

As with homelessness, the problems of severe overcrowding are most intense in central London. Let us take the case of Mr. and Mrs. A, who are clients of a local housing aid centre and have three daughters and two sons aged between 15 and 21. On becoming homeless, they were offered temporary accommodation in the private sector, which was described as a four-bedroom property. However, the bedrooms measured 2 m by 1.5 m, and the living room, which was meant to accommodate the whole family, was approximately 3 m by 3 m. As a result, the total floor space of their accommodation was around 160 sq ft, which falls far short of the 400 sq ft that should be allocated even under the very low standards of existing legislation.

Many families experience severe effects on their health, welfare and well-being as a result of overcrowding. According to recent research, there is a high prevalence of skin disorders and infectious diseases. Owing to a lack of space, children are at much greater risk of having accidents, and the stress of living in such cramped conditions can place a severe strain on family relationships. Children's education is being seriously undermined by lack of space: sharing bedrooms makes it hard to read or do homework, and disrupted sleep patterns mean that they do not get the rest that they need. All of that results in their falling behind at school.

The profile of severe overcrowding shows that black and minority ethnic households are far more likely to be affected. Although only one in 50 white households live in overcrowded conditions, the figure increases to one in seven among minority ethnic households. Alarmingly, it can be as high as one in four for families from parts of the Indian subcontinent. According to the recent Cantle report, severe overcrowding was a contributory factor to the housing stress and social exclusion experienced by ethnic minority communities in all the major cities in the north of England that were hit by civil disturbances in the summer of 2001.

The problems of overcrowding standards have been recognised by the Government, who have said that they are reviewing the options for updating them. That is to be welcomed and exactly what my Bill would achieve. While I am at it, I also welcome the progress that the Government have made in tackling homelessness and improving the quality of social housing. However, delivering a decent home for all cannot be achieved without addressing the stress experienced by families living in overcrowded accommodation. Otherwise, it will prove difficult, if not impossible, to deliver on the Government's commitments on child poverty, social exclusion and family welfare.

The Housing Act 1985 lays down two legal definitions of overcrowding: the room standard and the space standard. If either or both are breached, the dwelling is statutorily overcrowded. That occurs under the room standard when two people of opposite sex who are not married or a cohabiting couple must sleep in the same room. However, all living rooms, including the kitchen, are included as bedrooms. There is no limit on the number of people of the same sex who can share the same room, and young children are excluded.

That standard would be replaced under my Bill by a new bedroom standard modelled on that used in the survey of English housing, and is based on a very simple formula. Rooms available as living rooms or kitchens would not count. Any single person aged 21 years or more would be allocated a bedroom, and young people aged between 10 and 20 would be allocated a bedroom together only if they are of the same sex. Two young people under the age of 10 of different sexes could be paired in the same room. The new bedroom standard would take account of the changing nature of family life, recognising the needs of adults, children and infants alike by identifying a suitable number of bedrooms for their use.

The current space standard is based on the number of people who may sleep in a dwelling of a particular size. Children are partially or totally excluded from the count. As a result, four children under the age of 10 could share a room without statutory overcrowding occurring. Under my Bill, all children would be counted in deciding whether overcrowding occurred. That would ensure proper recognition of the impact that they have, in the same way as adults, on overcrowding.

Under the 1985 Act, local authorities are allowed to undertake surveys of overcrowding in their areas. A report on the nature and extent of the problem can then be drawn up, from which proposals could be made to the Secretary of State on providing the required number of dwellings. Sadly, no such report appears to have been drawn up and no specific action has been taken. Clause 4 of my Bill would require local authorities to undertake a periodic survey of overcrowding in their areas and to estimate the number of dwellings necessary to abate that overcrowding. The clause would also require the Secretary of State to take such reports into account in determining the overall allocation of funding for new, affordable accommodation.

Finally, I reiterate that the Bill would bring overcrowding standards into the 21st century and place a duty on local authorities and the Government to tackle overcrowding through the funding of investment in the homes that these families so desperately need. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Andrew Love, Ms Oona King, Ms Karen Buck, Joan Ruddock, Mr. David Kidney, Mr. David Curry, Peter Bottomley and Mr. Adrian Sanders.

HOUSING (OVERCROWDING)

Mr. Andrew Love accordingly presented a Bill to make provision relating to the definition of household overcrowding standards and the housing needs of those living in overcrowded accommodation: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 28 February, and to be printed [Bill 46].

Defence in the World

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Dan Norris.]*

1.50 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): This is the first opportunity of the Session for the House to debate defence in the broadest context of our interests and commitments throughout the world. The last of these regular debates took place on 17 October 2002. Many themes and concerns remain unchanged, and the two major issues on which I made recent statements to the House reflect that.

Last week, I set out the Government's thinking on the request from the United States to update RAF Fylingdales for missile defence purposes. On Monday, I made a statement on contingency preparations for possible operations in Iraq. It is therefore highly appropriate that, today, the House should debate defence in the world.

It is worth setting out the United Kingdom's singular place in world affairs. The UK is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and a member of NATO, which is the world's most powerful military alliance. We stand at the heart of the European Union and we have interests far beyond its bounds. We have the fourth largest economy in the world and we are a great trading nation with global commercial interests. We belong to the Commonwealth. Just as important, family ties link us to almost every nation in the world.

The Government are well aware of our responsibilities in the world. With our allies and the wider international community, we want to make a positive contribution. We operate in several different ways: diplomatic, economic, legal, social and humanitarian mechanisms are at our disposal. They are used separately and in combination. The role of our armed forces as a force for good is essential to that.

The role of our armed forces is essential because we must be prepared to play our part in confronting threats to global peace and stability. Above all, that threat is threefold—from rogue states, terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. However, those challenges are not separate. Some rogue states support terrorism; terrorists benefit from support; both seek weapons of mass destruction. The risks of allowing the proliferation of weapons to dictators and terrorists are simply too great to ignore.

Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): The Secretary of State said that weapons of mass destruction posed one of the threats. What about Israel, which has the ultimate weapons of mass destruction—nuclear weapons? Has my right hon. Friend held discussions with anyone in the Israeli Government about Mordechai Vanunu, who has been in jail for 16 years for telling the truth about Israel's nuclear capacity when all those around him were lying?

Mr. Hoon: We address our worries about proliferation to friends and allies such as Israel as well as other countries around the world. In the past, representations have been made about Mr. Vanunu on behalf of British Ministers. I am sure that those matters will be raised again with Israel.

[Mr. Hoon]

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made clear last week, if we do not deal with the sort of threats that I outlined, the consequences will haunt future generations. We are therefore determined to counter such risks through a wide range of diplomatic and political means and ensure as far as possible that the developing threats are not realised.

We must guard against the possibility that political and diplomatic efforts will not succeed. Deterrence has been a central feature of our approach, founded largely but not exclusively on our possession of nuclear weapons. As the new chapter of the strategic defence review confirmed last year, the United Kingdom's nuclear weapons continue to play a role in deterring major strategic military threats and ultimately guaranteeing our security.

We acknowledge that we need to use all the mechanisms at our disposal. As I said to hon. Members recently, I do not rule out the possibility that in future those mechanisms will include active missile defences. If we decide to help others, we must also ensure that the United Kingdom is as secure as we can make it.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Doubtless the Secretary of State has had time to reflect on the announcement that he made last week on national missile defence. Does he believe that we are embarking on the dangerous road of extending the process, which will encourage an opposite reaction from China and other countries that are not included in it? We will thus be in a new ballistic missiles race.

Mr. Hoon: As I shall explain in due course, the point of missile defence and its potential benefit is to protect this country and its allies against a threat from rogue states—that means a state that has a limited number of ballistic missiles. The category does not include, for example, China. I shall deal with my hon. Friend's arguments in my remarks on missile defence, and allow him to intervene if he remains unsatisfied.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): Does my right hon. Friend recognise the inherent contradiction between his explanation of the central role of nuclear weapons in securing our defence and his wish to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons to other countries? Those countries might take the same view as us and believe that nuclear weapons secure their defence.

Mr. Hoon: I do not accept that there is a contradiction, not least because we are trying to protect ourselves and other friends and allies from threats from countries that might not, for example, be deterred by our possessing nuclear weapons and reserving the right to use them in specific circumstances. It is important to consider missile defence in the context of emerging threats from states that might pay no regard to the safety and welfare of their own people.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff, West): On protecting our armed forces, does my right hon. Friend know about the revelations in the hearing in America on the friendly fire killing of four Canadians in an infantry unit in Afghanistan? The United States air force revealed that it had issued amphetamines to its pilots. Has the Secretary of State had an opportunity to consult the US air force about whether the practice will continue in any future military action in which our troops may be at risk? Is it our armed forces policy to issue speed to any of our personnel?

Mr. Hoon: I am aware of the allegations, which have been made during disciplinary proceedings. It is best to allow the proceedings to conclude before making specific comments. To answer my hon. Friend's second question, the Royal Air Force does not adopt such a practice.

Last October, I set out the principles that we needed to consider in order to determine our approach to missile defence. Three months of vigorous debate ensued and, on 17 December, we received a request from the United States to upgrade RAF Fylingdales for missile defence purposes. I came to the House last week to explain our preliminary view that we should accept the request.

I previously emphasised the nature of the threat that confronts us. No responsible Government would fail to give themselves and their successors at least the opportunity to defend themselves and their people against a potentially devastating attack. Nevertheless, hon. Members asked several questions last week and I shall now try to deal with them in more detail.

I do not doubt the sincerity of those who link missile defence with proliferation. However, let us consider the facts. Ballistic missiles and technology have proliferated in North Korea for many years. Iraq used weapons of mass destruction 15 years ago. No one could claim that United States efforts to develop a limited missile defence system caused those events. Surely we cannot ignore the threat to our interests that proliferation in states of concern poses. We have a comprehensive strategy to tackle the threat and we must consider the role that missile defence can play in it.

Missile defence is a defensive system that threatens no one. Indeed, it could work against proliferation. There is little point in a country spending huge amounts of money on acquiring ballistic missiles when it is faced with the probability that any missile attack would fail because of missile defence.

Some hon. Members asked about the possibility of an increased threat to RAF Fylingdales. As I said previously, states of concern that develop a few crude ballistic missiles are unlikely to want to use one of their limited number against the base.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): As I understand it, the argument was that developing missile defence would deter states such as North Korea from trying to develop missiles. Under Clinton, the US concentrated on diplomacy, and North Korea seemed to be slowing down what it was doing. Under Bush, diplomacy has made way for a concentration on missile defence. Does North Korea seem to be responding to that in a positive way?

Mr. Hoon: I do not think that my hon. Friend has grasped my argument. I suggested that, in pure deterrence terms, a country could be deterred from spending a significant proportion of national income on developing threatening ballistic missiles—as North Korea undoubtedly does—if it were to recognise that there was little or no chance of those missiles getting through.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way, and I hope that he will put me right if I have failed to grasp the argument. He has said that an anti-ballistic missile system would act as a deterrent to rogue states, as they would not put money into developing their own weapons. How does that chime with mutually assured destruction, the policy adopted by the west and the Soviet Union in the cold war? Has not the defeat of the Soviet Union meant that there is a massive atomic arsenal that cannot be decommissioned with any safety? Is not that where rogue states will obtain weapons of mass destruction?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend at least recognises that the debate has moved on from MAD. In the past, many colleagues—at least on the Labour Benches—consistently criticised that policy. The potential availability of missile defence to the US has encouraged that country to reduce significantly its offensive missile systems, and that reduction is something for which many Labour Members, including my hon. Friend, have worked consistently. That seems to me to be an enormous success, arising out of the efforts of the US. I am slightly surprised that my hon. Friend has not congratulated the US.

Mike Gapes (Ilford, South) *rose—*

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) *rose—*

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North) *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden).

Richard Burden: If missile defence is about increasing security, should not that protection be available to all countries? If so, should it not be under international control—in other words, the UN? What on earth is the justification for its being under the control of just two states, the US and possibly Great Britain?

Mr. Hoon: The US President's statement last year indicated his willingness to extend missile defence to allies in NATO. That is certainly an extension from the original proposals, which were described as "national missile defence". The only other factual point that I would make is that a ballistic missile defence system already exists. It is located in and around the city of Moscow, and has been part of the defensive mechanisms of the former Soviet Union and Russia for many years.

Mr. Chaytor: Will my right hon. Friend clarify the argument in relation to deterrence? He has said that the debate has moved on from MAD, but also that our nuclear weapons provide an effective deterrent. However, he has also said that there are some states against which our nuclear weapons do not provide an effective deterrence. Does nuclear deterrence work, or not?

Mr. Hoon: I do not think that there is any inconsistency in the arguments that I have set out. I recognise that the UK's possession of nuclear weapons is a powerful deterrent to any country foolish enough to challenge us. On the other hand, it is equally true that there are a few states—I make no apologies for mentioning North Korea and Iraq in this connection—that have no particular regard for their own people. Such states might risk the threat of nuclear or other retaliation, regardless of the interests of their own people. It is logical to say that MAD might deter those states rational enough to recognise the risk of significant retaliation. Equally, however, there are regimes—and I have mentioned two of them—that are capable of ignoring that risk because they have no regard whatsoever for the safety and security of their people.

Mike Gapes *rose—*

Jeremy Corbyn *rose—*

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South) *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: I shall give way once more at this stage, to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham). I shall come back to other hon. Friends later.

Mr. Cunningham: My right hon. Friend mentioned by name two states that pose a threat. What other states pose a threat?

Mr. Hoon: There are others, but the states that I named best demonstrate my point.

I was dealing with the terrorist threat to our military installations, and I emphasise that they are well guarded against such a threat. I want to dismiss the rather far-fetched idea that state-sponsored terrorists could blind the missile defence system a few minutes before a ballistic missile attack. The Fylingdales radar was designed during the cold war, when we faced the threat of military assault from the Soviet Union. It is well within the capabilities of the system to withstand a lesser threat. If we were only a few minutes away from a ballistic missile attack, I find it impossible to believe that anyone would prefer that we had done nothing to help protect us, our people or our allies.

Hon. Members have also raised the technological challenges. No one doubts that they are considerable. That is why the US has invested considerable sums in its wide-ranging research and development programme. We have worked closely with the US in that area for many years. A new technical memorandum of understanding will give us full insight into the developing missile defence programme, and allow the close involvement of British industry.

The UK benefits greatly from the role that RAF Fylingdales has played, and will continue to play, in the ballistic missile early warning system.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): What the Secretary of State has just said recognises that there are two components to missile defence—upgraded radar, and the interceptor that would bring down any attacking missile. The right hon. Gentleman has been somewhat opaque about Britain's participation in the interceptor programme. Will he confirm that he has not ruled out

[Mr. Gerald Howarth]

the possibility that interceptors could be based on British soil? Will he say a little more about the opportunities for British industry arising from participation in this very important US programme?

Mr. Hoon: I indicated the possibilities for British industry once the new memorandum of understanding is resolved. I shall come to the other matters raised by the hon. Gentleman in due course.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way to me a second time. He has not convinced me of the arguments in favour of national missile defence. When he reads his speech on another day, will he reflect that many of those who wanted a Labour Government in 1997 and 2001 wanted a Government who were committed to global disarmament of nuclear weapons? My right hon. Friend has said nothing about global disarmament, but a great deal about accelerating and exacerbating a very dangerous arms race around the world.

Mr. Hoon: I am sorry that my hon. Friend feels like that. I regret that I have been unable to persuade him, although I live in hope. However, I have mentioned global disarmament. I answered an earlier question, from my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Glenda Jackson), by setting out the importance that I attach to the Moscow treaty and the significant reduction in offensive systems agreed by the US and Russia. That seems to me to be something that should be applauded. Given my hon. Friend's record of campaigning on these matters over many years, I am slightly surprised that he has not mentioned that treaty, and congratulated the US on it.

Mr. Harold Best (Leeds, North-West): I have been listening to my right hon. Friend, and am reminded of the film "Dr. Strangelove", which dealt with the insanity of the MAD approach. I regret that, in arguing for missile defence, my right hon. Friend seems to adopt that approach. Does he agree that the logical consequence of his argument is that more weapons systems will be evolved to overcome missile defences? Indeed, would not that be a cheaper way to develop those weapons systems?

Mr. Hoon: I rather thought that I was arguing precisely the opposite. The availability of missile defence might avoid the nightmare scenario in the Stanley Kubrick film to which my hon. Friend refers. However, it may be that we require more opportunities to debate the issue at greater length than today affords.

Mike Gapes: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Savidge: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hoon: I have given way once to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge), but I have not given way to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mike Gapes).

Mike Gapes: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the debate about these issues has moved on from the 1980s? The Reagan Administration's star wars was superseded by Clinton's talk of national missile defence; now the debate is about some form—as yet undefined—of co-operative missile defence system. In those circumstances, would it not be helpful for my right honourable Friend's Department to produce a briefing dealing with these theoretical and theological aspects of the debate because, unfortunately, a lot of the language and terminology, whether it is Dr. Strangelove or Dr. Kissinger—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. The hon. Gentleman must bring his question to a close.

Mr. Hoon: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend; the debate has moved on significantly. Unfortunately, sometimes the arguments have not, so it is important that the work that he describes is undertaken. Whether he is better placed to do it than the Ministry of Defence is a matter for him to decide.

Mr. Savidge: My right hon. Friend has been very generous. When he boasts of the wonders of the treaty of Moscow, is he really suggesting that a four-page document, with a mass of let-out clauses in it, that does not ask for the destruction of a single missile and simply asks for them to be dismantled and put into storage, and asks that its target figures be achieved only by 31 December 2112—the date on which the treaty expires—is really that much better than the START negotiations, which were rather more positive?

Mr. Hoon: Again, I am sorry that my hon. Friend is determined to see the worst side of those agreements. It seems to me to be enormous progress that the United States and Russia have reached those agreements, and although all of us would like to see more such agreements going further than this one, this is a significant start, and one we should applaud.

I was referring to the fact that Fylingdales is controlled and staffed by the RAF, save for a single American military liaison officer. We have access to all the data relating to early warning and missile attack and for the tracking of space objects; not just that provided by Fylingdales, but from the whole system of radars and satellites. Essentially, the same arrangements would continue after the upgrade. These arrangements would include the data generated during the brief periods when Fylingdales was engaged in the more accurate missile-tracking mode required for its new mission.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): In his very interesting evidence session with the Defence Committee last week, the Secretary of State said that he could find no reasonable reason for not agreeing to the request. What will be the timing for the request to be properly consulted on and then for a decision to be made? When does he expect the upgrade to take place, and when would it be in use?

Mr. Hoon: Clearly, it is necessary for us to notify the United States formally. I said to the Committee that I anticipated that the decision would not be long delayed thereafter. As I said to the Committee, there will be a significant period of preparation and the work will be taken forward in time to meet the US deadline so that a basic system is in place for 2004–05.

Some concerns have been expressed about possible future developments and, specifically, about what is known as X-band radar. I want to make it clear that the United States has not asked us to site an X-band radar in the United Kingdom, nor are we aware of any plans to do so. Nor has the United States requested the use of interceptor sites in the United Kingdom. Interceptors would be required for missile defence coverage of Europe, although there is no need necessarily to co-locate them with the radars. The United Kingdom could, indeed, be protected by interceptors placed elsewhere in Europe, but whether the United Kingdom should acquire missile defence is a quite separate decision for the future. The immediate question is whether we should preserve the possibility of such defences ever protecting the people of the United Kingdom.

Jim Knight (South Dorset): What is my right hon. Friend's view on theatre missile defence, an aspect of the debate that has not really surfaced? There is concern about the protection of our forces in theatre. Other countries, including some of our European partners, seem to be doing more on this subject. Are we to follow suit?

Mr. Hoon: It is certainly something about which we are concerned and it is something on which we have various co-operative development programmes with a number of allies. However, it is increasingly recognised that there is no clear distinction between what is known as theatre missile defence and the more strategic defences that I am describing. Therefore, the technological challenges are very similar as regards both. I anticipate that the United States work that is under way will inform and assist work on developing a purely theatre missile defence system.

I assured the House that the Government would agree to the request to upgrade RAF Fylingdales only if we were satisfied that ultimately it would enhance the security of the United Kingdom and the NATO alliance. An upgraded radar at RAF Fylingdales would provide us, at no cost to the United Kingdom, with a vital building block on which missile defence for this country and for our European neighbours could be developed if the need arose, and if that is what we decide.

Hugh Bayley (City of York): What conversations has my right hon. Friend had with his opposite number in Denmark about the United States application to use the Thule base in the same way as Fylingdales? Will he be seeking to co-ordinate the response that he makes with that made by the Danish Government?

Mr. Hoon: There have been discussions; the request was issued in parallel and we continue to be in close contact with Denmark about the issues.

Ballistic missile defence is one significant response to the threat posed by rogue states, but it cannot be our only reaction. We must look also to control the proliferation of the technologies that might arm such missiles or, for that matter, other delivery systems. We are aware of several countries with an interest in acquiring a nuclear capability. Their weapons programmes are all at differing stages of development. Rather more countries already possess chemical and biological weapons and are now seeking to improve their capabilities, and a number of countries that do not yet have chemical or biological weapons harbour aspirations to acquire them.

While the nature of the real danger posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction may vary over time, when it presents an immediate and real threat to world security, then we must act, and act decisively.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West): My right hon. Friend refers to the threat of proliferation and the danger changing over time. It is acknowledged that Iraq was a danger in the 1980s and early 1990s, but is now in an impoverished state. Will he describe to us how Saddam Hussein might use his weapons of mass destruction now against the United Kingdom? The Falklands hero Simon Weston raised this matter this morning; he said that he, like many others, could see no positive threat to the United Kingdom from Iraq.

Mr. Hoon: Last year, the Government published a detailed dossier, drawing on a number of sources, about the threat that Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq poses. The dossier contained some detailed supporting evidence, showing that—notwithstanding the undertaking that Saddam Hussein gave at the end of the Gulf war—he has continued with programmes to develop weapons of mass destruction, including determined efforts to develop a nuclear weapon and the means of delivering one. That is a complete answer to my hon. Friend; clearly the risk is a matter of grave concern and one that we cannot ignore at this stage.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): The Secretary of State referred a second ago to success in the Gulf war, part of which was down to equipment built by BAE Systems. Recent press reports indicate a strained relationship between his Department and the company. Questions have been asked about orders and about the company's future and balance sheet. At a time when we are putting considerable dependence on companies such as BAE Systems, will the right honourable Gentleman say a word or two about the current situation in order to put the facts on record, as opposed to speculation?

Mr. Hoon: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that the Ministry of Defence has an excellent relationship with BAE Systems, a very successful British and international company, and one that we rely on for a great deal of our defence equipment and I anticipate will continue to rely on for many years to come. It does an excellent job on behalf of the armed forces of the United Kingdom, and we want to ensure that it continues to do so. Indeed, as soon as I am released from my responsibilities here, I have a meeting with the chief executive of BAE Systems. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that relations between the Ministry of Defence and BAE Systems are excellent.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Hoon: I give way to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis).

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): In response to the question that the hon. Member for Newport, West

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

(Paul Flynn) posed about Iraq using weapons of mass destruction, surely there is the point made by the Prime Minister quite forcefully last week, which is that Saddam Hussein could indeed supply terrorist organisations with, for example, biological weapons that he has previously manufactured and then deny all responsibility for them when they were used.

Mr. Hoon: That is indeed a point made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, but I anticipate that hon. Members are now beginning to deliver the speech that I would like to give, if only I were given the opportunity to do so. I want to make progress.

Mr. Doug Henderson (Newcastle upon Tyne, North): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hoon: I will give way in due course.

Saddam Hussein's regime poses a clear threat. There can be no question of the potential for Iraq to use its weapons of mass destruction. That has already been tangibly demonstrated—it has used them on its neighbours and on its own people. The international community has for many years demonstrated its concern about the very real threat posed by Iraq's illegal weapon holdings through a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions, and most recently when the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1441. That resolution gives Saddam Hussein one last chance to respect the will of the international community. Experience has shown, however, that he is not a man who will do that readily. It is for that reason that the contingency planning that has been carried out by the Ministry of Defence over recent months has in the past days and weeks necessarily moved up a gear.

Mr. Doug Henderson: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way, especially as he has taken so many interventions. May I raise again the point that was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West(Paul Flynn)—the Simon Weston point? Is not my right hon. Friend concerned that there is considerable anxiety among the chiefs in the forces and among the rank and file that the Government might be asking them to do something that lacks the support of the public in this country? Is not that extremely dangerous for the relationship between our political institutions and our military institutions? Would it not be better for the Government to listen to the public, listen to a lot of the advice that they are getting from the senior staffs, and get back into a containment strategy which the public understand—and if not, to go through the United Nations?

Mr. Hoon: I think that we have to treat the snapshot polls as we do such polls on other issues. However, as I understand the latest polling, it showed that when asked a question about the Government's policy and pursuit of the policy through the United Nations, the overwhelming majority of the people in this country do support what the Government are doing, and I have no doubt that that is the case. It is certainly my experience from my constituency and that seems to be the position recorded in at least the most recent poll that I have seen.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) *rose—*

Mr. Chaytor *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: I wish to make progress, if the House will forgive me.

On Monday I announced to the House the composition and deployment of a land force of about 26,000 servicemen and women to provide military capabilities for potential operations in Iraq. That force package will supplement the recent deployment of the amphibious task group, which itself comprises in total about 8,000 personnel. As I explained on Monday, we are also actively considering the composition of a balanced contribution from the Royal Air Force. I will update the House once decisions have been taken.

I want to deal now with the stories that hon. Members will have seen in the press, alleging that our troops are poorly equipped.

Mr. Tony Banks (West Ham): I am sorry to add to the friendly fire falling upon my right hon. Friend and I am certainly not on speed, but may I just ask him a question? We have dispatched a quarter of our forces—26,000, he just said—as a contingency force for possible action in Iraq. Will he explain to us, because we need to understand, why it is that our European partners do not appear to share that concern? They do not appear to have deployed any of their troops. Could my right honourable Friend suggest why their perspective on the matter seems radically to differ from that of the British Government?

Mr. Hoon: I do not accept that it does radically differ. The only European nation that has specifically ruled out the use of force is Germany. Before they have seen the evidence from the weapons inspectors, all other countries, undoubtedly reflecting their different constitutional arrangements, are at various stages in the political process to decide whether or not they would participate, so I do not accept my hon. Friend's assertion that there is any lack of support for the position that the United Kingdom Government has set out.

Bob Russell (Colchester): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hoon: No; I need to make progress, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

I want to reassure the House and the country that British personnel deployed on operations will be properly equipped by the Ministry of Defence, and fully capable of fulfilling the tasks that may be required of them. They will be properly equipped to deal with the environmental conditions that they face. The Ministry of Defence has long had contracts in place to ensure that sufficient stocks of desert clothing and boots are available very quickly. It is simply not practical or sensible to hold, on a permanent basis, vast stocks of clothing for every conceivable operational environment.

If we did, we would be rightly accused of wasteful spending. For example, we already hold substantial stocks of desert boots, and are taking delivery of thousands more. The same is true of desert trousers and jackets; we expect an early delivery of 90,000 more of each.

The operational modification programme for the Challenger 2 tank and the AS90 self-propelled guns, improving efficiency in desert conditions by adding side skirts and improving air filtration systems, is now in progress. It will continue while the equipment is in transit, and on arrival in theatre if required. All combat and close support troops will be equipped with the modified and highly reliable SA80 A2 rifle.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way, and this is a helpful intervention. Can he assure the House that all British armed forces have been equipped with the latest A2 version of the SA80?

Mr. Hoon: If the hon. Gentleman had been listening, he would have heard me say that all combat and close support troops would be equipped with the modified rifle, and that is the position.

The protection of our troops is an absolute priority. Contrary to press speculation, our ability to protect and operate in a nuclear, biological or chemical environment is second to none. Our training and equipment mean that we are prepared to meet this threat if necessary, and make a proportionately serious response should anyone use such weapons against us.

Our combat identification procedures are effective. This is about new technology, situational awareness, target identification, tactics, techniques and procedures. Specific provision has been and is being made to minimise the risks of friendly fire, but the House will understand why I should not go into the specific detail.

New potential operations and new security challenges inevitably result in new requirements, such as those identified through Exercise Saif Sareea. Work to address those has taken place over the last few months, and is now nearing completion.

I hope that hon. Members will not allow misleading and tendentious press reports to divert attention from the fact that our armed forces will be prepared, in all respects, for what we may ask of them.

This significant deployment of credible military capability underlines the United Kingdom's determination to work with our allies to disarm Saddam Hussein's Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction. We do not take these decisions to deploy lightly or easily, but with caution and circumspection.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): On that point, is pre-emption now officially part of the defence policy of this country?

Mr. Hoon: I have always emphasised, as has every other Minister addressing these questions, that whatever action we take must be within international law, and it has always seemed to me—straying into my former occupation for a while—that pre-emption is simply a form of self-defence, and that is the basis on which it could be and would be justifiable in international law.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: Indeed, for those who doubt this proposition there are a number of examples of pre-emption as long ago as the 19th century, when these principles of international law were developing.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): The Government are a member of the United Nations, and the United Nations specifically prohibits pre-emptive and defensive strikes against countries that are not threatening us. What is the threat from Iraq?

Mr. Hoon: I refer my hon. Friend to what I said a few moments ago. The United Nations charter specifically allows for self-defence in article 51, and that is the basis on which I would rest our case.

We are dealing with a regime that has defied a series of United Nations obligations for more than a decade. We are dealing with a regime that has authorised the use, with lethal effect, of appalling weapons both within and beyond its borders. We are dealing with the very real danger that its illegal weapons could find their way into the hands of international terrorists.

As a responsible member of the international community and of the UN Security Council, we must deal with the threat of weapons of mass destruction. In the case of Iraq, we are pursuing that policy through the deployment of a significant force to the Gulf region. We are doing this as part of a process of long and careful deliberation about how best to coerce Saddam Hussein into disarming. We believe that that is the right action to take—that it is the most effective means of achieving our aims, which are in the interests of the Iraqi people and, more widely, of the Gulf region as a whole.

Not just the security of the middle east is at stake, however. If Iraq is allowed to develop its chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programmes it will send a signal to other nations, encouraging them to defy non-proliferation standards. Our policy on Iraq must be seen as part of a global non-proliferation effort.

Mr. Chaytor: May I return to the question of self-defence? Does my right hon. Friend think that the first use of British nuclear weapons in Iraq could be defended under international law on the grounds that it was a form of self-defence?

Mr. Hoon: I do not consider that helpful, and I will not become involved in a debate about it at this stage. The Prime Minister made it clear yesterday that there were limited circumstances in which he might contemplate the use of such weapons, but that they would be extreme circumstances involving self-defence. That has always been, and remains, the policy of the British Government.

I emphasise that we have not yet made any decision to commit our forces to conflict. All our actions have been motivated by the strongest desire to avoid war; no steps under way cannot be stopped should a peaceful solution prevail. We are confident, however, that those who

[Mr. Hoon]

deploy to the region will, in their actions, enhance the outstanding reputation of the United Kingdom's armed forces as a force for good in what is an increasingly uncertain world. They will leave with our strong support, and our best wishes for a safe and speedy return.

Iraq is not the only issue that we and the international community must confront. We should be in no doubt that international terrorism remains a real and potent danger to both the wider world and the people of the United Kingdom. The determination of groups such as al-Qaeda to obtain chemical and other weapons of mass destruction is well known. We know that terrorists will use such weapons. The House will recall that AUM Shinriko attacked the Tokyo subway with sarin nerve gas in March 1995. Given the opportunity, terrorists will use these weapons again. The recent arrests and discovery of attempts to produce ricin here in the United Kingdom have shown that we cannot afford to be complacent.

That is not the only reason why we remain committed to the campaign against international terrorism, however. There can be no illusions about terrorists: they will try to damage us in any way they can. Al-Qaeda's attacks in New York, Bali and Mombasa did not rely on weapons of mass destruction, but the House knows the devastation and loss of innocent lives they caused.

My right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Ministry of Defence will say more about our contribution to the global coalition's campaign against international terrorism, but I remind the House that on 16 October 2001 the Government defined their objectives for that campaign. I want to mention two of them specifically. First, the United Kingdom will do everything possible to eliminate the threat posed by international terrorism. Secondly, it will renew efforts to bear down on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. I assure the House that our armed forces will play their full part in achieving both those aims, seeking to eliminate terrorism as a force in international affairs.

Llew Smith: If the Government decide to nuke Iraq, will that reduce the possibility of establishing a more democratic regime?

Mr. Hoon: I am rather sorry that I gave way to my hon. Friend. I have already dealt with the first part of his question, and he can deal with the second part himself by consulting the objectives of our policy on Iraq as set out recently by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. My right hon. Friend said specifically that one of those objectives was to restore a representative Government in Iraq, which I consider a proper policy objective.

I do not intend to overlook the military contributions that we are making elsewhere. We remain committed to safeguarding peace and stability in the Balkans. We have more than 1,500 troops serving in Kosovo and another 1,400 in Bosnia, representing a significant commitment to aiding the people of the region. The agreement of Berlin Plus at the Copenhagen European Council opened the way for the European Union to have access to NATO's planning facilities, assets and capabilities, and it will allow the European Union to take on NATO's operational tasks in Macedonia and Bosnia. The strategic relationship between the EU and the NATO alliance with regard to crisis management is now a reality.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Now that the Secretary of State says that the strategic alliance between the European Union and NATO is a reality, can he tell us which operations will be carried out by NATO and which will be carried out by means of the European security and defence policy?

Mr. Hoon: Those are clearly matters for discussion and negotiation among members of the international community, many of which—like the United Kingdom—are part of both arrangements and will therefore have an influential voice. What interests me more—the hon. Gentleman may be able to tell us about it in a few moments—is whether his party now supports those arrangements. As he has opposed them consistently so far, I assume that in the interests of consistency he will continue to do so.

Military operations are significant, but if our armed forces are to be a force for good we must also support and maintain the right security structures and systems. That is why we welcome the recent developments in the North Atlantic Alliance. The Prague summit in November gave renewed impetus with regard to capabilities, command and force structures, modernisation of the NATO bureaucracy and partnership. It also invited seven nations to begin accession negotiations. That is evidence—if evidence were needed—of the continuing relevance, health and vitality of the alliance, for the invited countries know that the alliance is both resilient and flexible in responding to the demands of a fast-changing strategic setting. They want to be part of that alliance.

Member states are also committed to dealing with military capability gaps. The new NATO response force promises to sharpen the cutting edge of the extremely successful high readiness force structure, and the command structure is undergoing fundamental review, making it leaner, more effective and more focused on what really matters in a post-cold war world confronted by proliferation, rogue states and terrorism.

The House may know of NATO's announcement this morning that Lord Robertson will step down as Secretary-General at the end of the year. Let me take this opportunity to express our gratitude for his huge contribution to NATO, and particularly to its modernisation and adaptation, during his time in office.

It is rightly not unusual in defence debates to praise the men and women of the armed forces. The praise is deserved, because they are essential if the United Kingdom is to carry out the responsibilities that our position in the world demands. Without them we could not act to help maintain international peace and security in the face of the dangers, including those presented by weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism. We do not take our armed forces lightly or for granted, because theirs is not an easy job. What we recognise is that they excel in whatever tasks they undertake. That excellence will continue as they prepare to face the risks and dangers of an increasingly uncertain and unpredictable world.

2.38 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): The Secretary of State has made an important speech. It is a shame, perhaps, that it has been overshadowed by other Government announcements today. I hope it receives the publicity that it deserves. We believe the endorsement of missile defence upgrading at Fylingdales is an important decision. I have little to add to what the Secretary of State has said about missile defence, except our welcome for that decision.

The Secretary of State has some explaining to do to his own party—not, I hasten to add, from his own point of view. To his credit, I do not think he is on record as ever having opposed missile defence, but his party was clearly opposed to it in principle, and a champion of the anti-ballistic missile treaty. It will take time for some of his colleagues to become used to the new Government position.

I understand why the right hon. Gentleman wants to go on avoiding the question of whether Britain will participate in the United States global missile defence programme. I do not think that it benefits the United Kingdom to go on avoiding that decision as the right hon. Gentleman attempted to avoid the previous one. I think that he is about as likely to turn down the American request for Fylingdales as to turn down the opportunity to participate in missile defence. The only sad thing is that British industry—the British defence industry—will lose out as a result of the Government's failure to participate enthusiastically in the missile defence programme as it develops. There is also the possibility that we will lose the opportunity to influence the architecture of the system, which we might yet influence to our advantage and that of Europe.

This debate, entitled "Defence in the World", will inevitably be largely preoccupied with the deployments of British forces now under way, and it is very clear that a large number of right hon. and hon. Members wish to speak. As a courtesy to them, I shall try to keep my comments as brief as possible.

The Opposition have consistently supported the broad thrust of the Government's policy of diplomacy, backed by force, against Iraq ever since the Prime Minister first made his position known in the summer, and we continue to do so.

Bob Russell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way as twice the Secretary of State would not do so. I shall ask him the question that I would have asked the Secretary of State. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the popular support in the country for our armed forces should not be read as popular support for the Government's adventure in Iraq?

Mr. Jenkin: I shall come later in my comments to the question of popular support for the Government's policy on Iraq because it is extremely important, and I am sure that it exercises the Government as much as anyone else.

The Prime Minister is right to maintain, however, that action must be taken to deal with the growing threat posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. In particular, questions remain about the

"accurate, full, and complete declaration of"

weapons capabilities provided by Iraq to the UN on 7 December, as required in paragraph 3 of resolution 1441, from which I quote. The head of the UN inspectors, Hans Blix, has already stated that the documentation contains gaps. Paragraph 4 of the resolution makes it clear how that omission can lead to a material breach. We are still waiting to find out whether the Government believe that there is, or will be, a material breach of resolution 1441.

Our support for the Government, however, is not unconditional. No Prime Minister should—we do not believe that this one will—ever commit Britain to military action on the say-so of another country, even the United States. The Government need to make the case for military action on its own merits if it becomes necessary and make the case that disarming Iraq is in the interests of the British people. We believe that to be so.

Furthermore, if military action becomes necessary, it is certainly preferable that the Government make an effort to achieve the clearest UN endorsement and that will have our fullest support, but a second resolution is not a prerequisite. The danger is that in such circumstances Britain could find its hands tied. The interests of one nation on the Security Council may lead to the interests of the British people being vetoed. There is a precedent: when Britain acted to free the people of Kosovo, Russia would never have agreed to support a UN resolution on that matter. In that case, Britain joined a coalition to free that nation's people from terror. It would be worrying if Britain could not take such principled action again.

Joan Ruddock: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that there was a very clear moral imperative in the case that he cites? Present and immediate genocide was under way. That is not the case at present in Iraq, as far as I am aware.

Mr. Jenkin: It is interesting to discuss what motivates military intervention. I submit that there was not only genocide, but a direct threat to the stability of our continent. We are in very dangerous territory. Why not, for example, immediately authorise a military intervention in Zimbabwe, where a massive humanitarian crisis is being inflicted on its people by a vicious tyrant? Why does the hon. Lady believe that a country such as Iraq obtaining weapons of mass destruction and having relationships with terrorist organisations is something from which we can simply walk away? We cannot.

It would be worrying if Britain could not take such principled action again. Military action would still depend on a broad international consensus, particularly among those nations that border Iraq, and provided that any military action remains within international law, we must be prepared to take such action. Now that the Government have committed themselves to a very major deployment, there are many questions that we could ask, including many that I do not expect them to answer, but it would surely help the House if they could clarify some issues.

The Secretary of State did not answer my questions about the command arrangements for British forces in the Gulf. We have read a certain amount about that in the press, and I should be grateful to him if he could

[Mr. Jenkin]

inform the House at some stage. Similarly, the Government did not say where the main element of United Kingdom forces would be deployed. Again, at some stage, I am sure that the Secretary of State will wish to ensure that the House is informed. It is important that the public should understand that, although UK forces will operate under overall US command, the UK command can nevertheless retain the discretion to act as a partner rather than a servant of US military commanders.

The force is clearly configured to sustain itself for a considerable period. There should be no doubt about the magnitude of the commitment that the United Kingdom is taking on. If war is avoided—we still hope that it will be—how long might the presence of substantial UK land forces be required? If there is military action, how long will UK forces be committed, and on what scale, to deal with the aftermath of war? After Afghanistan, the Prime Minister assured the people there that we would not just walk away. Does the deployment for a much bigger operation indicate a similar long-term commitment on behalf of western nations?

Bob Spink: My hon. Friend is right to take that line. Does he agree that we should be preparing for political solutions post-Saddam in Iraq, as well as for the possibility of military action there? Does he welcome the fact that the Kurdistan National Assembly reconvened in October? Does he think that we should give more support, recognition and encouragement to such bodies, so that they come forward in Iraq?

Mr. Jenkin: I am anxious not to place prescriptions on the Government, but we have pressed them to be clearer about what they envisage might happen if the Saddam regime collapses, or if Saddam Hussein flees the country or is defeated militarily. In particular, we are anxious to know what role British aid policy will play in the event of such circumstances, and the Secretary of State for International Development has been pretty silent so far on those eventualities.

Yesterday, the Foreign Secretary said in concluding his statement on global terrorism and Iraq:

> "Our country can never become an island of security in the face of the global dangers of terrorism and rogue states, so just as we should redouble our efforts to enforce the law at home, our interests demand that we be at the forefront of enforcing the law overseas."—[*Official Report*, 21 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 168.]

That statement suggests that Britain is preparing seriously to increase our role as an international policeman. I ask the Minister to tell us in his winding-up speech whether that is the intention. Even if it is not, the deployment raises very serious questions about the sustainability and overstretch of the British armed forces.

Half the Army and a very substantial part of the other two services are now deployed on operations. The Army in particular will take some years to recover the stability of its training and readiness cycle. Is it not now clear that the Army is too small to meet the sustained challenges we now face? It is a sad comment on the Government's commitment to the armed forces that the Army recruiting group should have run out of money at such a time.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): What is the Opposition's position on the role of being an international policeman? How do they tie that in with military action being legitimate only in defence of national interests, as was argued earlier? International policing could go well beyond anything that was a matter of national interest.

Mr. Jenkin: The hon. Gentleman raises a very pertinent question. It really is about adjusting to the new strategic climate in which we now have to operate. The question whether we should play a greater role in international affairs, particularly with our armed forces, must be very much regulated by what we are prepared to spend on defence. The Government must be prepared to match the military commitments they take on with the resources necessary to fulfil those commitments. I question whether that is the case on a sustainable basis at present.

On the other question of the whole climate and how we respond to the new strategic environment in which we now live, I will make some comments later that will address the hon. Gentleman's point.

Hugh Bayley: The hon. Gentleman complains that the armed forces are too small to deal with the tasks they face. Does he not recall that in the last 10 years that his party was in power defence spending was cut by a third, but under our party it has increased each year? Will the hon. Gentleman give a commitment that his party will match pound for pound our party's spending on defence?

Mr. Jenkin: It is unfortunate that on an occasion such as this, when such serious issues are under discussion, the hon. Gentleman should start scoring political points. However, if he wants to trade party political points, I could say that the size of the armed forces has continued to shrink under the present Government, despite the radically changed strategic climate that we are now in. I do not recall his party objecting to any of the reductions in the armed forces that took place under "Options for Change" during the 1990s. On the contrary, I remember his party constantly urging the Government to cut more than we did.

The question that we now need to face is whether we are spending enough to enable our armed forces to meet the commitments that the Government place upon them. There is no doubt that the strategic defence review was premised on an increase in expenditure that was not delivered, and that we are now fulfilling many more military commitments around the world than was originally envisaged.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is not the most significant point about the attitude of scores of Labour Members that they are in favour of expenditure on defence forces only as long as those forces are never used? Given that Saddam is both a pathological killer and a proven liar, is it not regrettable that substantial numbers of Labour and Liberal Democrat. Members can offer us only an exercise in sustained hand-wringing?

Mr. Jenkin: My hon. Friend's point makes itself.

With such a large overseas deployment, what is the position of the armed forces left at home, and what sort of circumstances do they face?

For example, the Government have deployed the First Battalion of the Royal Tank Regiment, a nuclear, biological and chemical warfare regiment. That is obviously an appropriate element to deploy to this operation. But what NBC cover is left at home to deal with a potential terrorist attack? Do the Government begin to detect something of a morale problem in line regiments and other frontline forces, which find themselves confined to firefighting and possibly another tour in Northern Ireland for as far as the eye can see?

We are constantly told that the opinion polls show a majority of the British public to be opposed to war. Such polls inevitably depend upon the nature of the question and the timing. No civilised human being wants a war. At this time President Bush and the Prime Minister are seeking to avoid a war. It nevertheless remains one of the biggest challenges the Government face to ensure that the nation will be in true support of our armed forces if the time comes for military action.

The Prime Minister has been passionate in the advocacy of his policy, but, periodically, he has been drawing on different arguments. The need to stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction begs the question: why Iraq and not North Korea? There is no doubt about North Korea's nuclear weapons and long-range missiles programmes—it boasts about them. Moreover, last week the Secretary of State said that North Korea might be able to strike directly at the United Kingdom within weeks.

The Government have also published a dossier on Saddam Hussein's human rights record. That certainly strengthens the moral case, against Saddam Hussein. The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) might reflect on that. For some, it is certainly a pretext for intervention. If so, why not publish, as I asked earlier, an equivalent dossier on human rights in Zimbabwe? Only recently have the Government started to set out the arguments about links between Saddam Hussein's Iraq, weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate) *rose—*

Paul Flynn (Newport, West) *rose—*

Mr. Jenkin: What a choice! I give way to the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Glenda Jackson).

Glenda Jackson: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman has made the best choice.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, and indeed my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary in his most recent statement, have been at some pains to point out that there is no evidence linking Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, where does the hon. Gentleman obtain his evidence for making a direct link between Iraq and international terror as we have experienced it?

Mr. Jenkin: The hon. Lady must have kept herself rather immune from much of the speculation in the press, which is probably based upon sound judgment that there are substantial links between Saddam Hussein and terrorist networks. Saddam Hussein has worked with al-Qaeda in the past and he has sheltered known terrorists. He is today assisting certain terrorist movements. The hon. Lady would have to be blind to have missed that fact. The Government need to make that fact clearer.

Glenda Jackson: As I heard one of my hon. Friends say from a sedentary position, there must be a lot of very blind people here.

The hon. Gentleman referred to Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden working together. I should point out to him that Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein have both worked with, and been funded and supported by, the United States of America.

Mr. Jenkin: I certainly think that the latter was a mistake, and that the Government would admit that it was a mistake. I have heard representatives of the United States Government admit that it was a mistake. The important fact is that, for example, the 1993 al-Qaeda attack on the twin towers was known to have been supported by Saddam Hussein. Most particularly—

Paul Flynn *rose—*

Mr. Jenkin: I should like to finish the point.

Saddam Hussein was the only world leader at the time to welcome the destruction of the twin towers in New York and the attacks on the Pentagon.

Paul Flynn: I think that the hon. Gentleman was in the House when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence was asked precisely whether there was any proof of collaboration between the Iraqi regime and al-Qaeda. My right hon. Friend said quite specifically that there was absolutely no evidence of any link between Saddam Hussein and what happened on 11 September.

Mr. Jenkin: The hon. Gentleman is entitled to put these questions to his own Government. After all, it is the recent arrests of suspected terrorists in this country, along with the discovery of materials contaminated with the lethal poison ricin, that seem to have galvanised the Prime Minister and his Government to make the link between terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and rogue states.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Jenkin: I wish to make progress. I do not want to detain the House unnecessarily.

During the cold war the west successfully developed a clear doctrine of nuclear deterrence to contain the Soviet threat. It helped to explain to people throughout Europe and the free world the basis for deploying weapons such as Trident, Cruise and Pershing nuclear missiles. Similarly, British counter-terrorist doctrine served this country well after 1945 in such campaigns as Borneo, Malaya and Oman, and, most significantly, against terrorism in Northern Ireland.

[Mr. Jenkin]

Winning the argument is as much a part of modern warfare as winning the war itself. Now we are fighting a war against terrorism, but the Government have not yet succeeded in articulating a comprehensive doctrine for it. There is clearly need for new strategic thinking to meet new strategic twin threats—international terrorist networks linked to rogue states developing weapons of mass destruction.

On 17 October, I set out to the House what the basis of such a strategy might be. The Foreign Secretary's statement yesterday and the new UN resolution on terrorism would appear to be the first steps towards a more comprehensive approach to international terrorism and rogue states. It needs to be fleshed out, but the argument for threatening and, if necessary, using military force against Saddam Hussein can be won with the broad majority of the British people. It is asking far more of our troops than is reasonable to face military action if there is doubt that the nation is behind them. But the job of explaining would be much easier if people could see that the actions that the Government are taking are in a clear, coherent context of policy and doctrine that shows how the leading democracies of the world are acting rationally and in the wider interests of world peace and stability.

Llew Smith: Putting aside the obvious links between the United States and Iraq, does the hon. Gentleman think that it was somewhat of a mistake for the previous Tory Administration, in particular the Department of Trade and Industry, to encourage the export of military equipment to Iraq, as was highlighted and concluded in the Scott inquiry?

Mr. Jenkin: That point is entirely irrelevant to the debate.

The Secretary of State also addressed the question of the NATO summit, and this is the first opportunity that we have had to address the outcome of the Prague summit. I certainly join him in congratulating the noble Lord Robertson on his term of office as Secretary-General of NATO. He has been seeing NATO through an extremely challenging period and has maintained, so far, its relevance, supremacy and centrality to the security of our nation and our continent.

We remain sceptical about some aspects of the outcome of the Prague summit, particularly about the effectiveness of the commitments to increase military capabilities without targeted increases in defence expenditure. We welcome the creation of the NATO rapid response force, although the composition of that force remains unclear. But have the Government truly resolved the institutional relationship between NATO and the EU? I point out to the Secretary of State that the so called Berlin plus agreement is said to be the basis of the new settlement, but Berlin plus was coined at the 1996 Berlin summit when that referred to the European security and defence identity, long before the ESDP had been conceived and long before the ESDP included non-NATO EU members in the arrangements.

The question that I put to the Secretary of State and to which he could not give a clear answer remains. Who decides whether an operation falls to NATO or the ESDP? Every time a crisis arises, there will be a complex and lengthy political question to resolve—whether that crisis requires European military intervention. I raise that now briefly only because future events are bound to expose the problems.

This is an anxious time for many servicemen and women and their families. The time is approaching when we may need to resolve our differences in the House with a debate, a specific resolution and a vote. If that time comes and we resolve to support military action, that will be the time when we must all give our armed forces our fullest support. They are a beacon of excellence to other nations. They believe in our country. Once a decision has been made we must back them with faith in our own judgment.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind all hon. Members that Mr. Speaker has imposed a 10-minute limit on all Back-Bench speeches.

3.4 pm

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): The Secretary of State in his opening address to the House set out a list of the dangers that face the world. It was a succinct and clear list and one with which many of us would agree. It contained one glaring omission, which is this: the existence of a single, uncontested, uncontrolled superpower, and the nature of the illegal regime that is presently in control of that country.

There are many in the House and outside it who realise that within America lies the solution, but also within America lies the principal problem. There are many in the House and outside it who understand that within America lies the principal cause for hope, and within America lies the principal cause for apprehension. That American paradox is something that I have lived with all my life.

There is no country on the globe that has a greater breadth of internal freedoms, and there is no country on the globe that is more reviled for the perception—very often the accurate perception—that it actively denies those freedoms to others, and the present example of that, transparently, is the Palestinian Arabs. No country in the world in my lifetime has done more for the cause of peace—and I have in mind the Marshall plan which has underpinned economically the peace that we have enjoyed in Europe—and no country in my lifetime has been a greater cause for war.

There is no country at the moment more committed to the war on the abstract noun "terrorism", and yet there is no country in the world in my lifetime that has given aid, succour and encouragement to more terrorist groups, more military dictatorships and more rogue states.

To simply take a list in no particular order, one recollects the corrupt Diem regime in Vietnam; the military overthrow of the democratically elected Government of Salvador Allende; and the support of the Contra guerrillas in Nicaragua. One recollects now, as we speak, the support for the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, one of the vilest terrorist organisations that are operating in Africa. One recollects the unalloyed support of Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran. In those days, the United Nations weapons inspectors need have gone no further than the Customs of the United States, or even, possibly, the Customs at Dover. One now sees the unalloyed support of the war criminal Ariel Sharon. As was memorably said in the last debate by an Opposition Member, every single Israeli bullet that kills a Palestinian is paid for in the United States.

We would therefore urge the Secretary of State to understand the depth of feeling that there is on this side of the debate and the argument about the nature of the regime that is leading us to war in Iraq. The opposition to the war is not based upon an approbation of Saddam Hussein. On the contrary: it is based on a total aversion to Saddam Hussein. I myself have a total loathing, more than anything else, for authoritarian Governments, which is one of the reasons why I occasionally have so much trouble with our own. Nor is our opposition based—I really ask the Secretary of State and the Government to cease this accusation in public against those who oppose the present war in Iraq—on some form of anti-Americanism in itself.

My family, I am proud to say, fulfilled a number of roles in their generation in the second world war. They never let me forget as a child the debt that we owed to American men and women and to America. Subsequently, when I had the great privilege to debate in many universities in that country during the course of the Vietnam war, I came away not with an aversion to America because of that war, which I loathed, but with an enormous respect and love for American institutions, American vitality and American freedoms.

Those on this side of the House and on this side of the argument—who knows whether the two may yet be synonymous—do not harbour within us festering anti-American feelings. Our opposition is to the nature of the American regime, which is as bad as any that I can remember within that paradox. It is ruled, governed and motivated by a ghastly mixture of fundamental Christian evangelism, ruthless Zionism and the oil economy. That mix, if it is allowed to rule us in our international affairs, will bring us nothing but disaster.

Those of us who oppose this war do so because we believe that it is ill-proven and unnecessary—I am neither by nature nor by inclination a pacifist. If I may respond to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who accused me by implication of "hand wringing", I have never done such a thing. If I had coherent evidence that there were weapons of mass destruction trained on my constituents in Medway my opposition to the war would not be based on any form of clammy, wet liberalism. There is no such evidence, however; on the contrary, the evidence points directly against us. The motivation for this war is suspect in the extreme, and those outside the House know that it is so.

Will the Government exercise the considerable influence that they rightly have in Washington to ensure that the progress of the middle east is immensely enhanced by the withdrawal of support for Israel and its present repression of the Palestinian people? At a stroke, that will remove the principal causus belli and the underpinning of terrorism in the world that threatens both them and us. Will the Government also exercise their considerable influence and use the massive sum of £5 billion, which they threaten to expend on this war, in the middle east and particularly in Iraq to give health and succour—and political succour to those who oppose the Iraqi regime? That is not impossible. It was done in Kosovo, as we were reminded only recently. To starve and force Saddam Hussein into submission, although possible, would be done at a terrible price for world peace and for world security. To feed that country back into democracy should be the aim of all of us. I hope that the Secretary of State and Her Majesty's Government understand that those feelings and those sentiments are the basis for much of the opposition here and in the country.

3.13 pm

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): First, I apologise for the absence of my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch), who is at the moment returning from a visit to Kuwait.

There have been very few times in recent years when there has been such worldwide uncertainty and unease owing to a range of perceptible international threats. Central to this collective sentiment is the prospect of an imminent conflict with Iraq, coupled with the shadow of international terrorism that has already spread over a large number of different countries, and the long-standing problems in the middle east. I associate myself with many of the comments of the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) about Israel and Palestine, which I have visited recently. I have considerable sympathy with his views.

The debate could focus on many different aspects of defence in the world, but the Secretary of State implied in his statement last week that this would be the occasion for the House to debate his proposals in dealing with the request from the US to upgrade the early warning radar at Fylingdales for missile defence. The country and the House also rightly expect to have an opportunity to debate in depth current Government policy in respect of Iraq. The point must be made that if the Government believe that missile defence merits the attention of the House, time should also be set aside for a debate on Iraq. Likewise, the time afforded in today's debate is in no way sufficient to address all the strategic and political questions inherent in many of the significant decisions that will have to be taken in the next few weeks and months. How we are to deal with Iraq, and whether or not to participate in the US missile defence programme may both be subjects covered by "defence in the world", but both need separate consideration, and my party has considerable concerns about Government policy on each.

As announced this week, the deployment of more than 30,000 troops to the Gulf is unique in size and has proceeded without any debate or vote in this House. The Secretary of State will be only too well aware that many consider this to be yet another example of proceeding down a predetermined route in conjunction with the United States. Although he has properly emphasised on many occasions that war is not inevitable, realistically, such actions reduce options and increase pressure to use those forces.

The Prime Minister has emphasised that time must be given for the weapons inspectors to undertake their tasks. We entirely agree with that. It therefore seems at the very least somewhat premature to deploy such a large force at this time, bearing in mind the significant

[Mr. Colin Breed]

logistical support that will be required over the prolonged period. The Secretary of State seemed to indicate in his statement earlier this week that a force of this size can be maintained in theatre indefinitely, but that is not a view shared by many other experienced commentators. Is it realistic to think that our troops can be maintained over a prolonged period, to enable inspections to be fully completed and weapons inspectors' reports to be received and considered, before any action is taken?

I welcome the Secretary of State's statement on Monday that a substantive vote in the House would precede any commitment of British troops. That has considerable public support. What would happen, however, if the House were to vote no or with only a relatively small majority in favour? Could we realistically opt out of any operation if the Government chose not to support a US-led invasion? Are we not so operationally tied in to the United States plans that if President Bush gives the word, we will have no real alternative but to follow?

As regards the preparations for the deployment of our troops, there are many questions concerning the quality of the regulation kit, the capability of tanks and helicopters to operate under desert conditions and the position in hospitals at home once military medical staff have been deployed. The time available to make the modifications to the equipment and artillery seems, at best, to be extremely tight, with little or no opportunity for full testing to ensure that the alternations have been successful. In particular, the communications problems identified in Oman are very significant so much so that the National Audit Office declared a capability gap until 2004. In an increasingly technological world, communications are clearly vital. Will the Secretary of State or the Minister who winds up the debate confirm just how our forces will talk to each other on the battlefield?

As has been said, it is impossible to exclude entirely the possibility of incidents of friendly fire in warfare. However, everything should be done to ensure that they are reduced to the absolute minimum, so will the Minister indicate what identification friend or foe—IFF—upgrades are not yet complete and what preparations are in hand to ensure that British tanks are not bombed by US planes?

I briefly want to mention defence medical services where the shortfalls in capability are perhaps most stark. Considerable pressure is being placed on the reservists to fulfil other international peacekeeping commitments—let alone those in the middle east. Ministry of Defence hospital units are understaffed and locums are employed to take up the slack. Even the use of private hospitals to treat service members is beginning to fail to cope with the situation. In my local district general hospital at Derriford in Plymouth, the deployment of military medical staff has already brought the closure of a 35-bed surgical ward. I am therefore extremely concerned that any further deployment of such staff will have even more profound effects on a hospital that is already struggling to cope with other related problems.

I applaud the staff and managers alike at Derriford for their manful attempts to keep all hospital services running as normal, but further reductions in key medical staff will inevitably mean that patient care is compromised and that waiting lists will lengthen. What contingency plans have been made by the Ministry of Defence, in conjunction with the Department of Health, to spread the pressure more evenly, so that particular hospitals that have a higher than normal proportion of military medical staff are supported by other units that are not so greatly affected?

I turn now to missile defence. Can the Minister explain the seemingly incredible rush to judgment on an issue that is of huge strategic and political importance? It seems only a matter of days since the Secretary of State received the formal request from the United States, yet here he is, inviting consultation on the one hand, while wishing to sanction the request at the very earliest opportunity on the other. If, indeed, the decision to allow the US to upgrade the radar station at Fylingdales in no way commits us to participate in the US programme, why did the Secretary of State feel the need to make such a lengthy statement extolling the virtues of missile defence if his only purpose was to announce a simple software upgrade? His Department's public discussion document was published just before the Christmas recess, but already a number of serious questions about our participation in a future US programme remain unanswered.

First, is any agreement to this upgrade truly "not at odds with the view of our allies"? The NATO Prague summit agreed to examine options for different kinds of missile defence; it certainly did not issue a statement in favour of the development of a US programme. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with our allies and what do they really think of this US request? What are the terms of the memorandum of understanding that the MOD is apparently negotiating with the US on access to the American missile defence programme? This is an important aspect of any technological integration and needs to be more clearly explained.

Many strategic and technological dimensions to the missile system are not well understood, and the hasty deployment of any system must carry political and strategic consequences, not least among other nuclear powers and for the integrity of the non-proliferation regime. Will the Government set out the clear criteria by which they seem to have already judged their decision on this matter? The Foreign Office deserves recognition for its role in promoting the new Hague code of conduct against ballistic missile proliferation, so are the Government satisfied that this, and other non-proliferation measures, will not be undermined by the missile defence system, whether at the instigation of the US alone or the US with others?

What is certain, however, is that missile defence is not an option just yet, and that the dangers of proliferation represented by North Korea, Iran and Libya, which the MOD consultation document discusses at length, are problems that have to be dealt with now with the tools currently available. Does the Minister agree that, regardless of the development of future defensive measures, the best way to reduce the threat from ballistic missiles is to strengthen the international non-proliferation and monitoring regimes?

I began by saying that we live in an uncertain world. It is unlikely that a war on Iraq will eradicate the fight against international terrorism in one fell swoop. The next few months will be a defining time for the UN and the countries that support it. The threats to world peace now offer far more complex challenges to all countries and their Governments. The UK has played a significant role in the defence of the world and the maintenance of peace, and it must continue to do so using its influence, patience and long-standing policy of military force as the very last resort, having exhausted all other avenues to peace. The British Government must hold on to those principles in the face of what appears to be considerable pressure for more immediate action. They must ensure that firm political control is maintained over their armed forces so that any future decision on their use is retained and not compromised by their deployment as part of an international force.

3.25 pm

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate. As we do not have much time, I shall raise only a couple of points that the Government should consider. Obviously, Iraq is the main focus of our attention, but the debate is about defence in the world. I share the views of the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) to the extent that I, too, am not certain that the Government have fully appreciated the change in the security environment, especially after 11 September.

We all welcomed the new chapter in the strategic defence review and it has made an important contribution to defence thinking in this country. I am not convinced, however, that we have gone far enough. Perhaps that is understandable. The events of 11 September were so unequalled and horrendous that their consequences have not fully sunk in. It was a unique event in human history because it was an attack on a civilian population that was not directly involved in a conflict, disagreement or warfare. No notice of the attack was given. Asymmetrical weapons—non-traditional methods—were used. No one seriously predicted that such a thing would happen. We should bear in mind the fact that the terrorists targeted 50,000 people, not the 3,000 who were killed. It was only a combination of luck and circumstances that so few died.

It should also be borne in mind that the evidence shows that the target of the previous attack on the twin towers some years earlier, which was not taken seriously, was an unbelievable 300,000 innocent civilians. The intention was to blow up the basement of one tower and for it to fall in such a way that it would have a domino effect and destroy half of Manhattan. The planned attack may have been unworkable and unrealistic, but the fact is that it was proposed, and on a scale that we had never heard of before. That has to affect our defence thinking. I am delighted that NATO addressed the problem in the Berlin-plus arrangements by developing a counter-terrorist strategy and a rapid response force, which is important, but we have a long way to go. This country can make a unique contribution to the debate in the changed security environment because of our bitter experience of fighting terrorism over the past 30 years within our isles.

I am worried that in my discussions with the Americans as part of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, of which I am proud and privileged to be a member representing this Parliament, it has become clear that their response does not fully grasp the scale of the security threat that we face throughout the world. We should use our close alliance with that country to get the message across.

I do not have time to develop all these ideas, but I will hint at a couple. The Americans believe that Europe, and they include us in Europe, does not take terrorism seriously after their experience of 11 September. They think that we are soft on terrorists and that we are not prepared to take the tough decisions necessary to sort them out. My reaction is that the Americans have not had the same experience of dealing with terrorists that we have had, and they make a fundamental mistake if they think that the solution to international terrorism is purely military.

That is a lesson that the United Kingdom and other countries in Europe have had to learn the hard way, and we would make a mistake if we did not use those lessons now to tackle international terrorism. Our American military counterparts talk about the changed environment after the cold war, but I do not think that they fully grasp the changed environment after 11 September.

We should also take into consideration the psychology of the United States since 11 September. The average American citizen is terrified. It is some time since the attacks on Washington and New York, but the people there feel physically threatened 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We should be aware of that in any debate about these issues.

The world has changed. We should not—this has been the case since the end of the cold war—take the traditional views of defence policy and military tactics, as portrayed classically by Clausewitz. We should not look at the military tactics set out by Tsun Tsu, or at guerrilla tactics or at the tactics of deception; we should consider the military tactics of Michael Collins in a world environment in which there is access to apocalyptic and elliptic weapons. That is the challenge that we face, and we need to tackle it in a completely new way. I hope that the Government will consider that in due course.

As a founder member of the campaign against repression in Iraq, which was launched just after Saddam Hussein usurped power, I have supported regime change in Iraq since long before it was popular to do so. We argued that that man and his country would be a threat in years to come if we went on selling weapons to him and doing business with him. We all made a big mistake in doing that, but that does not change the fact that he must be dealt with now.

Since 11 September and the threat of mass international terrorism, which takes an unprecedented form, the need to deal with Saddam Hussein has become even more pressing. What has changed is not the threat that he poses but the environment in which he makes that threat and the fact that there are people who will take advantage of, and use, the weapons that he has developed and that he is prepared to develop.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Smith: No, I am running out of time.

[Mr. Smith]

We should not believe for one second that Saddam Hussein would be going along with the weapons inspectorate if forces were not building up as they are. That man only understands violence and the politics of brute force and power. That is why he has acted, and if we took away the threat, he would stop.

There are those who want to argue in favour of Saddam Hussein—I can think of examples—and say that he is a reasonable, rational man. Someone who, despite being called the defender of the faith by some, can order that the most senior Muslim cleric in his country is arrested, that the man's wife is systematically raped in his presence, that his facial hair is set on fire and that 4 in nails are hammered into his skull while he is still conscious, is not someone with whom any of us can do business. Somebody in that position who has weapons of mass destruction has to be dealt with. My view is that he can be dealt with without a war. He understands power, and if we build up forces and present a serious and credible threat, he will know what to do. I remain hopeful that we can avoid war—I hope and pray that we do. We are going the right way about preventing a war that none of us wants.

Finally, our brave soldiers have embarked on a journey to that part of the world and could face great direct danger, although I hope that they do not. I am glad that anthrax vaccinations have been given to them well in advance of a move forward to the front line. I understand that a lot of soldiers have not taken up the option of vaccination, but may decide to do so later. Will the Minister assure me that the Government will not use pertussis vaccinations as they did last time to speed up the effectiveness—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman's time is up.

3.36 pm

Mr. David Atkinson (Bournemouth, East): I want to make three points to which I would appreciate a response from the Minister in his winding-up speech, and shall then speak about missile defence and Iraq.

First, an inter-parliamentary dimension in European security and defence policy has, as the House knows, been maintained for more than 50 years by the Assembly of the Western European Union. It remains the only way in which directly elected members of 28 national Parliaments can co-ordinate a response to current issues with an input and influence that are impossible for national Parliaments to achieve on their own. With the assets of the WEU now being merged with those of the European Union, it is expected that the fate of its Assembly will be decided at next year's intergovernmental conference. Meanwhile, the Assembly's budget has been cut by 30 per cent., reducing both the quality and quantity of its input. Will the Minister tell the House if he considers that an interparliamentary dimension to European defence policy should be maintained and, if so, how? With the long experience of the WEU Assembly, why reinvent the wheel?

Secondly, further to the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), can the Minister clarify what the Secretary of State meant when he reportedly told journalists last week that BAE Systems is not a British company and can expect no favours from the Government? If BAE Systems is not British, what is it? Its headquarters are in Britain; its senior management must be British; the majority of board members must be British; the British Government holds the golden share in the company; 50,000 of its employees are based in Britain; a good many more people have jobs supplying BAE, including some in my constituency; half its turnover originates in Britain; and it is Britain's largest defence contractor. Is the Secretary of State saying that that will all be disregarded when contracts are placed, or can the Minister assure us that British jobs matter?

Thirdly, will the Minister respond to the concerns of a constituent who complained to me that his son, who serves in the Royal Marines and is going to the Gulf, has to pay nearly £500 to buy kit, including a sleeping bag, back pack, combat knife and desert boots, which the Marines either cannot supply or, my constituent says, supply as

"old, worn and second-hand rubbish"?

Will he get his money back?

For the past 10 years, I have been the rapporteur for the WEU Assembly on transatlantic co-operation on ballistic missile defence. Following fact-finding visits to the USA and Canada by the Technological and Aerospace Committee in 1994, 1997 and 2000, we presented three reports that were unanimously endorsed by the Assembly, and I shared with the House our principal conclusion that Europe remains defenceless against a ballistic missile attack. Moreover, we are concerned that neither the WEU nor NATO has a firm, clear and coherent response policy. I am therefore encouraged by the Secretary of State's statement to the House last Thursday and by his speech today that he has agreed to upgrade Fylingdales for missile defence. In my view, that decision must be the start of a clear commitment to the development of a missile defence system for the continent of Europe in which the Russian Federation should be invited to participate.

Even before his election, President Bush was clear in his support of a national missile defence system in response to the Tenet report of 1999, in which the then director of central intelligence warned that, in the next 15 years, American cities would face ballistic missile threats from a variety of sources. Some experts even warn that such threats could come much sooner. That warning also applies to this country and Europe. When the Secretary of State said last Thursday that the threat was a combination of intention and capability, he was right also to point out that intentions can change with Governments, that Governments can change overnight and that capability can change as soon as Governments decide to purchase such capability.

In the past 25 years, ballistic missiles have been used to destroy, threaten and intimidate in Europe, the near east, the middle east and Asia. They can affect whole economies and impact on foreign policies. Today, a growing number of third-world Governments are buying and developing missiles. They are easier to maintain and cheaper to acquire than squadrons of fighter aircraft. At least 18 such countries, which are ignoring the missile control regime, have ballistic missiles on which nuclear, biological, chemical and radiological warheads are capable of installation.

Let us remind ourselves that this country was the first in history to experience a ballistic missile attack. It came from the V2 rockets that rained down on our capital city, killing some 2,500 Londoners, and against which we had no defence. I am sorry that some Labour Members representing London seats do not recall that.

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that people who speak out against missile defence should be asked whether they would have spoken out against the development of radar during the second world war and in the run-up to it? Would those who did so on the basis that it might have upset the Germans and destabilised relationships with Germany and England say the same thing today?

Mr. Atkinson: Thank God we developed radar and the Spitfire, which managed to defeat the Nazi forces ranged against us. Surely, common prudence and sense should encourage us in the United Kingdom to accept the American offer of a missile defence shield and to contribute to it.

I come now to Iraq. Yesterday, the House was lobbied by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament against a war with Iraq. Those involved were right to lobby and to do so now, but they were wrong to lobby us. They should all have been in Baghdad, outside one of Saddam's many palaces, demanding that he disarm his weapons of mass destruction in response to resolution 1441 and all the other United Nations mandatory resolutions that have called on him to do so over the past 12 years. The issue today is not the threat of war against Iraq, but the threat posed by Iraq to the authority of the United Nations. Since CND would not have been allowed to lobby Iraq, the question that it should have been asking us yesterday was how much longer we in this House were prepared to allow the United Nations to be undermined in such a way, demonstrating to Israel and others that it can be ignored with impunity. If CND and some Labour Members really support the United Nations, they should recall that it was the failure of the League of Nations to demonstrate any will against the dictators that led to the second world war. If we do not enforce the will of the United Nations today, it will be even more difficult to do so tomorrow.

Glenda Jackson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Atkinson: I am glad to give way to the hon. Lady.

Glenda Jackson: I am most grateful. If it is the will of the United Nations not to accord a second mandate authorising military action against Iraq, and if the United States and the United Kingdom ignore that will and engage in a pre-emptive strike against Iraq, would the hon. Gentleman regard that as an endorsement of international law?

Mr. Atkinson: I ask the hon. Lady to wait for a little more of what I have to say. I am sure that I shall provide her with the answer that she seeks.

I applaud the Prime Minister and President Bush for now insisting that time must run out for Saddam Hussein. They were right to insist that resolution 1441 warn of the consequences of Iraq's failure to disarm. They are right, in learning the lessons of the past, to build up a force which, if Saddam does not comply, will do that for him. I must say to the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), for whom I have the greatest respect, that it is Saddam Hussein and not the Prime Minister and President Bush who should be hauled before an international tribunal and charged with crimes of war and genocide.

It will be for Hans Blix, when he goes before the Security Council on Monday, to say whether he needs more time, but I have no doubt that he will conclude what is already clear: Iraq has continued to ignore the will of the world community. In that case, the United Nations must insist under a new resolution that Saddam disarms or departs. If he refuses to do so, or if for reasons of narrow, national, ideological self-interest on the part of other dictatorial regimes such a new resolution is not passed or is vetoed, resolution 1441 remains to be enforced by force. Long-term peace on this planet will be at stake if it is not.

3.46 pm

Mr. Marsha Singh (Bradford, West): I am pleased to take part in this debate. As we approach war with Iraq, it is worth remembering that there are more than 30 conflicts in the world at the moment. As we continue with the war against terror, it is worth remembering some of the causes of terror. During this debate, it is worth remembering some of our responsibilities for the situation in the world today.

In India, for example, we were responsible for partition, and we left behind the dispute in Kashmir. There have been three wars between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, and two have recently been averted. Just last year, 1 million men faced each other across the border between Pakistan and India. Thousands of Kashmiris have died in their struggle for self-determination. Despite countless United Nations resolutions—people talk about UN resolutions—what response has there been from the international community? The answer is that there has been no concerted international response to resolve the dispute in Kashmir peacefully.

The result is two nuclear powers facing each other with barely concealed hostility and aggression. What has been the international response to that and to the near war last year? Our response has been to try to sell India 16 Hawk fighter training aircraft. Russia's recent response has been to sign a multi-million pound deal to sell and lease long-range strategic bombers and nuclear-powered submarines. What price defence in the world?

In Palestine, we were responsible for the creation of the state of Israel. Again, despite UN resolution after UN resolution, the Palestinian people still have no homeland or compensation. Indeed, in direct defiance of the UN, Israel continues to occupy Palestine. Hundreds of Israelis and many thousands of Palestinians have died. Palestinians are living the life of the refugee—or worse—in their own homeland. That has gone on for more than 50 years. What is the response of the international community? It has turned a blind eye and ignored the plight of the Palestinian people.

But there has been a response. Britain has licensed components for F-16 fighters to be sold to Israel, despite the fact that it regularly uses them to attack Palestinians. Germany recently announced the sale of Patriot missiles to Israel; God knows what the United States sells it. With such policies, what price defence in the world?

[Mr. Marsha Singh]

In the 1980s, we armed Saddam Hussein to fight Iran. We turned a blind eye to his use of chemical weapons against Iranians, never mind his own people. We are responsible for that. Again in the 1980s, the US poured arms into the mujaheddin to fight the Government of Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. The Taliban inherited the weaponry, and the policies led to recent events in Afghanistan. Was that a price worth paying?

Let us consider terrorism. We all know what it is, but is there room for grey areas? Should the war on terror be all embracing? After being ignored by the international community, those who take up the armed struggle in Kashmir see themselves as freedom fighters for self-determination. Palestinians who take up the armed struggle perceive themselves to be freedom fighters, fighting the illegal occupation of their country. More recently, Chechens have regarded themselves as freedom fighters for independence. What is the difference between those people, who have a national cause, and the French resistance? What is the difference between them and the African National Congress? Were ANC members terrorists or freedom fighters? We need to examine our actions—and inaction—which have led to what we call terrorism today.

In the war against terror, the international community cannot continue to ignore legitimate aspirations. Indeed, if we do that we can never win the war against terror.

Mr. Eric Joyce (Falkirk, West): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Singh: No.

As we prepare for the war on Iraq, I question the logic behind it. It appears to be that Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction and that he must therefore disarm or be attacked. That is strange and dangerous logic. If we follow it to its conclusion, do we wage war against every country with weapons of mass destruction? If not, how do we pick and choose? Do we go to war with North Korea, Pakistan, China, India and former Soviet republics?

Mr. Joyce: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Singh: No. If we do not follow our logic, how do we get those countries to disarm? Where do we go after Iraq if we follow the logic to its conclusion?

I have tried, but I find no justification for a war against Iraq. I find that the Muslim world, not only part of it, is completely bemused. It asks why United Nations resolutions are enforced against Iraq but not against Israel; why Palestinians are not given their homeland, and why that is not a priority for the international community. Muslims are asking, "Why is Kashmir not a priority for the international community?" They are bemused, and they have every right to be.

Saddam Hussein has been contained since 1991. He has not posed a realistic threat to anyone since then. Apart from Kuwait, none of Saddam's neighbours has asked us to attack Iraq, or offered to help us. How is Iraq an imminent danger to this country? Will someone please answer that question? No other significant world leader backs the US in this war. Do other leaders see something that we do not?

I do not see why we should spend billions on a war that cannot be justified, when our own people have economic needs, or why we should damage our political and economic relations with the Muslim world. I cannot countenance the deaths of service people and of thousands of innocent Iraqis in this pointless war. I see the danger of regional instability. I agree with the ordinary men and women on the streets of this country who ask, "What has this war got to do with us?"

The best defence in the world is peace. To get peace, we need conflict resolution in the trouble spots. We need to halt the arms trade, cancel third world debt and encourage good and transparent Government. We need disarmament, and we should lead by example.

3.56 pm

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I am delighted to get the opportunity to speak in this debate. I echo the sentiments of the Secretary of State and the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman in paying tribute to Lord Robertson. I am desperately sorry that he could not be persuaded to take a second term as NATO Secretary-General. I think that all of us would have welcomed that, and that we all appreciate his work in bringing NATO together and making it a more positive force than it has been for some time, especially from a political point of view. He will be sadly missed, and a very tough act to follow.

I also congratulate the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) on his speech. I am disappointed that he is not present just now. I share many of the sentiments that he expressed, and I am sure that many other hon. Members do too. I am a member of the NATO parliamentary assembly, and I am always amazed by the extent to which members of the US Senate and Congress fail to understand why so much of the rest of the world has a problem with the actions that America has taken. In the US, American citizens are even more resentful of the fact that a sizable chunk of the rest of the world does not always perceive their country as a power for good.

The hon. and learned Member for Medway and I are the same age. We grew up seeing the goodness that can come from the US, as well as the awful mistakes made over the past 50 years by various Administrations. I grew up in Portsmouth, and I have often stood on the beach and on the old town's fortifications to wave off Navy and other personnel, among them members of my own family. My earliest recollection is of waving my father off to the Korean war, along with thousands of other servicemen.

A week or so ago, I was there to see the Ark Royal leave. The crowds were as big as usual. Various television crews were interviewing Portsmouth residents and the families of the service men and women on the aircraft carrier. Not a person there did not wish the crew all the best and godspeed, and hope that all of them returned safely. There was no dissenting voice to be heard.

For the first time in my experience, however, I heard serious doubts being raised by the families of the service personnel, in response to questions asked by the domestic and foreign media crews recording the occasion, about the logic and the aims of what those young men and women were being sent to do. Serious questions were asked. My local newspaper has supported the armed forces historically, and still does, but its editorial that week was very questioning of the Government's motives. We need to examine and get answers to these serious questions.

Since 1996, there have been outstanding UN resolutions concerning attacks on Iraq that would have given the same mandate as the Government now suggest they need to use force in Iraq. However, there was no move to enforce those UN resolutions. For some mysterious reason, five or six years elapsed. If one were really cynical, one might think that someone explained to President Bush in the middle of last year that it was going to be very unlikely that he was going to catch Osama bin Laden, which would be a real failure for his Administration and for him. Perhaps he needed a target that was more achievable than the capture of bin Laden. There was then the zeroing-in on Iraq.

The British people, have rightly, demanded that the evidence be forthcoming. Earlier this week, I asked the Secretary of State whether he was satisfied that the right message was being given to people inside Iraq and in the surrounding countries as to why we were sending 30,000 men and women to the Gulf for a potential war with Iraq. He said that he believed it was. That is different from what one hears when one talks to people from the region.

I was in my hospital in Portsmouth at the end of last week, where I spoke to an Iraqi who works there and who told me his family's story about the situation there. I spoke to another Iraqi—a UK citizen, but a former citizen of Iraq who has been in the UK for more than 25 years—who told me of the spin that is put on this subject inside Iraq. Little or no effort is being made to put the Government's case, or the United States Government's case, to the people of Iraq. There is a great deal of ignorance. We will not win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people by convincing the dissidents outside Iraq of the justification of the case. The main bulk of the people within Iraq do not understand or appreciate the sentiments that the Prime Minister and others portray time and time again.

Today, the Secretary of State virtually dismissed the public opinion polls; he said that he had seen the latest one. He cannot have seen *The Guardian* poll, which was quite clear; 47 per cent. of the British people said that they were not in favour of a war and 81 per cent. said that they would not support a war unless there were a second resolution. The Prime Minister had a question and answer session with Select Committee chairmen, a newspaper report of which said:

> "But again Tony knows best. He said yesterday that the new UN resolution would be "desirable", but that the UN will not be allowed to stand in the way of dealing with Saddam Hussein."

The British people have a right to know exactly what that means; the Prime Minister has had many opportunities to explain it. Does it mean that the Germans, who will chair the Security Council from the end of this month—they do not have a veto but are vital in terms of bringing the subject on to the agenda—will say no? Does it mean that the Germans do not believe that we are ready and that the inspectors need more time? Or will it be France, which has a veto on the Security Council and might exercise it? What is the Prime Minister's response? What does he mean when he says, "We are not going to allow the UN to stand in the way of dealing with Saddam Hussein"?

Huw Irranca-Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hancock: We do not have enough time to take interventions and, to be fair—[HON. MEMBERS: "We get injury time."] If we get injury time, I welcome the opportunity of giving way.

Huw Irranca-Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; the time that I take will be added on at the end of his speech. While I and many others agree that it would be good to have a second resolution, what would be the Liberal Democrat position if all bar one of the United Nations members said that they agreed that there was a case for tackling Saddam Hussein?

Mr. Hancock: That will largely depend on who the one is and their reason for objecting. What the hon. Gentleman has got from me is a lot closer to an answer than anything that any of us have got from the Prime Minister. If the Prime Minister had gone that far, I think that some of us would have been appreciative, but sadly he has not even been prepared to take that question on.

Are we convinced as a nation that we have given all the information that is available to us to the UN inspectors? Has the United States given the UN inspectors the best possible chance to achieve their goal? It is very difficult to get anyone to give a straight answer to that question. If we are sending people to a country such as Iraq—in some instances possibly even putting their lives on the line—to seek out information, and we claim as a nation and a Government, as does the United States, that we have that evidence, and that it is strong and compelling enough for us to send 30,000 people halfway around the world to fight a war, have we left it to the 300 or 400 people on the ground in Iraq to prove it? The answer is that the Government have not given the House an assurance that they have made that information available.

Mr. Joyce: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that if there were such excellent intelligence, if it were given to 400 people it might just possibly be compromised in one way or another?

Mr. Hancock: The likelihood of compromise is always there; our own Security Service has been compromised many times in the past 50 years in various ways. However, if we are to take on a whole country, we must also define the targets that we shall bomb. Presumably those targets will be where we suspect the weapons to be hidden, and I think that we have a right to expect the inspectors to have at least a level playing field in which to operate.

In the few minutes remaining to me, I want to mention the current debate, in the House and in my city, over the future contracts for the two aircraft carriers. The matter is unrelated to Iraq, but it does affect jobs in our area. At the end of the day, the Government will have to decide whether BAE Systems or Thales gets the contracts, and they must make their choice for the right

[Mr. Hancock]

reason, for the right price and for the right product. We need to know that the decision is based on those criteria and not on a vendetta between the Secretary of State and the chief executive of BAE Systems, or on the fact that BAE Systems has done a good wrecking job by suggesting that Thales is a foreign company, although it is itself 54 per cent. controlled by people outside the UK. The Government must insist that the successful contractor live up to the expectations of the House, of the Government and, more important, work forces in shipyards all round the country, and that work for those carriers is evenly spread around the United Kingdom, which of course includes Vosper Thornycroft in Portsmouth.

4.8 pm

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): Today the German Chancellor and the French President have pledged to work together to prevent a war in Iraq, and the contrast between their courage in standing up to the United States, and our Government's position could not be greater.

Resolution 1441 is not a resolution for war. It does not authorise military action and the Government know that it does not. It does not contain the automatic trigger that the United States wanted; it simply requires that the Security Council must meet if a breach is thought to have taken place.

Mr. Gerald Howarth *indicated dissent.*

Mrs. Mahon: The Opposition spokesman shakes his head.

From the moment that resolution 1441 was passed, both the United States and our Government have sought to interpret it as a vote to make war possible, and not a vote for peace. It has not brought the United States back under the umbrella of international law, as many hoped that it would, and the central issue remains: will the British Government defend international law, and by that I mean the charter—not a resolution that has been arrived at by arm twisting, by bribing, by intimidation—which says that when we are not being threatened we should not pre-emptively attack? Or will that fall as a result of United States muscle?

Throughout all this, the Government have refused to recognise the dangers inherent in allowing an unchecked US superpower to set the international agenda. I thank my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) for a brilliant speech about that; I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh). Both set out the position with great clarity.

It is a shame that the Prime Minister appears to be set on following President Bush. I think that the Government have shown a great deal of dishonesty in today's debate, and a great deal of cowardice. Not for the first time, they are not prepared to put their position to the vote—but we will call a vote today. I believe that this is our last chance to do so before a war against Iraq.

The Government know that they are prepared to take Britain into a war with Iraq if, or should I say when, President Bush decides to go, and they are prepared to do so regardless of the UN. I believe that when the Prime Minister visited the ranch in Texas he promised that he would give that support. A deception has been carried on for months. I think the Government are too cowardly to face up to opposition among the electorate and admit the truth. They are too cowardly to face up to opposition within their own party, and they are too cowardly to face up to the hostility expressed by many of our constituents.

It is worth going back to the Security Council, many of whose members were against any kind of resolution. They wanted the weapons inspectors to return. During the negotiations on resolution 1441, they supported France's proposal committing Washington to seeking Security Council authorisation. The United States had to do an awful lot of arm twisting to get the resolution through. I think I know why it succeeded.

Some may recall what happened in 1991, when Yemen dared to vote against the first Gulf war. The United States made sure that it withdrew all aid from that impoverished country, and persuaded the Saudis to send the guest workers back, thus wrecking the country's economy. The United States wields enormous economic as well as military clout, and things are no different today. We are left relying on Germany and France, which might be able to use its veto. I think that China will be threatened with the withdrawal of trade with America, on which it relies heavily. The Russians, of course, are worried about oil contracts.

The truth is that the United States, being the only superpower, is corrupting the one international organisation that we should all be protecting. We should be honest about the UN charter: it does not provide for pre-emptive attacks.

I want to say a little about why the United States is going to all this trouble to wage war on Iraq. The point has been well made that the US could not catch Osama bin Laden of al-Qaeda, and needs another villain. But when we talk about Iraq, it is also worth talking about oil. The United States already imports 50 per cent. of the oil that it needs, and that need will increase in the next 20 years. According to the Cheney report—named after the American Vice-President—America will need to import more than 60 per cent. more oil in 2020 than it imports today.

Oil is not just an old bit of economic policy; it is indispensable to a modern economy. The protection of oil is a central plank of America's foreign policy. Washington says it wants to eliminate any threat of interruption of the flow of oil, to ensure that it will be accessible to US oil companies and will not be controlled by Russia, China or any European firms. A different and more compliant Government in Iraq would make that possible.

The Americans say that weapons of mass destruction, not regime change, are the issue. Sometimes they change their minds; we hear different versions. We must ask ourselves, why we would bomb Iraq if some weapons were found. Why have we sent the inspectors in? Have we not sent them in to destroy the weapons if they find any? Why do we have to slaughter hundreds and thousands of innocent civilians if we can get at the weapons and contain the regime? The latest UN figures on projected casualties and refugees make war absolutely unthinkable. How much will going to war so that America can get access to oil cost this country?

Mr. Joyce: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Mahon: No, I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman. He can make his own war-like speech, and I am sure that he will.

How many more recruits will al-Qaeda have if we go to war? What strategy have we to deal with the huge numbers of Kurds and Iraqis who will seek asylum in Britain? When will the Secretary of State for International Development come to tell us about contingency plans? Should the Government be putting taxpayers' money into a needless war when they say that we cannot afford decent public services and when our firefighters are going on strike? Today, we have introduced proposals that will make the price so high that those from low-income families cannot go to the best universities in the country, regardless of talent.

War is not a computer game. I advise my hon. Friends, particularly those who want to sit here and send our young service men and women to war, to read "War Brought us Here"—a Save the Children report on what happens to the children and many millions of innocent victims when we decide to unleash such weaponry on civilians.

I remind the House that it is civilians who die now in any war. People 20,000 ft in the air are relatively safe. Sitting in an inadequate bunker, trying to protect children, or trying to put them to bed somewhere so that they might be alive in the morning, is entirely different. I cannot bear to think about the sheer terror of the parents and mothers in Baghdad at the moment, as the most awesome force in the world surrounds their country and makes ever-more threatening noises.

Little publicity has been given to the civilians who died in Afghanistan. Those people seem to be invisible. I asked the Library how many civilians had died during the successful war in Afghanistan. I believe that the jury is still well and truly out on whether it was a success. Professor Marc Herold of the university of New Hampshire has estimated that, as of 16 January 2003, there have been between 3,100 and 3,600 civilians deaths as a consequence of the US-led war in Afghanistan. Some people think that the figures might be as high as 8,000. The victims of cluster bombs, daisy cutters and depleted uranium should not be invisible. Now and again, we should visit them and have a look at them.

I get tired of people saying that we would not defend ourselves, and I want to give the last word to a man who defended his country. He is one of the bravest men and one of my heroes—after my father. Simon Weston says:

> "This war is wrong. Where is the proof? There is no heart for this one. There is no belief."

Do not take us into a war without the British people believing in it, and I think that they do not.

4.18 pm

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): The speech made by the hon. Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) has one virtue: consistency. I do not share her anti-United States feelings, but I do wish to concentrate on the possible war in Iraq.

Some 17 years ago, on 6 June 1985, I warned the House of the dangers of Iraq and similar states. I said that

> "if nuclear war ever broke out it would be initiated not by the superpowers but by a nation without any sense of responsibility, where power is concentrated in the hands of the evil, the insane, or the bigoted dictator". —[*Official Report*, 6 June 1985; Vol. 80, c. 537.]

I mention that not as a matter of self-appreciation, but because when I argue that although a war against Iraq may become a necessary continuation of political means but that I am not convinced that it has yet been proved necessary, I do so in the clear appreciation that Saddam Hussein constitutes a malevolent threat that cannot be ignored.

In terms of international law, Iraq compounds substantial and undeniable violations in many different areas in ways few states can match. Saddam Hussein has used chemical and biological weapons, and, given the leakage of fissile material from the former Soviet Union, it is likely that he is very close to producing atomic weapons. I am in no doubt that he must be denied the ability to do us harm, and if in that process he and his regime are destroyed, hardly anyone anywhere in the world, including the Arab world, will weep.

However, can a defensive war really be justified on the grounds of possibility? Is there a greater threat from Iraq now than there was before 11 September 2001, and what new evidence is there of proven links between the Iraqi regime and al-Qaeda? I accept that it is impossible to disclose publicly all intelligence without endangering the very sources of that intelligence. But if that vital intelligence exists, it should, as I proposed to the Prime Minister last week, at the very least be made available to the Intelligence and Security Committee, a Committee that the Prime Minister accepts does not leak. To date the Government have not made the case for war or done enough to dispel the impression of the inevitability of a possibly unnecessary war.

So for me the essential questions remain, and asking them should be interpreted as an act not of disloyalty to the armed forces, to which I once belonged, but of rational concern for our enlightened self-interest.

They are as follows. First, can we achieve what our own safety compels us to achieve, short of war? Can we, by showing continued determination and reasoned restraint, make less likely a fundamentalist Islamic backlash manufactured by the political rhetoric of victimisation? If there is a chance that all we need can be delivered without the death of thousands of oppressed Iraqis, should we not at least try all these political possibilities?

We must acknowledge that, however surgical and technologically inspired a war in Iraq may be, however careful we are to safeguard our own troops and accurately target our own munitions, many in Iraq will perish or lose their families, their homes or their livelihood. Saddam Hussein will undoubtedly continue to place legitimate military targets close to population centres, and we shall have to destroy those targets in order to safeguard our own personnel. Every television company will broadcast to the world, including the Arab world, harrowing pictures of the human catastrophe that warfare leaves in its wake, and the closer war comes to Baghdad, the greater will be the innocent casualties.

[Mr. Jonathan Sayeed]

I have no doubt that pressure on Iraq, reinforced by the clear threat of military action, is necessary. I have no doubt that Saddam Hussein must not labour under any misapprehension as to international determination. But I believe that before the final decision is taken, we should intensify the pressure on the Iraqi regime so that we can achieve what we need without Iraqi and British lives being lost.

So what measures could we consider? I should like to suggest just a few. First, the no-fly zone should cover the whole of Iraq for all Iraqi military fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft, and friendly aircraft should have complete freedom to roam those skies and destroy any Iraqi military aircraft that leaves the ground.

Secondly, all Iraqi military installations should be listed, and its military personnel and equipment should be required to return to barracks or agreed positions. Any major military excursion should be met by immediate force.

There should be no limit on the number of weapons inspectors or on their capacity to carry out their tasks and there should be no time constraint. At the discretion of the inspectors, interviews with Iraqi personnel should be in private and take place outside Iraq. We must make, what Saddam Hussein will never make—every attempt to protect the lives of the innocent, be they our own people threatened by the upsurge of Islamic terrorism, or those who have for so long been oppressed in Iraq.

If we can achieve what is necessary by peaceful, albeit admittedly, draconian means, that is clearly preferable. The Iraqi regime must be in no doubt that non-compliance would reap dire repercussions, but it is in our own interests that we demonstrate that war is our last resort.

If Iraq is to return to the amity of nations, it will not be enough to disarm it and leave. Much has been said about the need for the future state of Iraq to retain, after any action, the shape and form that it has now. Such decisions should not be a matter for us, Turkey, or anyone other than a free Iraqi people, with the advice of those experienced in democratic reconstruction. It may well be that, given the three or more different areas and ethnic groupings of Iraq, a loose federation of autonomous or semi-autonomous regions might be preferred. If we want to ensure a Balkans-type war in the middle east, we need only impose an unnatural or unwanted union, a democratic façade maintained by our own troops in order to indulge and assuage Turkish fears of a Kurdish state.

If, on the other hand, we are concerned, as we should be, that a new Iraq offers its people safety, prosperity and opportunity, we must make real the empty principle contained in the declaration to the Seven concerning the partition of the Arab states in 1918

—"the consent of the governed".

4.27 pm

Colin Burgon (Elmet): I am glad to take part in the debate. I do not think for one minute that I can approach the kind of passion displayed by my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh), but, for what it is worth, I shall try to put over my historical perspective on the situation that we now confront.

As has already been said in the debate, we live in a world where the United States is now the only world superpower. We are living really at the apex of the American century. In our lifetime—looking round the Chamber I am confirmed in this view by the advanced age of most of the Members present—we have had what was called the balance of terror between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. But we have also had an international stalemate, notwithstanding the fact that we also had a large number of localised conflicts.

The collapse of communism changed all that. The 20th century is over, but the 21st century opens, I would argue, in twilight and obscurity. We are now sailing in completely uncharted waters. Using an admittedly Western perspective, it is the first time that we have had one global superpower, probably since Spain of the late 1500s or the British Empire in the 19th century.

The decisive question of the 21st century is how the United States will use its power and position. How we react to that question is itself instructive. Are we relaxed about it, or are we apprehensive? What, if any, checks and balances—like the American constitution is itself—should we attempt to put in place to control that situation?

I pick up very much on the comments of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews). I, too, am not anti-American. I find the United States fascinating. It has massive diversity: although some of it is sometimes not worth looking at, I respect its vibrancy and energy. I have American friends whom I value greatly, and I immensely enjoy the study of the history of the United States. I have been lucky enough, for instance, to walk the beautiful states of Virginia and Maryland on their civil war battlefields. To take a diversion, it is worth noting that the American civil war saw more American deaths than every other war and action in which America has been involved. That period of history is well worth studying, as it is part of the American psyche, and it is arguable that we have yet to get the result of the American civil war.

As a friend of America and its people, I say that honesty is central to any proper friendship. If the US has no better friend than the UK, we should be able to tell the US if we think that it is heading in the wrong direction. I therefore agree with the former President of the United States, Bill Clinton—this will not get me any brownie points from the current President—who said:

> "You cannot have an integrated world and have your say all the time. America can lead the world towards that but we cannot dominate and run the world".

The test of a mature and confident nation should be its response to such a view, and America's friends hope that it can accept what could be seen as constructive criticism. I am lucky enough to be reading at the moment Eric Hobsbawm's fantastic book, "A Twentieth Century Life". Drawing towards the end of the last century, he writes:

> "Our problem is that the US Empire does not know what it wants to do or can do with its power, or its limits. It merely insists that those who are not with it are against it."

Life is sometimes a little more subtle than that.

We must also reflect in this Chamber on the views put to us by constituents. It is clear from opinion polls, not only in this country but in America, that there is a deep reservation about possible action in Iraq. The concerns that I promised constituents who have written to me that I would raise include, to put it bluntly, a profound distrust of President Bush, his judgment and some of the people who surround and advise him. Some of my constituents think that possible action against Iraq is dominated by the domestic American agenda and an attempt to distract attention from the state of economy there. In addition, there is the question of oil supplies, which has been mentioned in the House previously. Many constituents have written to me to say that we are entering a situation the outcome of which is completely unknown. Another group of people, for sincere, pacifist reasons, think that all wars are wrong. I respect their opinion but I do not share it. On balance, I have even had a few letters from people who say, "I oppose everything Tony Blair does, but I support him on this one," which could be a warning sign to us.

Something else that has surprised me—I do not know whether this is reflected in other Members' experiences—has been the paucity of letters that I have received on this subject relative to its importance.

Mrs. Mahon: I have had thousands.

Colin Burgon: I have not. I ask myself why, and I can only presume that people feel powerless—that they feel that events are completely out of their control, and that we are sleepwalking into a war. My view is that the basic preconditions for winning a battle for public opinion in this country are a second resolution from the Security Council, taken in the context of the evidence in the current situation, and a vote in this House.

I have another two concerns to which I hope that Ministers will respond. There is a strong argument that intervention in Iraq represents a massive diversion from the vital struggle against al-Qaeda and all the elements allied with it. That struggle is tremendously important. It is an ideological and military struggle that we cannot afford to lose. The whole basis of western secular society is under threat from the assault from al-Qaeda. Any action in Iraq will divert resources from that battle. It is estimated that we may need 100,000 troops minimum to bring stability to a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq.

If the US and Britain act unilaterally or bilaterally and ignore the UN, any regime that is set up in Iraq will be severely compromised. It will be seen as the puppet of two western powers. Therefore, it is absolutely vital that the UN throws its support behind any intervention, if there has to be an intervention in Iraq.

I mentioned the American civil war earlier. It was the northern general, Sherman, who made the famous remark, "War is hell." We must do our utmost to make sure that the innocent civilians of Iraq are spared that particular experience.

4.36 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh) and the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) on their superb speeches. I very much associate myself with their views. The hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) made an interesting speech but, with respect, I do not know of anyone on either side of the House who is pro-Saddam.

Mr. John Smith: It was not my intention to imply that. My intention was to make those who think that they can conduct normal business with such a tyrant realise that they cannot.

Mr. Llwyd: I am obliged for that explanation.

I am pleased to take part in this debate on behalf of Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National party. We all know that much has happened over the past two months or so but, in essence, the main questions remain exactly the same. Could the use of military force against Iraq without UN sanction be lawful? There are two avenues through which such action could be deemed lawful. The first is if there were a material breach of resolution 1441 and a further resolution were sought from the Security Council to authorise such action. The second relates to the inherent right of self-defence as encapsulated in article 51 of the UN charter. Any action that is not caught by one or other criterion would not therefore be lawful.

That is not simply my contention but that of the leading human rights lawyer, Rabinder Singh QC. His opinion was set out with clarity and great detail in a written opinion prepared for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament dated 15 November 2002. I commend that document to anyone in this place or outside who is in any doubt about the legality of a unilateral strike by the United States.

There is no clear or compelling evidence to suggest that the United States or the United Kingdom could invoke the self-defence provisions. One would have thought that the dossier that was the subject of the recall of Parliament in September would have spelt out the case for self-defence. Alas, that document did nothing of the kind. In fact, there was nothing in it that could not have been gleaned from the broadsheets and from the internet. Certainly, there was no urgency in any perceived threat. If anything, the document tended to defuse the case for urgent action. The ifs, buts and suppositions in the document spoke volumes. No one could seriously allege that there is an imminent danger of attack that would legitimise an act of self-defence.

Let us consider whether resolution 1441 authorises the use of force. The proponents of military action argue that it does, but previous Security Council resolutions—for example resolution 678—have adopted strong and very different language to authorise the use of force. States are authorised to use "all necessary means" or take "all necessary measures". Those are not merely issues of semantics. Undoubtedly, the consideration of such words took a lot of time when resolution 1441 was discussed. It is known that the United Kingdom and the United States sought an express authorisation, but such authorisation is manifestly lacking in the final wording. Security Council permanent members, Russia, France and China made their position crystal clear: they did not want the resolution to authorise force.

Instead, resolution 1441 provides at paragraphs 4, 11 and 12 that, in the event of non-compliance, the matter will be referred to the Security Council, which will convene to consider the need for full compliance

[Mr. Llwyd]

and so on. That clearly means that it is for the Security Council to decide on any further action that might be taken against Iraq. Having failed to obtain express authorisation for the use of force, having incorporated minute changes to the final draft, the sole purpose of which was to exclude the possibility of hidden triggers and to preserve the role of the Security Council, and having publicly agreed in the explanation of the vote for adopting resolution 1441 that there was no such implied authorisation for the use of force, would it not be extraordinary for the UK and the US to regard the resolution as now providing such authorisation?

Mr. Hendrick: What does the hon. Gentleman take the words "serious consequences" to mean if it is not military action?

Mr. Llwyd: According to diplomatic language and the way in which previous resolutions have been drafted, those words do not authorise military action. Any expert on legal interpretation would confirm that. I am no expert, but I prefer to believe them than the hon. Gentleman.

The Government argue that sending 30,000 troops to the middle east does not make war inevitable. I hope that that is so. Last week, the Prime Minister tried to reassure his Back Benchers that Britain will follow the United Nations route. Like many hon. Members, I hope that that is so. Many of us believe, however, that the United States has decided on war. In less than four weeks' time, 160,000 US troops will be in the region. Is the United States President going to hold them there if, as appears likely, the weapons inspectors request a substantial extension of time on 27 January? What if the prevailing view in the International Atomic Energy Agency is correct and it takes 12 months to complete the inspectors' work, with or without the sanctions argument?

A friend of mine, a highly regarded retired judge, recently wrote to the Prime Minister. He said:

> "Any military action carried out against Iraq, whatever the justification or pretext, without the authority and full consent of the United Nations would be a grave breach of the comity of nations, the basic principle of international law."

I wholeheartedly agree. On 11 January, Javier Solana said:

> "The legitimacy of such a war will be determined by the Security Council. The UN arms inspectors derive their legitimacy from the Council . . . so if there is not any information deemed sufficient by the Security Council . . . I would find it very difficult to act."

Speaking on 14 January, the French Prime Minister said:

> "If there is going to be the use of force, there will have to be a deliberation other than that for 1441, because the source of international law—essential for us—is the UN and the Security Council."

Like many others, I feel that we are on an inexorable slide to war. Public opinion is against it. In *The Guardian*/ICM poll referred to earlier, outright opposition to war is 47 per cent. Some 81 per cent. of those polled say that a further UN mandate is essential. Interestingly, the opposition of Labour voters has risen to 43 per cent. Conservative opposition stands at 41 per cent. The public are saying that a further UN mandate is not just "preferable", to use the Prime Minister's word, but essential. The Prime Minister told the Liaison Committee yesterday that he believed that the public would back a war if Saddam Hussein refused to disarm. I wonder whether he is right.

Plaid Cymru fundamentally opposes the concept of pre-emptive strikes, as proposed by the Bush Administration, and firmly believes that conflict between nations should be resolved through international institutions, such as the UN and the establishment of an international court. The United States and the United Kingdom should allow UN inspectors to complete their inspection and to have as much time as they desire to undertake their investigations. If they do discover evidence of weapons of mass destruction, and of an intention to use them, that would breach resolution 1441. However, that would not sanction the use of military force; rather, further action would be needed which would the take the form of peaceful and diplomatic measures. As I said at the beginning of my speech, we see no evidence of an imminent attack.

I conclude by quoting Kofi Annan, who said that if

> "the inspectors continue to work as aggressively as they are doing, we may be able to disarm Iraq peacefully".

I join many in this House, in the UK and throughout the world in hoping that he is right.

4.45 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Following one of the important questions asked by the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd), I think that he may recollect that at Prime Minister's questions, his fellow countryman, my right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Denzil Davies), asked a similar crucial question—supposing the weapons inspectors report "no failure", does Britain then go to war? I listened carefully to the Prime Minister's answer, but honestly there was no addressing of that critical question. I say to my Front-Bench colleague that if tonight that question could be addressed, we would be grateful.

Do not British servicemen, when asked to risk their lives and those of possibly hundred of thousands of innocent civilians, have one right in particular, which is to know that it is the overwhelming opinion of their fellow countrymen and women that their cause is just and that what they are being asked to do is important and urgent for the British state? Well, there is no settled conviction. I wonder what servicemen and women in HMS Ocean or HMS Ark Royal make of the *Daily Mirror* today and yesterday. I am not saying that the *Daily Mirror* is absolutely right in all that it has said, but it must surely sow the seeds of the greatest doubt whether the majority of their fellow countrymen think that the task on which they have been sent, risking their lives, is worth while.

It is not only the Churches and the usual suspects on the left of the Labour party; there is a new ingredient in the doubt, and that is the senior military: Field Marshal Lord Bramall and Field Marshal Sir John Stanier. When I wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister, which was published in *The Times*, who should appear in the major letters column, with the lead letter, supporting the general view that I put forward with many of my hon. Friends but Field Marshal Sir John

Stanier—no leftie he. The doubts go right across the political spectrum. They have been expressed by the commander of 7 Armoured Brigade, of which I was once a very junior member for two years, General Patrick Cordingley, who was the Armoured Commander in the Gulf last time. When these serious people express doubt, what does that do to servicemen dispatched on this folly of a war?

There is something else. I do not know about the timing. People talk about March, but it is then said that there must be a softening up, which would be aerial bombardment for so many days or weeks. My God—aerial bombardment from 15,000 ft? Of course that will happen, because what is the American imperative? Above all, it is that body bags are not taken back to Alabama, Wyoming and all the states in between. They will make damn certain that they do everything to destroy anything that could risk American lives, and that means huge collateral damage.

I want to ask the Minister a particular question that I asked earlier today of the Secretary of State. What are the facts about inoculations? I refer again to today's edition of the *Daily Mirror* and, indeed, *The Times*. There was an undertaking that medically things had been learned since the last Gulf campaign. In particular, jabs and inoculations would be given one after the other, not in multiple doses. However, it appears that some multiple doses have been given. Have people just slipped through the net or, if not, what has happened? The House of Commons deserves the facts.

Like a number of my hon. Friends, I regret that we are having this debate without a substantive motion—an opportunity allowed the Scottish Parliament but denied the House of Commons. I deem it deeply unsatisfactory that at 6.58 pm I shall rise to ask that the question be put. It would have been infinitely more satisfactory to have had the opportunity to divide on a reasoned amendment, when people know what they are voting for and against. In response to the Conservative spokesman who raised the issue, I am not at all clear about whether or not an undertaking has been given that the House of Commons will have a vote. The Leader of the House said that it was "inconceivable"—that was the word he used—that there would not be a vote before or after critical decisions had been made. If the House is not to be demeaned, it should have a vote before any commitment to action. I hope that the House authorities and those who control these things will take that seriously, otherwise the House of Commons will be greatly demeaned.

4.57 pm

Patrick Mercer (Newark): It is a privilege to follow the Father of the House. If forces' morale is being undermined by the press or Members of Parliament, thank God that we have forces whom we can trust to do their duty, whether deterring oppression or fighting.

The press do the forces a disservice when they say that if they are deployed they must be used. That is not the case—troops can be withdrawn without a shot being fired. I fervently hope and pray that that will be so. I hope that we do not have to fight a war. If we do, I trust that war will be brief and that casualties will be kept to a minimum on both sides. I stick to my premise, however, that war is not inevitable. Whether or not it happens, whatever the press tell us, our terrorist enemies are now operating in this country. I wish that the House would lose its hang-up about the term "al-Qaeda". I do not know whether there is a connection between Baghdad and al-Qaeda, but there is a connection between Baghdad and Islamic terrorism. Those terrorists do not, to use a military phrase, necessarily wear the cap badge of al-Qaeda, but that does not matter—their cause is the same. Anyone who doubts that should ask the wife of Detective Constable Oake, "Who killed that brave officer?" It was probably not a member of al-Qaeda, but someone serving the same cause.

Mr. Dalyell: There is a connection between al-Qaeda and Baghdad—al-Qaeda has twice tried to kill Saddam Hussein.

Patrick Mercer: I am grateful to the Father of the House for underlining the point that I am trying to make. I do not think that that relationship matters. There is plenty of evidence in open sources of connections between Baghdad and Islamic terrorists bent on death, destruction and mayhem in this country. When I put that point to the Foreign Secretary yesterday, he blanked me and said that making public certain information could compromise intelligence sources. I say this to him: if open sources are reporting that information, let us see them brought together. Let the dossier be added to, let us be convinced and let our troops be given a clear indication of where the threat lies.

Mr. Barnes *rose—*

Mr. Savidge *rose—*

Patrick Mercer: I have given way once; I shall not do so again for a moment.

Whether or not we go to war, this country lies at risk. I urge the Government to use the troops who remain behind in this country properly, correctly and sensibly. These are trained nuclear, biological and chemical warfare troops who can be equipped to assist in any emergency in this country. Will the Minister investigate, for instance, whether troops currently deployed on firefighting duties are carrying that equipment with them? He will find that the answer is no.

If we go to war—I hope that we will not do so—will our commanders be backed up better than they were during the Afghan campaign? Will the Minister assure me that there will be no more disgraceful conduct of the sort that arose in the case of Brigadier Roger Lane? Will he assure me that the commander of 3 Commando Brigade, 7 Armoured Brigade and 16 Air Assault Brigade will not be subjected to the same sort of public criticism and humiliation?

Whatever happens to the enemy forces, I believe that only two divisions of the Iraqis will fight, if it comes to it. As many hon. Members will know, however, two divisions are a lot of troops. The ultimate fight, as Labour Members have clearly pointed out, will come in Baghdad. There are three options: bombardment, infantry assault—or a combination of the two—and siege warfare. None of those forms of warfare is

[Patrick Mercer]

acceptable. With the media and civilians present, we will not be able to use any of those methods with a clear mind and conscience.

In the event of such fighting, who will be asked to do the job? Let us remember what happened at Tora Bora, when American forces found the going a little bit too tough. The Royal Marines were called for. The force that we have sent is infantry heavy. The Fusiliers, the Black Watch, the Royal Marines and the Parachute Regiment are the men who will be asked to fight, should those circumstances pertain. We must be ready for that, should it happen, and this House must support our troops.

Finally, what happens after the war? What will happen if the regime changes? It does not matter whether we fight or not; I believe that the regime will change. The Americans have said many times that they do not do mountains, but they do deserts and they do not do peace. Well, our troops do peace and they do it well. How well prepared are our forces to rebuild a country and to give humanitarian aid? How well prepared and equipped are they to cope with that altogether gentler but no less important role?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): Better than anyone else.

Patrick Mercer: I hope that the Minister is right. I ask him carefully to consider our role post-conflict or regime change, because as sure as eggs are eggs, it will be Tommy Atkins and Jack Tar who are asked to remain behind and do the job.

If that happens, a huge number of troops will be deployed. We have already heard that more than a quarter of the Army is deployed and that 50 per cent. is currently on operations of one sort or another. Following on from the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), I should like to iterate these words: our Army is too small to do this job. On Monday, I asked the Secretary of State for Defence why, in the current circumstances, as we stand on the brink of war and our Army is between 6,000 and 7,000 men under strength, recruiting has been suspended in certain parts of the Army. He answered that it was because recruiting had gone well. I am sure that there was no intent to deceive, but, sadly, he was wrong. I ask the Minister to look closely at what is going on and at why the MOD has chosen to suspend recruiting to the infantry and other divisions between now and the end of the financial year. The Army is between 5,000 and 6,000 men short.

The true answer is that money and resolve have run out. That is a disgrace when our forces are about to go into action. I invite the Minister to ask anybody from the First Battalion the Black Watch what it is like to be in an undermanned battalion as it is deployed to war. I am sure that he would get a trenchant answer.

Whether we approve or disapprove of standing shoulder to shoulder—I use the words advisedly—with the United States, the fact is that our troops, sailors and airmen are now in danger. I believe that they will be subject to terrorist attack in theatre before the fighting starts. We must therefore consider for how much longer we are prepared to stand alongside America as it proceeds with its campaign against the axis of evil. We have uncomplainingly backed America in Afghanistan; we are backing America in its action against Saddam Hussein. Where else might such an approach lead? Let us start to look over the horizon and to decide where our loyalties and our duty lie.

I very much hope that we can avoid war. If we do go to war, I pray that this House will support our gallant soldiers, sailors and airmen.

5.1 pm

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore): I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this very important debate. I have a twofold message to put to the House. As a relatively new Back Bencher, and having listened to many hours of debate on this issue, I hope to give a considered point of view, sharing the sympathies of many in the House who urge caution and consideration, while recognising the role that the Government have played. The fact that weapons inspectors are now in Iraq and, for the moment at least, the United States Administration are on board for a project that is proceeding through the United Nations is due solely to the role played by the Government and the Prime Minister.

We are reaching a critical period. War, say some, is inevitable. I still feel that it is avoidable and that there are ways for which we should be pushing in order to try at all costs to avoid it. Having said that, it would be wholly unrealistic to say that war is not a very strong possibility. Anybody who took that card away might as well take the weapons inspectors away from their inspections and forget any other possible escape routes by which we can avoid war. I shall explain why.

What are the alternatives to war? There has been speculation among different Governments on the possibility of exiling or finding an escape route for Saddam Hussein and many members of his family. Donald Rumsfeld has said:

> "I think that would be a fair trade to avoid a war",

but stopped short of offering immunity. He avoided that interesting question. Would the House consider palatable a horrible compromise or trade-off that allowed villains such as Saddam Hussein and his many lieutenants—many of whom are members of his family—to escape the reaches of international law? Would we allow such a solution in order to avoid the collateral damage, civilian casualties in their thousands and military casualties on both sides that would result from conflict? I would welcome more details from the Government about whether it is a realistic possibility. The Foreign Secretary said that offering any immunity would be unpalatable, but if the alternative is war, most people would swallow hard and accept it. However, I urge caution. The possibility was mooted in 1991 and Saddam's regime dismissed it out of hand, while many Arab nations laughed at it. Even the Opposition paper, *Al-Mutamar* reports:

> "The thought of escaping cruises in the hearts of many of those close to Saddam."

Even in the Arab nations it is acknowledged that the hierarchy of Saddam's regime is beginning to crumble. That is partly due to the weight of diplomatic and military pressure that is being brought to bear. Hon. Members should consider and debate the matter in full.

Does a precedent exist for such a horrible compromise? There are examples of compromises that were not necessarily engineered. The murderous Idi Amin, whose regime murdered up to 500,000 people in Uganda in the 1970s, is now 77 and sits fishing in the Red sea off Jeddah with a monthly stipend as president for life. Mengistu Haile Mariam, who tortured and killed tens of thousands of people in Ethiopia in the 1970s as part of the red terror campaign, lives in exile in Zimbabwe. The list goes on, including Baby Doc Duvalier, Ferdinand Marcos and Bokassa. Those names fill hon. Members with distaste and revulsion. However, when we consider the revulsion to which casualties, including civilian casualties, and war give rise, we should fully consider such immunity. We should urge the Arab nations, our Government and other western countries to put their weight behind it.

In the world of diplomacy, with its clever words, it would be wonderful if we could allow such people to go into exile without holding out the hope of complete escape from international persecution for genocide and other crimes against humanity.

The Saudi Foreign Minister, Saud al-Faisal, told reporters:

> "The concept is if you have a decision by the UN to go to war, give a chance for diplomacy to work before you go to war".

I urge the Government to do that. War is not inevitable. It may happen, but let us continue to use every diplomatic means. It is wrong to call for a vote now. I understand the principle, but we do not have the evidence that the UN weapons inspectors are putting to the Security Council and we have not yet made the decision to go to war. It is therefore vital to continue the pressure.

There is another way out. Mounting pressure may cause the Iraqi regime to topple internally, either by a coup led by the generals or by internal opposition. If that happens, let us hope that it has the full support of the international community. The opposition should not be left to hang out to dry, as has happened previously.

We hear that 3,000 Iraqis in exile are currently in training at a US base in Hungary. Whether that is correct or not, we should try to find a solution that delivers democracy to the Iraqi people for the Iraqi people, not simply at the behest and for the good of western nations. Arab and western nations will benefit from getting rid of Saddam; nobody pretends otherwise. However, if we are to do it, we must be clear that our priority is to return power to the indigenous people.

There are other agendas, but the primary purpose must be restoring democracy, stability and peace to the middle east, and thereby to the world. We are considering not simply missiles being aimed at us today, but what will happen one year, two years and five years hence.

All the options to avoid war that I have set out still depend on increasing the diplomatic and military pressure. They all recognise that it is inconceivable that Saddam Hussein should remain in power. That is a bold-as-brass statement, and it is based on the fact that we are not talking about weapons of mass destruction only. If we want to end the suffering of the Iraqi people and to restore democracy, Saddam Hussein has no more part to play in Iraq.

We are faced with a classic example of what-if history—otherwise known as contrafactual history. What happens if there is a military invasion, or if we leave Saddam Hussein in place? The latter option is inconceivable and we must not take it, for the sake of peace in the world as much as in the middle east, and for the sake of the Iraqi people.

Saddam has a track record. He has used biochemical weapons, and he clearly would do more, if he was able. There is no provable link between Iraq and terrorism, but the lines are not as clear as those shown on organisational charts. We are talking about dotted lines and informal channels: weapons of mass destruction and biochemical weapons pass among nations and terrorist groups in a very fluid way. That is what we need to be afraid of.

I urge the House to continue to support the Government. There is still time to avoid a military conflict and the civilian and military casualties that would be incurred. If we can avoid that, we should, but we must face up to the possibility that the decision to wage war will have to be made sometime. The House cannot hide behind UN resolution—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's time is up.

5.12 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): The debate about Iraq has been moving and often effective. I apologise for interrupting it. Despite what the Father of the House has warned, I think that we will get an opportunity to debate this immensely important subject again. However, we may not get another chance to debate a matter that I believe will come before the Cabinet tomorrow—the question of who will win the aircraft carrier contract. The first stage of that contract is worth around £3 billion, and the full contract could be worth as much as £10 billion.

I do not expect Ministers to give any hint of what decision will be made, but it is legitimate to ask about the principles and processes involved. Earlier, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) briefly but effectively set out what those principles should be. The primary concern should be to secure the systems that the armed forces need for national security, and the other key consideration should be value for money.

What should not be at issue is flag-waving nationalism. Moreover, although I am sure that most hon. Members would be pleased to have additional business in their constituencies, the contract should not be determined by the length of the gravy train of subcontractors that will be generated.

It is clear that the two major consortiums involved in the bid are excellent companies, with high levels of expertise among their scientists, engineers and skilled craftsmen. Whichever company wins the contract, it will place most of its development and manufacturing work in the UK. However, if the Government were to be advised that the Thales contract was the best, it would take a lot of political courage for them to take that decision. If they are advised to opt for the Thales contract, they should do so, in the interests of the armed forces and of the taxpayer. I would fully support that decision.

[Dr. Vincent Cable]

The contract could provide an opportunity to adopt a more mature approach to the matter of defence contracting.

Mr. Hendrick: Clearly the Government would like all the work to be carried out in the UK, irrespective of which contractor gets the contract. Does the hon. Gentleman believe that, in the long-term strategic interests of the defence of this country, it is important that much of the development of the new technologies that will go into building these aircraft carriers—including the intellectual property and the expertise—must remain in this country and not go to France? Is it not also important to consider whether France would have carried out a similar exercise and allowed British companies to bid?

Dr. Cable: My understanding is that the intellectual property remains in this country, whichever of the two bids wins. The hon. Gentleman is right that it would be very much in the interests of Europe, Britain and France if the French became less nationalistic in their approach to these matters. However, that should not prejudice our decision about what is good for the British armed forces.

I hope that we will advance to a more mature way of looking at these things. For example, when the Government make a decision on a new generation of cancer drugs, they make that decision on the basis of what is necessary for patients and issues of cost. They do not make the decision on the basis of the distribution of the shareholding of the companies that may have patented the different competing varieties; or, indeed, of whether the research and development have been done in British, French or American laboratories. We should apply the same logic to our defence decisions.

I should like to commend the Government at this point for making a considerable advance in terms of the maturity with which we approach these decisions, in two key respects. The Secretary of State has made it clear—he is to be commended for this—that no company should have a guaranteed monopoly, which companies have demanded. He has made it absolutely clear that there should be competition and smart procurement. That is a big step forward.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, there was an enormous amount of waste in defence procurement. Brigadier Kincaid, who retired in 1997, gave a figure of 25 per cent. in terms of the total waste in the defence procurement budget from soft contracts from guaranteed suppliers. It is very important that we move—as I think the Government want to do—to genuine competition; but genuine competition means that different companies may win big contracts.

The second thing that the Government have done right—I hope that they will have the courage to follow this through—is to say that when commercial companies enter into binding contracts, they should be made to adhere to them. When there are major overruns of cost that are the fault of the company and not the fault of the Government, the contracts should be honoured; the shareholders are then responsible for the overrun and not the taxpayer. In this case, there are enormous cost overruns in the Nimrod and the submarine contracts. It is not just BAE Systems; all the contractors have for many years got away with padded contracts and large overruns and then got the Government to pay for them. That must stop, and hopefully that will be an integral part of the decision.

Having complimented the Government, I must say that, to a degree, they have got themselves to blame for the expectation that had been built up in BAE Systems that it had some automatic right to this and other big contracts. The reason for that is the way in which the Government behave in other contexts. We have become used to the idea that British Ministers are free, in some cases, to subvert foreign policy and development objectives by promoting arms sales to countries that often do not need the equipment or cannot afford it. The worst case in recent months was the Tanzania contract for air traffic control systems.

BAE Systems executives who have been used to having such support—with Ministers, effectively, acting as their salesmen—are now rather confused. Are the Government there to promote them or to promote competitive contracts? The opportunity now exists for the Government—I hope that they will exercise it in this case—to insist that, in the interests of the armed forces and the taxpayer, there is real and effective competition; and if necessary, not to flinch from unpopular decisions that may have to be made here.

5.19 pm

Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): Some 33 years ago, the Labour Prime Minister was faced with a foreign policy dilemma: whether we should support the American action—indeed, American war—in Vietnam. So concerned was my predecessor, Michael Foot, that he managed to obtain an urgent parliamentary debate on the issue, and I think that all hon. Members would benefit if they took the time to read his speech.

It is worth quoting a few of the comments that Michael made that day. He warned:

> "The events . . . can have the gravest consequences for us all. In my opinion, it is sheer despair for people to say that nothing that we can do or say can have much influence on such distant occurrences, and that, therefore, we should keep our mouths shut, and possibly keep our eyes closed as well. I believe that we should debate these matters".

Sadly in my opinion, the present Prime Minister wants us to keep our mouths shut and our eyes closed. He wants a Parliament which, in the face of war, remains silent, and where the words and voices of the peacemakers are gagged. Hopefully, Labour Back Benchers, unlike the Prime Minister, will learn from history and have the same wisdom and courage as did Labour Back Benchers in 1970, when they forced the Labour Government not to support that war with British troops. We must warn the Prime Minister that, unlike him, we will not act as some puppet for the American Government or as their 51st state.

Our Prime Minister is in danger of being seen as a warmonger, and he would be wise to read the speech by Michael, who to this day is still very much an "inveterate peacemonger".

Michael also warned in that speech that the United States could create

> "a wilderness and desolation",

but it could never win a victory. He said that

> "the best friends of the Americans are those who join the growing host of brave Americans who themselves are telling the truth about this war."—[*Official Report*, 5 May 1970; Vol. 801, c. 208, 214.]

Michael was also wise to remind us that our refusal to support America's military ambitions did not make us anti-American, as our present Prime Minister on occasion seems to imply.

Some of us realise that there is a need to make a distinction between those great American people—those who, in the face of adversity, had the good sense and courage to ensure that the voice of the peacemakers was, and still is, heard; those who campaigned and often gave their lives so that all people could be treated equally; and those who were, and still are, determined to defend free speech, while others around them merely pay lip service to that concept—and the bloodthirsty and oil-grabbing American Administration, headed by Bush, who are determined to plunge us into a war with Iraq. Bush would like us to believe that that war is about weapons of mass destruction, about the breaking of UN resolutions, about a threat to world peace, and about Saddam Hussein, who in the opinion of the American Administration represents all that is evil, when we all know that it is about George Bush Jr. finishing the job that his father started many years ago. It is about who controls the Gulf; it is about the need to set up an American puppet Government in that region, and linked to that, and most important of all, it is about oil.

When my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) made that suggestion at last week's Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister implied that he was just pushing some ridiculous conspiracy theory, but, as on so many occasions, my hon. Friend was right. The Prime Minister was left muttering the American line, which, in my opinion and that of the vast majority of the people in the United Kingdom, is divorced from reality. The Prime Minister should remember that it was the oil barons who financed Bush, who wrote his manifesto and who now control his Administration. Working together, they are determined to control the second biggest oilfield in the world.

If I am wrong, why has the United States failed to declare war on Israel; failed to condemn its possession of the ultimate weapons of mass destruction—nuclear weapons; failed to protest at the jailing of Mordecai Vanunu, who has been rotting in an Israeli jail for 16 years now for telling the truth about Israel's nuclear weapons when all around him were lying; failed to stop their daily attacks on the Palestinian people and their breaking of the UN resolution; and failed to expose Sharon for what he is—a state terrorist?

I do not wish to go to war with Israel, but the hypocrisy and double standards of the Administrations of both the UK and the US are highlighted by their decision to ignore Israel's wrongdoing, while being more than willing to go to war with Iraq. In an answer to a question from me, the Prime Minister demonstrated the lack of concern about Israel's behaviour and the threat that it poses by admitting that he had not had any discussions with the Israeli Government about their weapons of mass destruction in the last 12 months.

It is obvious that the US and UK Administrations believe that Israel's weapons of mass destruction are harmless, that they do not threaten world peace, and that it is OK to jail anyone who says otherwise. They are weapons in a war machine that the west has helped to finance; but the weapons of mass destruction that those Administrations say Iraq has are nasty—a threat to world peace and to democracy.

I take the view that all weapons of mass destruction, including our own, are unacceptable and a threat to world peace. I do not believe that Britain should have a foreign policy based on the idea that "my enemy's enemy is my friend". That is how the west ended up backing Saddam Hussein's tyranny in Iraq. He too was opposed to the fundamentalist militants in Iran who, in turn, hated the Americans. Our foreign policy and, dare I say, our aid policy should be based on ethical judgments of what is right.

Not just the Government but the Conservative Opposition are guilty of hypocrisy. The Opposition also stand shoulder to shoulder with the American Administration in wanting to go to war with Iraq. They did not always have such anti-Saddam policies. Indeed, not so long ago, they stood shoulder to shoulder with Saddam. In 1989 the Department of Trade and Industry assisted British exporters to the Baghdad arms fair, advising them on "current bilateral commercial relations". We now know that the DTI's trade Minister, the late Alan Clark, encouraged exporters with a nod and a wink to sell military equipment and arms to Iraq. Anyone who doubts that should take time to read the conclusions of the Scott inquiry.

The Tories supped with the devil of Baghdad. That should be a warning that we should not sup with the devils of Washington. If anyone believes that the word "devil" is an offensive description of members of the American Administration, he or she should pause for a while and consider some of their appointments. Bush has appointed as his ambassador to the UN John Negroponte—a man who at best turned a blind eye to, but probably supported, the death squads in central America in the 1980s, when Reagan supported the Contras and other terrorists in despicable crimes against humanity.

Elliot Abrahams, whom Bush has appointed senior director of the National Security Council Office for Democracy Human Rights and International Operations, is even worse that Negroponte. He has defended the actions of death squads and dictators, denied the existence of massacres and lied to Congress about the Reagan Administration's support for the Contras. He has been described in *The Washington Post* as the "pit bull" of that Administration,

> "who promoted the policy in Central America of 'better dead than red'".

We have nothing to learn from the George Bushes of this world, or from the oil barons of this world; but I believe that Labour Members, at least, can learn from our internationalism and our socialism that peace with justice is the only way. If we fail to heed that advice, once again the losers will be not only our soldiers, but tens and tens of thousands of Iraqis—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has had his time.

5.29 pm

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): The guiding principle in foreign policy for centuries—indeed, it is associated with the treaty of Westphalia in 1648—has been respect for national borders and the concept of the nation state, but the viability of that model has been threatened and eroded with increasing speed in recent years.

In a speech at Reykjavik, the Prime Minister proposed the concept that, where events take place within the borders of a nation where people are being oppressed, tortured and murdered, it is appropriate to cross national borders to rectify the situation. He used that as an argument in favour of intervening in Kosovo. I am not at all sure about that concept, but I am certain that, where a realistic threat to the world and our own security comes from within a national border, crossing national borders can be justified.

With global communications increasing all the time, with media communications increasing so that messages, signals and pictures can be flashed around the world instantaneously and with transport links improving so that aircraft can travel half way round the world, missiles can travel enormous distances and weapons of mass destruction can threaten other countries from many thousands of miles of away, it sometimes becomes necessary to say that one cannot just respect national borders and that it is necessary to take action within them.

The threat of weapons of mass destruction is very considerable. One of the sub-committees of the political committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, of which I am a member, has been studying that subject in some depth in recent years. The threats of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons are very dangerous and frightening. The only reassuring factor is that weapons of mass destruction tend to be quite difficult to deliver.

World leaders cannot stand aside from that threat. In fact, there is one leader in the world: the United States, which, as we all know, now spends as much on defence as the next 14 countries put together. The United States takes its responsibilities profoundly seriously, so I would take issue with the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Llew Smith), whose speech preceded mine.

I know many Americans and have spent much time in America. I have great respect for that country, although it is a rather insular nation. Some 7 per cent. or 8 per cent. of the population of the United States have passports, and some Members of the Senate and the House of Representatives boast of not having a passport and not needing to travel outside its borders. Nevertheless, the United States is the world leader and it takes its responsibilities deeply seriously.

The United States was and remains shaken by the events of 11 September, the first major occasion on which terrorism was brought to American soil. They and we cannot allow Security Council resolutions to be ignored and flouted. They and we believe that action is necessary. Saddam Hussein must be made to comply. Although I recognise that it has been an extremely difficult path for the Prime Minister to follow, I respect what he and the Government are seeking to do.

My constituents will be thinking and praying for the men and women in the armed forces who are proceeding now to the middle east and those who may be sent there. We must hope that war does not become an inevitable event—we must hope that it can be avoided—but we must use military threats if we are to achieve any progress.

This debate is not on Iraq and the threat of war in the middle east, but on defence in the world. Of course, it succeeds the two-day debate on the defence estimates and the separate one-day debates on the Army, Navy and Air Force that we used to have. So although the threat of Iraq is overwhelmingly important, I would prefer to move off that subject and say a few words about the reserve forces—a completely different, but extremely important subject, on which I should like to put down a marker.

The 1998 strategic defence review announced a 3,000 increase in the size of the regular Army, but, because of recruitment and retention problems, the strength of the armed forces has decreased, making it much more important that we should have viable reserve forces of sufficient strength.

We need reserve forces for four reasons: first, as a framework for expansion in case it is necessary to expand our armed forces to cater for the unforeseen; secondly, to reinforce our regular forces during wartime or operations other than war, such as peacekeeping, either at home or overseas; thirdly, to provide aid to the civil community in times of emergency or natural disaster; and, fourthly and very importantly, to act as a link between the armed forces and the civil community.

The regular Army is dependent on the Territorial Army to complete its mobilised order of battle. The TA and the regular Army share a common doctrine; they operate within the same command structure; they have the same reliance on the regimental system; and they use the same equipment. But the Territorial Army is different. Many of its members are young. They are not all in full-time regular employment and can regularly and easily be deployed if necessary, but a significant cadre are much older and have secure peacetime employment, which makes it quite difficult to deploy them.

The Territorial Army should therefore be big enough to be deployed without calling on its members too frequently; we must ensure that we have a sufficient cadre of territorial solders to be deployed from time to time. The announced reduction by the Labour Government from 59,000 to 41,200 was too great. I maintain that 59,000, the number established by the previous Conservative Government, is approximately right. If we need that number of Territorial Army soldiers, we need it to be available at all times. We must remember that there is a 30 per cent. turnover, especially in the first year. In order to have 59,000 troops always available, we need approximately 78,000 to allow for depletion. Therefore, I urge that consideration be given to a significant increase in the Territorial Army, from its present level of about 40,000 to 70,000-plus.

The United Kingdom is now the only major country in the world with such a limited capacity to reconstitute its regular forces. The United States, which is about four times our size, has 10 regular army divisions, supported by the equivalent of 13 reserve divisions. Australia, which is about a third of our size, is planning a force structure based on two and a half regular brigades supported by five and a half territorial brigades. We are out of step with the rest of the world in having such thin reserve forces capable of reconstituting our regular forces. I urge that consideration be given to a significant increase.

Moreover, the strategic defence review identified the proliferation of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, terrorism and drug-related crime, environmental damage and possible technological attack, perhaps through information technology, as significant threats to the nation. In all those areas the reserve forces, with their high degree of external experience and the ability to be called up if necessary, are ideal to take on those possible threats. Other countries do much more than we do in this area. The United States as the Minister will well know, has taken considerable steps to prepare against nuclear, biological and chemical attack. The reserve forces should be used to prepare this nation similarly.

5.39 pm

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): In common with other hon. Members who have taken part in the debate, I pay tribute to the contribution of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews), who, with no small eloquence, demolished the somewhat patronising attempt of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to dismiss opposition to a war in Iraq as being anti-American. I, like my hon. and learned Friend, am by no means anti-American. I can remember those care packages that came after the war, and I have always paid tribute to the Marshall plan. But I am most certainly opposed to the present American Administration.

The hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed), who again I regret is not in his place, in a thoughtful contribution posed the question: is Saddam Hussein more of a danger now than he was before 11 September? The answer to that has to be no. I would argue that Saddam Hussein is no more of a real and present danger now than he was in 1998.

The argument that one sometimes hears that Saddam Hussein is hiding his weapons of mass destruction I find utterly unacceptable. The President of the United States has stated that he is personally tired of this game of hide and seek. If one accepts that Iraq has been overflown by American spy satellites year after year and probably hour on hour and that the aeroplanes that are engaged in the no-fly zone are exclusively fighters and, if one accepts that, as the Prime Minster has said, the flow of intelligence from Iraq is increasing, but that does not persuade one that that would furnish the UN inspectors with no small detailed information as to where they should look for these supposed weapons of destruction, I do not know quite what would.

The hon. Member for Newark (Patrick Mercer), who, again I regret is not in his place, clearly spoke from direct experience of military action. He too asked some searching questions, not only how a war, if it goes ahead, would actively be conducted, but what would happen when the war was over. He asked whether we would, in effect, keep faith with the Iraqi people whom we have been urging to overthrow Saddam Hussein.

I well remember the encouragement that was furnished to the Iraqi opposition at the end of the Kuwait war by the then Prime Minister of this country, Margaret Thatcher, and the then President of the United States, George Bush, urging and encouraging opposition by the Iraqi people. But support from the United Kingdom and the United States was conspicuous by its absence, and those people who had attempted to overturn their Government were slaughtered.

The point I am attempting to make here is that the same kind of promises were made by the western nation states to Afghanistan. I entirely supported the military action in Afghanistan. I entirely supported what I understood at the time were firm promises on the part of the western nation states to assist Afghanistan to rebuild itself as a democratic society, but although those promises are only minutely being delivered with regard to Kabul, the wider area of Afghanistan is reverting to the state that it was in before. The opium is flourishing and being sold in probably greater amounts than ever before, the warlords are taking over and women are again being denied education and the opportunity to work.

A war against Iraq is totally and utterly unacceptable unless up-to-date, verifiable evidence can be presented that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction and the means of and intent to deliver them, and unless there is a second mandate from the UN endorsing military action. If war takes place, it will undoubtedly be won by what many hon. Members have defined as the most powerful nation in the world; it will be a war which in the first instance will be conducted by, I imagine, saturation bombing from the air, where the victims will not be Saddam Hussein and his Government but, again, the innocent. I do not believe Saddam Hussein's protestations that he will stay and fight with his people; that he will repel the Mongol horde. I believe that he will go. Equally, I do not believe that having won the war we, the United Kingdom and the United States, will be prepared to commit the money, people, material and time to create a new democratic society in Iraq.

Mr. Joyce: Can I take it from what my hon. Friend just said that if there were a new UN resolution, she would agree with subsequent military action?

Glenda Jackson: As I have always argued, if the evidence is presented to the United Nations that Saddam Hussein indeed has weapons of mass destruction, it would certainly be for the Security Council to place a second mandate on the table and to begin to define the parameters of any military action against Iraq. Let no one be in any doubt: if the United Kingdom and the United States, without a second mandate from the UN, engage in a pre-emptive strike against Iraq, the people who will die will not be military forces. They will be men, women, children, the elderly and the ill—all civilians. The engagement of ground forces, as the hon. Member for Newark (Patrick Mercer) pointed out in his thoughtful contribution, will essentially be for the taking of Baghdad. By that time, I repeat that in my interpretation Saddam Hussein will be long gone; he will be in another country, and, as I have had occasion to say previously in this House, he will act as a focus for undermining any kind of Government that either a combination of the United States and the United Kingdom or the wider United Nations attempt to impose.

[Glenda Jackson]

I also find totally unacceptable—and this has its own dangers at home—the Government's attempts to link Saddam Hussein with Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. The most recent example of that was in the statement by the Foreign Secretary yesterday on the most recent Security Council meeting. I freely admit that I paraphrase, but he said that the most overwhelming danger facing the United Kingdom was from international terrorism and rogue states. He went on to say that the most dangerous international terrorist was Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda and the most aggressive rogue state was Iraq and Saddam Hussein, despite the fact that he and the Prime Minister have said on the Floor of the House that there is no evidence linking Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. How could there be? They are miles apart philosophically. Their avowed aims are entirely different. One wishes to maintain a secular dictatorship, while Osama bin Laden wishes to see a fundamentalist religious Islam take over the world.

Mr. Hendrick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Glenda Jackson: I beg my hon. Friend's pardon. He also cannot recognise men from women.

Mr. Hendrick: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. Does she not also remember the Foreign Secretary referring to Hezbollah and Hamas as international terrorists that may be supported by the regime in Baghdad?

Glenda Jackson: There is no question but that Saddam Hussein supports Hamas. He supports it by funding the families of suicide bombers, which no one would support or endorse, but that is not the point that I am attempting to make. What the Government have attempted to do is to convince the British people—for whom my admiration goes up in leaps and bounds, as the Government have significantly failed to convince them—that the need for a war in Iraq has nothing really to do with whether Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction but that it must be a central and essential part of the Government's fight against international terrorism and the defeat of international terrorism.

We saw yesterday a mass lobby of people protesting outside the House that there should be no war against Iraq without evidence and a mandate from the United Nations. That protest, which included every age group and, I would argue, every economic group, was a simple request to the Government to think again. The Government have not convinced the people of this country of the rightness or justness of a war against Iraq. I am deeply ashamed that my Government—a Labour Government—should consider for a second a pre-emptive strike against another nation state that is offering no real, immediate and present danger to this country or, I would argue, to our allies. My admiration for the British people goes up by leaps and bounds because of the way in which they have not been convinced by arguments from the British Government that essentially attempt to delude and, in some instances, to deceive.

I spoke earlier of what I regard as the British Government's dangerous policy on this issue. Their insistence that there is a link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda has caused concerned about terrorists being in this country. The risk has certainly been inflated by the press, and that is having a knock-on effect on race relations. The most immediate alleged terrorist attack in this country, which was prosecuted with desperate success, was carried out using a kitchen knife. The argument that terrorists are holed up in this country—the example has been given of the minute amounts of ricin that were discovered in Wood Green—bears absolutely no relation to reality. One can get a recipe to create ricin and other weapons off the internet—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order.

5.51 pm

Mr. Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater): I want to consider not only the issue of Iraq, but that of procurement.

I joined the Territorial Army in 1979, and what has changed since then? The boots fell to bits, the uniform did not fit—the trousers were especially renowned for falling to bits—and anyone who could get the helmet to stay on was doing better than most. The radios were old and did not work. The one good thing that we had was a rifle, but that had had all its teething problems 20 years earlier.

Where have we now got to on procurement? We can get an army to the front line and get it ready to do its job, but if we do not equip it and do not provide information and back-up, such as the material that people are developing at home, it will not achieve anything. I have an enormous amount of sympathy for the troops who go overseas and who say that their kit is not up to the job. I certainly remember buying kit; we always used to. That was a normal part of being a soldier. We bought an early version of Gortex and sleeping bags that did not leak. On occasions, we bought our own helmets because they would fit and would not give us headaches after we had worn them for 12 or 13 hours.

We had a debate last July on defence procurement. Where have we got to all these months later when we are deploying British troops overseas? The Defence Procurement Agency has an annual budget of £6 billion; it is the single biggest purchaser of manufactured goods in the United Kingdom. At any one time, it is has 4,300 staff managing about 13,000 contracts. They purchase everything from field radios to submarines, and they are responsible for getting what the military needs to the front line and in good order and ready to go.

There are always delays in supplying the equipment, and we have faced that problem for years and, I suspect, for generations. For example, if one's radio switches itself off after a burst of fire or after an explosion, one is in real trouble, but we are not yet ready to supply the new radios to our forces. The Hercules transport aircraft is late and we all know that the Apache attack helicopters are in garages. The Merlin HC3 support helicopter still faces problems. In the past year, the agency has delivered equipment worth £3.5 billion, but it has slipped on the delivery of 40 per cent. of that. We cannot continue to have such problems because, if we do, we may encounter other problems of which we are not yet aware.

The total budget in Europe for defence procurement is £95 billion and Lord Robertson, the Secretary-General of NATO, has said that

"the public is not getting value for money."

I am not in favour of a European army, but the cost of defence procurement for such things as Eurofighter and Merlin requires us to have partners, and such orders are slipping badly.

Lord Robertson said:

"There are two million troops in uniform in Europe, half a million more than the Americans, but only a fraction"

are deployed with the kit that they are meant to have. That is obviously wrong. He also said that there are 2,800 attack aircraft. The Americans have half that number, but only 10 per cent. of our attack aircraft can fly at night and in all weather. The British have discovered that low flying in the Gulf is not always a good idea. Again, the necessary equipment is not ready and the Eurofighter is unable to perform a support role.

The US Arms Export Control Act says at the outset:

"In furtherance to world peace and the security and foreign policy of the United States, the President is authorised to control the import and export of defense articles and defense services and to provide foreign policy guidance to the persons of the United States"

and its allies. Let us consider that in the context of BAE Systems, the main defence contractor of the DPA with responsibility for supplying our forces with goods that are up to date, workable and operational. BAE Systems is in a complete shambles. The Secretary of State is in a meeting with the company now. I would love to know what he is saying because it has to pull its socks up. I strongly believe that it is a British company. It supplies British goods to British troops, and it must stay that way.

However, BAE Systems has taken on a contract for the biggest armaments factory in the world. It is in Tennessee, and it may well move the manufacture of the explosive and bullet capacity of our shells and ammunition there. If such production is not in line with American foreign policy, the President can stop any country, friend or foe, getting hold of those goods. I accept that some countries do not have a great record on exporting arms, but what if we were to do another Suez and the Americans were unhappy with our involvement in that part of the world? They could stop us getting ammunition—the propellant and the rest of it—because BAE Systems has been given millions by the American military to upgrade the plant in Tennessee. That is not right. British troops should be supplied with British equipment. If we break the security of supply, we will have to depend on people who may not always be friendly to us and our aspirations, now or in the future. We would have a major problem if an American President decided to cut off our supply on a whim.

Procurement also starts at home. I am glad that the Under-Secretary of State for Defence is in the Chamber because I received a letter from him on 15 January. The Ministry lost 20 anti-tank missiles in the Bristol channel. Perhaps that is carelessness or just something that happens, but the letter says that the final report is classified. Why is the report on equipment that has been accidentally lost classified? Perhaps the Under-Secretary can give us a clue. I signed the Official Secrets Act when I joined the military and, as far as I am aware, I am still bound by it. Why is it not possible for me to find out what happened to anti-tank missiles that are slopping around in a puddle of water?

The BAE Systems contract for the carriers is vital. We should not allow the French to have it for the simple reason that we will not get anything from them to build in return. BAE Systems is a British contractor. It is owned by the British and, I hope, will continue to be so. We cannot give away contracts of that size and complexity when we have no guarantee of getting anything in return. Surely the art of trade is being able to trade; it is not about giving things away.

5.59 pm

Mr. Eric Joyce (Falkirk, West): It is a privilege to take part in the debate after a number of excellent speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies), who is no longer in his seat, made a number of excellent points that are worth following up.

I do not know whether this is a consequence of the change in the way in which this place operates, but I cannot help noticing that a number of hon. Members who have taken part in this debate seem to have joined an all-party group on town crying, of which I was not advised. I tried to make interventions, but it seems to be taken as normal by some Members, none of whom is in his place at the moment, simply to stand up, read out a polemic, take no interventions and then complain that they did not get a chance to debate the issue in the House. It seems to me that they are not taking part in this debate.

Mr. Barnes: If I have an opportunity to speak, I will read out a polemic and readily offer my hon. Friend an opportunity to intervene.

Mr. Banks: You have given him an extra minute.

Mr. Joyce: My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) is a scholar and a gentleman, and he has given me an extra minute, for which I thank him, although I may not need it.

I have been listening to this debate and, over the past weeks and months, to other similar debates. I thought that I would label one or two of the generic arguments that have been applied to Iraq and the possible military action. Hopefully, it will not take place. The hon. Member for Newark (Patrick Mercer), who spoke very well, said that he hoped that it would not come to that. Some of these specious generic arguments have been deployed today, and it is worth giving them a label and quickly running through them.

For one argument I have simply written down in my notes the word "oil". I keep hearing, in debates such as this, that the only reason behind any possible action in the Gulf is oil. President Bush wants to get his hands on the oil; it is as simple as that. However, there are many sources of oil supply, and the United States, the United Kingdom and all the other users of petrol and oil products in the world do not go about invading countries simply to get their oil. I am sure that if we wanted to, and if it were simply a matter of oil, we could cut a deal with Saddam Hussein for his oil. That argument seems so transparent that it is preposterous that it is made again and again, yet it is.

[Mr. Joyce]

Another argument that I have heard, which I call the parasite argument, was encapsulated extremely well by Simon Tisdall in *The Guardian* on Monday. Simon Tisdall and, in the past few weeks, a number of others have said that under no circumstances should we take any action in Iraq, regardless of UN resolutions; we should simply rely on UNMOVIC's inspection regime. That is entirely incoherent and parasitical because it relies on the threat of military action poised over Saddam Hussein, which is implied by UNMOVIC being in Iraq in the first place.

My hon Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon), who is not in her place, deployed the Catch-22 argument. Those who previously argued that there must be a second UN resolution now realise that, if such a resolution is necessary, it is highly likely that there will be one, so they suddenly want to undermine it. They say that any second resolution will indicate only that the Americans have strong-armed everybody else into passing it, so it is effectively invalid. Yet much of the time the same people argue that the UN is important.

The third argument I call the missionary position, because I have heard it deployed by a number of Lords Spiritual in the other place. This is essentially the argument for containment. It says that for the past 12 years we have managed nicely to contain Saddam Hussein within his own boundaries and he has posed no direct threat to this country, so we should just let him crack on, persecuting his people and murdering as many people as he wants. As long as he is not bothering us directly, we should do nothing. It seems ludicrous, but it is true, that that argument is deployed alongside one that stresses the importance of humanitarian principles. How people can produce the containment argument while ignoring the humanitarian implications is beyond me.

Mr. Savidge: Is my hon. Friend saying that he is opposed to Government policy? Is the aim to try to disarm Saddam Hussein, and does my hon. Friend believe that we should go to war with him and other countries simply on the basis of human rights issues?

Mr. Joyce: My hon. Friend should not draw that conclusion from what I said, and I am at a loss to explain how he did so. My answer is no—I do not know why he drew that inference. Perhaps we can discuss this later, as there is a gap in his logic.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) offered what may be called the "shoot the messenger" argument. If there is any intelligence whatsoever that reveals bad things about Saddam Hussein, such as his having weapons of mass destruction, we should say so and tell *The Sun.* We should record it in the national press, then there will be no adverse effects. While we need to know as much as possible, we must consider the implications of revealing such information for individuals who may be killed as a consequence—we must be wary of compromising our position.

I shall quickly run through the argument deployed by my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh), which could be called the "others" argument. If we are not dealing with all the other problems in the world, why should we deal with the Iraq problem? That is the most ludicrous shift imaginable. Of course, there are many problems in the world, such as those in Palestine and Kashmir, but the idea that we should not therefore deal with an immense threat is too ridiculous for words. I would have asked my hon. Friend if he was arguing for intervention in Iraq and all those other places, but he would not accept interventions, which is a great pity.

Mr. Banks: Will my hon. and gallant Friend address in his thoughtful speech the question whether we should view Saddam Hussein and the regime in Iraq as uniquely threatening to this country? There are a lot of nasty regimes, as he has said, but we have to be satisfied that Saddam Hussein poses a unique threat because we are treating him as such.

Mr. Joyce: I thank my hon. Friend. Saddam Hussein probably does pose such a threat, but it is not necessarily the most serious threat—that may come from North Korea or another country that has already acquired nuclear weapons. Iraq does not have such weapons, and—if Members will excuse the use of a word to which some of them object—we want to pre-empt acquisition because, once it has them, there is much less that we can do. We believe that Saddam has weapons of mass destruction, but we can do something about that and prevent a scenario in two or three years' time in which, it is not impossible to imagine, Iraq has a nuclear capability, however modest, and terrorists are travelling the world in search of an easy source of such weapons, and the two come together. Saddam probably does represent a unique threat in that respect.

Joan Ruddock: If my hon. Friend believes in pre-emption, does he acknowledge that it can operate legally and morally if inspectors have the time to find weapons and destroy them, for which provision is made in UN resolution 1441?

Mr. Joyce: I am not convinced that the inspectors' role is to destroy equipment, but whether it is or not, this is not a game of hide and seek. That brings me back to the argument that I was parodying at the beginning of my speech. If the inspectors find something—the smoking gun, as it were—that may be viewed as evidence for their continuing to inspect, rather than evidence that Saddam Hussein is concealing a great deal and that we should take action in response to that threat. A subjective view can be taken, but I think that if we find something very significant, it will be a reason to take direct action on Saddam. My hon. Friend may think that that would be reason to stall and do nothing, but that would simply increase the risk.

I shall conclude my remarks, as I only have about a minute left. There is no question but that all of us want to see this whole Iraq business concluded without military action, but the fact is that there is a significant threat—I think that it is beyond serious doubt—and it has to be neutralised. Of course, debates have to take place in the House. It would be good if hon. Members at least recognised that such debates were taking place and if I did not have to talk on the radio tomorrow, as I probably shall, to an hon. Member whose complaint is that no debates take place. It would also help the quality of public discourse if some of the specious arguments that I have described today were not deployed. If people want to produce a pacifist argument—and I think perhaps most people do not—they should. What they should not do is produce an argument that is essentially pacifist but which is based on some other, rather weak proxy argument.

6.11 pm

Sue Doughty (Guildford): At the beginning of the debate, the Secretary of State referred to a vigorous three months of public debate, which reminded me of what happens when a council makes an unpopular proposal to close a school and conducts a consultation process that is not genuine. I am very concerned about the remarks made by the hon. Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Joyce), which suggested that he sees any opposition to his point of view as a specious argument. He and one of his colleagues managed to make a large number of interventions and yet expressed astonishment that even more were not taken.

We have heard some tremendous contributions. The hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) made a very powerful speech in which he set straight the attitude of hon. Members by stating the fact that people who are not in favour of this war are not automatically enemies of the United States. All of us have friends there with whom we constantly communicate; we discuss things with them and we share our concerns. We are all opposed to Saddam Hussein. Nobody in this House carries a brief for what he does, but that does not necessarily justify the actions that are being proposed.

We have heard many very powerful arguments and I shall not deal with all of them. I was especially moved yesterday by the constituents who came to see me—some of them from the far left. Pacifists would never countenance any war, and we know that some people will be of that persuasion. Others were of a school of thought in which, like the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Glenda Jackson), they can say, "I supported the Afghanistan war, possibly with reluctance, because I saw no alternative." Yet the objectives of that war have not been met. I saw people who will support a war if the cause is just and the action is appropriate, but they are not supporting war in Iraq. I also saw people from the more right-wing end of my constituency, which includes the prosperous Surrey villages, bringing messages of good will from their neighbours. Those are not the naturally left-wing and anti-war people. Indeed, the opposition that has been so eloquently expressed by many hon. Members stretches across the House.

We all have many causes for concern. As my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) said, our servicemen and women have gone to the middle east with our hopes, prayers and good wishes. Of course, we are desperately anxious about them. We are also anxious about the innocent men, women and children of Iraq, who will inevitably face slaughter in any military action. The numbers will not be small. It seems a strange sort of justice where we put matters right for them, but they die along the way. Possibly, those who are in favour of military action will square up those issues, but I do not think that I can do so.

One of the issues that I am concerned about in any proposed military action is what we will do, why we will do it and what we will hope to achieve? Will we be aiming for regime change or securing oil? What will be the objective of such action? How will we know when we have achieved it? That was one of the dreadful unanswered questions of previous military action against Iraq. We did not quite know whether we had achieved our objective, but seeing the pictures of aircraft strafing conscripted boy soldiers as they went home, having admitted defeat by the combined forces, brought a sudden end to the war in many people's minds. A day or two afterwards, that is just what happened—the public would not stomach the conflict any longer.

We have yet to establish sufficient evidence. There are still unanswered questions about what will happen if the arms inspectors need more time. I understand the need for confidences—perhaps we in Parliament are not allowed the information—but negotiations with some of our European partners such as France and Germany will surely have entitled them to see the evidence as part of the argument. Evidence is shared among those with a need to know, yet such countries are not buying the argument. Russia and China are not convinced either. There is a lack of international consensus.

The issue of oil has been touched on. There is likely to be a lot more than the 115 billion barrels of petroleum reserves in Iraq about which we know. Venezuela is in an impossible situation and Saudi Arabian oil is less secure than it used to be, so we cannot deny that oil is an issue. I ask Ministers to answer a question that we have posed before. When, as the Secretary of State has said, we are seeking consensus with other countries, will the Government ensure that the possible presence of oil does not form part of any negotiations? To many members of the public, it appears that alliances are being sought on those grounds. Those questions are present in many people's minds.

Another query has been reinforced by the leader of the Iraqi National Congress. He told *The Washington Post* in September 2002:

> "American companies will have a big shot at Iraqi oil."

There are many arguments about why the Americans have not been able to do a deal on that oil before now. After a war, they might be able to do so. Those arguments need exploration; we need more information about the part that oil plays in the proposals.

The issue of arms exports plays an important part in a debate about defence in the world. As part of the war on terror, the United Kingdom Government have, to a certain extent, relaxed export controls. They did so after 11 September and, as a result, arms were exported to countries that were perceived to be on side—but not necessarily with a guarantee that such arms would not be used on their own people. We are talking about countries such as Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which were criticised in the 2001 Foreign Office human rights report. None the less, licences were granted. That is not acceptable.

Let us consider the human rights record in Uzbekistan. Human Rights Watch noted:

> "Torture and other abuses in Uzbek prisons and police precincts remain commonplace."

[Sue Doughty]

There have been 11 deaths in

> "highly suspicious circumstances in custody in the past 16 months."

Yet we are talking about exporting arms to such people.

In 2001, the UK licensed 6,780 assault rifles to Nepal, yet the Nepalese Government face a serious insurgency from Maoist opposition groups. We are not sure what part those arms will play in that. The Government must be most certain that in exporting arms they are not conveniently buying support from the wrong people in order to do what they want to do. We must look most carefully at that in future.

Another aspect of proposed military action that worries me deeply is the outstanding issue of child soldiers and the fact that the United Kingdom continues to allow boys and girls who are under 18 to take part in military action.

Mr. Keith Simpson: That is not true.

Sue Doughty: If it is not true, I want the Government's assurance about that. Several commentators suggest that it is true.

Despite the comments of the hon. Member for Falkirk, West, we need today's debate and also a specific debate on Iraq. We need to understand the reasons for proposed military action, the exit strategy and the effects of war to enable our Parliament, alone in Europe, to decide whether to support the action. The Government must make time for that and allow us to vote on a specific motion for or against the action.

6.20 pm

Ross Cranston (Dudley, North): The response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was Security Council resolution 678 in 1990. It authorised the

> "use of all necessary means"

to end Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. After enforcement action against Iraq, resolution 687 imposed an obligation on it to disarm. After only four months, Security Council resolution 707 condemned Iraq's failure to comply as a "serious violation" and a "material breach" of its obligations. "Material" alludes to the language in the Vienna convention on treaties. It means a breach so serious that the other party to a treaty can end it. There is a good argument that a material breach of a Security Council resolution constitutes a breach of the United Nations charter.

Other Security Council resolutions followed. They include 1060, which condemns Iraq's "clear violation" of its obligations; 1134, which refers to a "flagrant violation" by Iraq, and 1205, which also mentions a "flagrant violation" that the Security Council found. In November's resolution 1441, the Security Council decided by 15 votes to 0 that Iraq had been and remained in material breach of its obligations. Paragraph 2 affords Iraq a final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations. Paragraph 12 states that the Security Council must convene immediately on receipt of a report by the inspectors, to consider the need for Iraq's full compliance with its obligations.

What is the upshot of the various Security Council resolutions? First, Iraq has an obligation to disarm. Secondly, it has failed to comply. Not only has it failed, but in the language of the resolutions, it has committed a "serious", "clear" or "flagrant" violation of its obligation to disarm. That is a material breach of its international law obligations. Thirdly, the resolutions that set out Iraq's obligations were passed under chapter VII of the United Nations charter.

When collective security was established under the UN charter after the second world war, it provided for the maintenance of international peace and security, and granted the Security Council the prime responsibility for that. Under article 25 of the charter, the Security Council's decisions are binding on all member states. It provides for two avenues: chapter VI and chapter VII.

Chapter VI deals with the peaceful settlement of disputes. Resolutions under that chapter are recommendations. That does not mean that chapter VI resolutions are less important than those under chapter VII. Hon. Members have mentioned resolutions on Israel and Palestine. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh) mentioned an early Security Council resolution: 47, of 1948, on Kashmir. Perhaps they are chapter VI resolutions because of geopolitical realities, but I want to make two points.

First, two parties are involved in these chapter VI resolutions—Israel and Palestine, India and Pakistan—and the best hope may be a negotiated rather than an imposed outcome. The second point is the character of the issue. Disarmament at one level is relatively straightforward, whereas finding a solution to the middle east or Kashmiri conflicts is more complex, because more than one party and mutual obligations are involved.

Resolutions on Iraq involve chapter VII, which enables the use of force under article 42 of the UN charter. Despite early expectations, it became clear that the UN was not by itself capable of extensive enforcement action. Over the years, it has authorised states to use force under chapter VII. I have already mentioned resolution 678, in relation to Iraq, and there was resolution 749 in relation to Yugoslavia. Other resolutions were passed in relation to Rwanda and Haiti in 1994, and Albania and the Central African Republic in 1997.

It is inconceivable that the Security Council will not authorise the use of force in the same way if the inspectors find a material breach by Iraq. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister asked yesterday, if the UN does not act in this case, how can it have any credibility in relation to North Korea? Moreover, although I support the UN unreservedly, I believe that it would be weakened almost fatally if it did not authorise the use of force in this case. Kofi Annan has said:

> "If Iraq's defiance continues . . . the Security Council must face its responsibilities."

I acknowledge that very important considerations are in the balance. They include the impact of enforcement action on neighbouring countries in the middle east, and the opportunity that conflict with Iraq would give to Islamic fundamentalists to portray the west as hostile to Muslims. However, I believe that a more important consideration is the future of the UN's system of collective security.

As I have said, I think it inconceivable that the Security Council will not act if a material breach is found, but the hypothetical question has been asked about what would happen if the UN did not explicitly authorise the use of force. Could one or a number of states take enforcement action to give effect to a Security Council resolution?

As a matter of international law, that possibility cannot be ruled out. Authorisation does not necessarily imply prior approval. There are arguments about automaticity into which I do not have time to go this evening, and about the resurrection of Security Council resolution 678, but one example is worth giving. In 1990, the Economic Community of West African States intervened militarily in Liberia without explicit authorisation from the Security Council, although the Council subsequently approved the action that was taken.

In the present case involving Iraq, the argument would be that, if the Security Council was thwarted by the arbitrary action of one permanent member, enforcement action approved by the other states could be sanctioned. In fairness, however, I should add that the view that commands more support among international lawyers is that explicit authorisation of enforcement action is necessary, and is required by the fundamental values underpinning the UN charter.

I shall conclude with three brief points. First, Iraq has been in material breach of its obligations under the UN charter. Secondly, if the inspectors find that it continues in that breach, it would be almost inconceivable for the Security Council not to authorise enforcement action. Thirdly, if the Security Council did not act in those circumstances, that would undermine the credibility of the UN and the principles of international law.

6.28 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I am sure that the Government will have noted the sound—and free—advice given by the hon. and learned Member for Dudley, North (Ross Cranston), the former Solicitor-General.

I have a relatively short time—15 minutes—to wind up a debate so modestly entitled "Defence in the World". As my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) pointed out, we used to have two-day debates on the defence estimates, and individual debates on each service. I hope that the Government will recognise that Opposition Members believe that a procurement debate is long overdue. My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. Liddell-Grainger) and the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) said that they had concerns about that subject, as do many hon. Members on both sides of the House with defence industrial interests in their constituency. We need a procurement debate in the very near future, particularly given that there are major procurement issues coming up shortly for decision by the Government.

The debate, inevitably, has been dominated by Iraq; indeed the Secretary of State invited Members to use this opportunity to raise concerns. At one point, it looked like a reunion meeting of CND—of which, of course, no Minister has ever been a member. However, the Government had a hard time from most of their Members. I would like to inflict some damage—not intentionally, but I fear that this might be the effect—on the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith), who made an important, interesting and thoughtful speech. I hope that he will have an opportunity to expand his remarks, and I shall be watching for any retaliatory attempts on him for having expressed his views so eloquently and courageously in the House.

We have had interesting contributions from the hon. and gallant Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Joyce), and from my hon. Friends the Members for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson), for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) and for Newark (Patrick Mercer).

My hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) has set out the reasons for our support, in principle, for the Govt's position on Iraq. But there are a number of issues that need to be addressed, some of which my hon. Friend has mentioned. I should like to single out the following ones. First, the maritime taskforce, led by HMS Ark Royal, has embarked without its Sea Harrier air superiority fighters. The Minister knows that we have consistently opposed the decision to scrap the Sea Harriers, and now we see a major capital force of ships deployed without that air cover. Although the Iraqi air force is unlikely to present a major threat, what plans do the Government have to protect the taskforce from air attack? Will the taskforce be relying upon United States air cover for that purpose?

Secondly, I should like to refer to vaccinations. Clearly there is concern among many hon. Members at what their constituents are reporting about inoculations given to those who are being deployed to the Gulf. I have had two cases drawn to my attention today by the National Gulf Veterans and Families Association, and others have approached me as well. The first of the two cases concerns a Royal Navy man whose mother stated that he has had a number of inoculations at the same time; notwithstanding the Secretary of State's assurance to the House that there would not be a plethora given at the same time. The second involves a young female attached to 16th Air Assault Brigade, who—despite having the anthrax inoculation—still had to sign a waiver to state that no further action would be taken in the event of illness and that she had had the injection voluntarily. I have heard from other sources that they are being required to sign a waiver.

Dr. Moonie: Not true.

Mr. Howarth: The Under-Secretary says that that is not true. These reports are coming to hon. Members; if the honourable Gentleman wants to assure the House and the country that these things are not happening, this is an opportunity so to do.

The third issue is the International Criminal Court. As has been pointed out—particularly by Melanie Phillips—the forces of Iraq and of the United States will not be covered by the International Criminal Court, because neither country has signed up; but the United Kingdom has. Given all the uncertainty about what may happen and about possible military operations—whether they flow from a second United Nations resolution, or from a belief that the current resolution 1441 is sufficient—it is important that our forces, who

[Mr. Howarth]

are embarked to take part in possible military operations, be assured that they have the full protection of the law in carrying out the duties imposed upon them by their senior officers, themselves acting on behalf of Ministers of the Crown.

Fourthly, I shall discuss homeland defence, the importance of which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Newark, and emphasised by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) on 17 October, in our previous defence debate. It is crucial that we have sufficient protection at home, particularly in the event of hostilities in Iraq. It is clear that the contingency reserve reaction forces are not yet up and running, and are not intended to be until the end of March at the earliest. It would help if the Minister would say something about what will happen on that front.

I have been told that there is a lack of toxicologists in this country—indeed, that there are only six whole-time equivalents. That is the unusual formula that the national health service uses. Given the risk to the country, which the Prime Minister articulated as recently as yesterday, we need the assurance that we have the requisite skills to identify and deal with possible chemical attacks on the people of this country.

We also need to be sure that we can deal with possible fifth columnists at home. I do not know whether the Minister has read an article in today's *Evening Standard*. It is headed, "Muslim extremists out to harass the Army's 'soft targets'". It continues:

> "A group of Islamic extremists has launched a campaign against army 'soft targets' in a bid to harass the military as it prepares for possible war against Iraq."

Our forces are entitled to proper protection. I hope that the clearest possible message will go out from all quarters of the House that people in this country, enjoying the privileges of citizenship or residence in this country, must not attempt to take any action against our armed forces doing their duty on behalf of Queen and country, because it is only right that they should receive that protection.

The Government are losing the battle for the hearts and minds of the people at home. They are obviously unable to persuade some of their hon. Friends, and they are failing to persuade people in the country.

Let me make an following observations on behalf of the official Opposition. First, our firm view is that war is not inevitable. Secondly, Saddam Hussein has a long history of brutality at home and has attacked or invaded four sovereign states: Kuwait, Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia. He finances Hezbollah, offering large bounties—paradoxically in United States dollars—to suicide bombers to help perpetuate the Arab-Israeli conflict. He has failed to account for chemical weapons components identified by the United Nations weapons inspectors in 1998 and, as the hon. Member for Falkirk, West pointed out, the weapons inspectors are back there again only because the United Nations has taken action and said that there will be serious consequences unless Iraq complies with UN resolution 1441 and the 23 other resolutions of which Iraq stands accused of being in breach at the present time.

To my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire and others, I say this. If they are wrong and Saddam Hussein does succeed in developing evil weapons and using them himself, or handing them to terrorists to be deployed on the streets of Halifax, or Bedford, the people of Britain may not forgive us for having given the benefit of the doubt to a man with such a proven disgusting record. It is important that we should be clear about that. These are not easy decisions. It is not the job of the Opposition to make the case for the Government, when the Government are in possession of documents and intelligence that they cannot publish and to which we do not have access, but I do say that if the Government want the support of the British people to enforce the United Nations resolutions, they must make a better effort than they are making at the moment.

Mr. Sayeed: It possibly was my fault. Maybe what I said was not adequately clear. I said that war may be necessary, but that I was unpersuaded that it was necessary yet, and that other things could be done to ratchet up pressure on Saddam Hussein.

Mr. Howarth: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, who has pre-empted what I was about to say. The United States in particular, but we too, must redouble our efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. There can be no either/or; work must be done to show the Arab world that we are serious about trying to resolve that conflict, notwithstanding the difficulties faced by Israel.

If there should be conflict in Iraq, at a time when our forces are already so heavily committed, we cannot afford to have them tied down in one theatre for any length of time. In Afghanistan there was a clear plan for British troops to be replaced by troops from other nations once the principal battle was over. Even then, we were committed for six months longer than the Government had originally intended. The House will therefore expect the Government to provide us, in due course, with information on the exit strategy should conflict with Iraq take place. I think it important for them to share with us their ideas of what will happen, in the event of conflict, to the governance of the people of Iraq. I think the House and the country are entitled to know what plans, or ideas, they may have.

That leads me to the inevitable issue of overstretch. Our armed forces are overstretched. Both my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex and my hon. Friend the Member for Newark pointed out that there has been a freeze on recruitment. I find it inexplicable that the Government should freeze recruitment at a time when we are 5,000 soldiers under strength. We have not heard an adequate explanation—but we think we know the truth, which is that the Government are not funding the Army Training and Recruiting Agency to the extent that they should. It is no good saying that that is not having an impact on troops. I am told that there are now 10 months between tour intervals for the Royal Engineers, which is putting a great strain on soldiers and their families.

This is a debate about defence in the world, and I think we need to look beyond the horizon of the post-Iraq world. North Korea has been mentioned. I think the Government should tell us a little more of their thoughts about the risk that it poses to the rest of the world. Last week the Secretary of State confirmed to the Defence Committee that North Korea has a missile system capable of flying some 4,000 miles. It has that capability, and now that it has dismissed the

International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors we must not take our eye off the ball. We do not want suddenly to be faced with a flare-up in the region because we have not been duly attentive to developments that may be taking place there. The Taepo-Dong II missile could reach the United Kingdom, and we need to do something about it.

The Secretary of State made an articulate case on missile defence, but he has spent an entire year stalling, saying that no request had been received from the United States and that therefore we need do nothing. As Members have pointed out, however, no sooner did the right hon. Gentleman receive that request than he made up his mind—but he could not share the thought process that he underwent before making up his mind during the year in which he waited for that little letter from Donald Rumsfeld.

We support the decision, of course. We agree that the Secretary of State eventually made the right decision.

Mr. Savidge: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howarth: I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not. I have only two minutes in which to finish my speech.

The Government did eventually make the right decision, but we need to exploit Britain's support for the US programme by striking a hard bargain on British industrial participation in the development of the interceptor programme. If we do not take advantage of that, the Government will sell British industry short. There is an opportunity here. The Government should also bite the bullet and say that they are prepared to participate in the interceptor programme, and to consider having interceptors on UK soil.

Let me say a word about the Government's current industrial policy. I think they have done a great disservice to BAE Systems. They bounced the company into making a stock exchange announcement wiping millions of pounds from their share value, and the Secretary of State then had the temerity to say that it was not a British company. The Government need to re-establish an industry policy that puts British business first.

Finally, I am sure that I echo the words of all hon. Members—I hope that I echo the sentiment of all hon. Members—when I say that, whatever differences of view we may have about the events that are unfolding in the middle east, the House has enormous pride in the men and women in our armed forces, who join up to put their lives on the line if necessary. They are the most professional forces in the world. They have never let us down. Their worry is that they may be stretched to such a point that, one day, they may not be able to deliver that which they have always been able to deliver in the past. I hope, therefore, that the House can unite tonight in saying that all the men and women in our armed forces—whether on their way to the Gulf, or fighting fires in the United Kingdom, or simply defending us—have our full support, and we wish them well and every success in what they do.

6.45 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Mr. Adam Ingram): I should like to begin by thanking hon. Members for their contributions to today's debate. As hon. Members have acknowledged, these are challenging and testing times. I, too, would like to pay tribute to the continued hard work and dedication of our armed forces and the civil servants who support them in the defence of this country. I echo the sentiments with which the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) closed his speech.

As ever, the issues raised are diverse, and it is not possible in the time available to address all the points in depth. Given the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) has indicated that he will eat into my time by calling for a vote before I have finished my full time allocation, it is probably best that I do not take any interventions, but let us see how things progress.

Following the terrible events of 11 September 2001, the past year has been marked by further terrorist outrages in Bali and Kenya and many other thwarted attempts worldwide and in the United Kingdom. Those recent developments have served only to strengthen our resolve to deal decisively with the threats posed by groups, such as al-Qaeda, and by rogue states, such as Iraq.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the United States, the Government set out objectives that would guide our efforts in the international campaign against terror. We declared a new focus in our diplomatic efforts to break the links between states and terror groups. We committed ourselves to the reintegration of Afghanistan into the international community, and we reiterated the need to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

We acknowledged the depth and complexity of the threats that we face. We recognised that a solely military response would not be enough and that addressing the root causes of hostility and conflict is just as important as military action itself to counter the challenges that terrorism and rogue states pose. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh) made a similar point, although I would take issue with the other points that he made in his contribution.

Against those objectives, there have been important achievements recently, with terror plots foiled and key members of al-Qaeda and affiliate groups arrested. In large part, those successes have been due to unprecedented levels of intelligence co-operation between allies—both old and new—and the ability that that provides to pre-empt planned attacks. I should like to pay tribute to our own intelligence and security services, including the police, for their unstinting efforts in dealing with those threats, often in dangerous circumstances.

Our battle against terrorism is fought on a broad front and is not easy. Although much has been achieved in the short term, the reality is that it may take years of continuing, unremitting effort to achieve our objectives, but we are right to persevere.

I shall now deal with some of the specific points raised by hon. Members during this debate. The hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) asked about the command arrangements that will apply if the armed forces are required to go into action and about the mix of those forces as our options become more defined.

We have consistently informed the House as and when we needed to take preparatory steps, such as the call up of reserves, the procurement of equipment and of

[Mr. Adam Ingram]

course the deployments that we have already announced. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made clear in his opening speech, when we have reached final decisions on the composition of a balanced contribution from the RAF we shall make a further announcement to the House. We already maintain a significant presence in the region as part of the United Kingdom's contribution to the patrolling of the no-fly zone. Again I pay tribute to the servicemen and servicewomen who daily face the threat from Iraqi anti-aircraft fire as part of the work of patrolling those zones.

Clearly, in managing our deployments in the region we shall need to ensure the availability in due course of the sort of air capabilities that may be required in the event of operations in Iraq. We may therefore make some adjustments to existing deployments in order to facilitate this, but I can assure the House that we will continue to keep it properly and appropriately informed.

The hon. Member for North Essex also asked about troops trained for nuclear, biological and chemical warfare being deployed to the Gulf and what that means for our protection at home. May I gently tell him that he does not quite understand the role of those troops. Their capabilities are to meet the needs of forces in a deployed environment. The question of NBC protection in the event of any such attack is a matter that rests elsewhere; it is a responsibility of the Home Office. Increasingly, our posture and response are having to be increased to meet those growing pressure points.

I turn to matters relating to Iraq. I recognise the strong opinion voiced by those opposed to the current posture that we are adopting to deal with the threat posed to the international community by Saddam Hussein. Strong arguments have been put forward. I understand the views advanced by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews), the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed), my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh), for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) and for Elmet (Colin Burgon), the hon. Member for Guildford (Sue Doughty) and the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd). They reflect a body of public opinion. That cannot be denied.

However, in response I say this: it is clear what they want us not to do, but they fail to set out what should be done to make Saddam Hussein and his barbaric regime comply with international obligations. It is a case of where the negative lies, not how we move forward on that vital agenda.

It was argued that we should give the United Nations inspectors more time. Time they will get. However, it is not unlimited time that the inspectors need; it is truth. Adherence to truth has been manifestly missing in all of Saddam Hussein's dealings with the United Nations over many years, and it is missing now, despite the new demands set out in United Nations Security Council resolution 1441. In six days Hans Blix will give his interim report to the Security Council. We cannot anticipate that report. However, two things are clear.

First, Iraq must comply fully, actively and positively with all its international obligations. Secondly, diplomatic pressure, without the visible and credible threat of force, will not bring that about. Let us be clear that the only reason the inspectors are back in Iraq is the threat of force. If Saddam Hussein eventually complies, which all of us want him to do in order to avoid conflict, it will be because that threat of force has been increased over recent weeks. Sadly, it is the only language that Saddam Hussein seems to understand. My hon. Friends the Members for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) and Falkirk, West (Mr. Joyce) made very powerful contributions on that very point, as the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) said.

The solution now lies in Saddam's hands. He can avoid war by openly and verifiably disarming his weapons of mass destruction. I ask those who criticise the Governments of the United Kingdom and the United States and other allies, for doing what is right in facing up to that challenge, to turn their campaign and energy towards stopping Saddam Hussein doing what is unquestionably wrong. The more they campaign, the more they encourage him not to disarm. I know that that is not their intention, but that is likely to be the effect in the mind of that particular dictator.

I come now to missile defence. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out a balanced case as to why we agreed to the US request for an upgrade at Fylingdales, as he did in a statement last week. The hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) and others argued that by taking this decision we have pre-empted and foreclosed a major discussion on the future of the missile defence system. I do not accept that. As my right hon. Friend pointed out, this is the beginning of a process, not an end. The time for fuller decisions lies in the future, but I am sure that the debate will continue in this House and outside, and the Government welcome that.

Equally, I do not accept that it is proven that the development of that system will lead to a new arms race. It may be an opinion that is sincerely held by those hon. Members who expressed it, but sincerity and passion do not establish a fact. My right hon. Friend explained why we do not accept the logic of the inevitability of proliferation. No doubt we shall return to that time and again, and I again look forward to that debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) and the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) raised the question of vaccinations and matters relating to that. It is our policy to ensure that all troops are vaccinated routinely and it should not be necessary to administer several vaccinations upon deployment. Should circumstances arise where individuals are not up to date with their vaccinations, immunisation takes account of any other treatment or medication that an individual may be receiving at the time. However, independent medical advice is that it is better to administer vaccinations with reduced time scales between them than expose individuals to the risk of infection. We should remember that a routine vaccination schedule, as in civilian practice, involves some use of multiple immunisations.

My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will be placing a full report on all those matters in the Library of the House and will communicate that to the major Opposition parties, setting out the position on that point.

I come now to matters relating to equipment. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made clear at the beginning of the debate, our armed forces will be properly equipped for any task that may be asked of them. All service personnel will be issued with the necessary personal kit. I can assure the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall that our forces will be provided with adequate secure communications systems, which will include the Bowman personal role radios.

Other major equipment, including the AS90 gun and the Challenger 2 tank, are receiving modifications, and the SA-80A2 rifle will be issued to all combat and close support troops. We continue to make the best provision possible in equipping our personnel.

I come now to matters relating to the procurement of the new aircraft carrier, about which concern has been expressed. The MOD has been assessing the proposals of BAE Systems and Thales since the end of last November when the second stage of the future carrier assessment phase was successfully completed. The choice of a preferred contractor represents a key decision in one of our largest and most significant new equipment projects. It is vital that we make the right decision and we are assessing carefully all the available information covering a wide range of technical and industrial factors. We hope—

Mr. Dalyell *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That this House do now adjourn:—

The House divided: Ayes 0, Noes 53.

Division No. 59] **[6:59 pm**

AYES

Tellers for the Ayes:
Andrew Bennett and
David Taylor

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Breed, Colin
Burden, Richard
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Clapham, Michael
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Cohen, Harry
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Dalyell, Tam
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Galloway, George
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hancock, Mike
Hermon, Lady
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
McDonnell, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Morgan, Julie
Organ, Diana
Owen, Albert
Page, Richard
Perham, Linda
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Salmond, Alex
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Wareing, Robert N.
Weir, Michael
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Kelvin Hopkins and
Sue Doughty

Question accordingly negatived.

PETITION

Natural Health Products

7.10 pm

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. There is further business to complete. Will hon. Members who are not staying please leave quickly and quietly?

Mr. McLoughlin: I wish to present a petition collected by Mr. Parker in Ashbourne and its surrounding areas.

The petition states:

> The Petition of consumers for health choices and it supporters
>
> Declares that consumers in the UK have for many years maintained good health by choosing to take safe vitamin and mineral supplements and herbal remedies; and fears that the European food supplements directive and the proposed European directive on traditional herbal and medicinal products would severely restrict the number and range of such products on general retail sale in the future.
>
> The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons requires that the Secretary of State for Health does all in his power to protect the rights of UK consumers by ensuring that such European legislation does not unnecessarily and unacceptably restrict the availability of natural health products.
>
> And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Overseas Service Pensioners

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

7.12 pm

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): The British empire, excluding what were often known as the old dominions, was, by and large, wound up quickly in the 30 years after India and Pakistan were granted independence in 1947. Those who had served it, by which I mean both the colonies and the home country, often did so with great distinction and sometimes at risk to their life and creature comforts. They were progressively repatriated and almost all of them have now returned. No one would, or indeed does, begrudge them a pension. Indeed, the various arrangements made post-independence have been achieved to secure and make certain the pensions of those involved. In many cases, they are paid through what is now known as the Department for International Development, and I am delighted that its Minister, who is also my constituency neighbour, is to reply to the debate.

I should explain my interest in the matter. As so often in my experience, it arises from the case of one of my constituents, in this case Mr. Douglas Hodson of Byfield, who has given me permission to quote from his file. I have come to admire him for his articulacy and persistence, which he has demonstrated over the years since I first heard of his case in 1999. He got me involved with the Overseas Service Pensioners Association, with which I had not dealt before. Its secretary, Mr. David Le Breton, has provided invaluable and exemplary briefing on the wider aspects of the matter.

The association provides a focus of interest and representation for the distinctive interests of colonial pensioners and presses for equitable treatment alongside that available for home civil servants in the principal civil service pension scheme, of which I was fleetingly a member. For completeness, I add that, more recently, I have held some Front-Bench responsibilities for issues relating to pensions generally.

The wider matters raised by issues of colonial pensioners, such as the revised principal civil service pension scheme and the anomalies in armed forces pensions, which I know greatly concern my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), who is also involved with OSPA, would perhaps overload this debate, so I do no more than flag them up and emphasise that they are relevant to the pursuit of equity. Equally, I shall do no more than touch on some of the special problems of pensioners with colonial service in the then Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and congratulate him on securing this debate on such an important topic. To be frank, I knew little about this issue until one of my constituents, Mr. Arnold Woolley from Buckley, who served in Rhodesia, informed me of the pension received by him and many of those who served with him. I was struck by the fact that because the pension is linked to the local currency, and we all know of the current state of Zimbabwe, what may have seemed a good pension is now worth pennies a week. That is a terrible way to treat people who have served us so well.

Mr. Boswell: I very much agree. I have at least one constituent who is in that situation. All those people have lost out badly, and the Minister may want to clarify their situation when she responds to my remarks.

The important principle underlying the concern of anyone who attends this debate should be that, as far as possible, those who have served the Crown in whatever capacity should be treated equitably. It remains incumbent on Ministers to identify, monitor and iron out any anomalies wherever possible.

OSPA, the representative association of these pensioners, was founded in 1960. As it says in its briefing, since then,

> "successive Governments, slowly and usually reluctantly, have conceded that . . . members should not be treated worse than their counterparts in the two UK services",

by which it means the home civil service and the diplomatic service. It refers to a number of advances that its pressure, and that applied by the House, has helped to secure.

Those include the extension of indexation to colonial pensioners in the 1960s, the Overseas Pensions Act 1973, which allowed for the central takeover of such pensions to ensure their continuing payment, and, in the 1980s and 1990s, important concessions to war service credit. Most recently, in 1996, the Government agreed to a special safeguard scheme for colonial pensioners who had served in Hong Kong. I shall refer to that service in a minute.

OSPA believes, and in this it goes along with modern good pension practice, that the position of widows and dependants in the various schemes should also be fairly aligned. It says that

> "the most glaring case of inequality at present is that of post-retirement marriages."

That brings me squarely to the case of my constituent, Mr. Hodson. His first marriage ended in divorce, but many years ago. He remarried 14 years ago, and has one young daughter of that marriage. Understandably, as he is now in his 60s, he is anxious to safeguard his family's position.

Under present arrangements, as Mr. Hodson's remarriage took place after his retirement, his pension will die with him. What he finds particularly galling is that although he saw many years of service with the colonial police, first in Uganda, then Fiji and finally Hong Kong, he knows of cases in which the widows of other colonial servants in Hong Kong are receiving a discretionary pension from the Chinese authorities, even though the remarriage was also post-retirement.

Leaving aside the oddity of a communist Chinese regime being more generous to former servants of the Crown than Ministers of the Crown, there are important anomalies in the treatment of home civil servants. A concern for those civil servants and their unions is the fact that in introducing the new principal civil service pension scheme in 2000, the Government decided not to make any change to the rule added to the old scheme in 1978, but without retrospective effect, thus allowing pensions for widows of post-retirement marriages for service after April 1978 only. There is therefore discrimination between the oldest and often neediest pensioners in various Crown pensions and people with later service.

Another anomaly, which bears directly on Mr. Hodson's case, is that the 1978 decision was applicable only to civil servants, not colonial servants. However, Mr. Hodson, unlike a large number of colonial servants, was still in service in Hong Kong at that time, as the colony was our main outstanding colonial commitment, although officers may have been serving in the Gilbert and Ellice islands—I use the colonial name—the Solomon islands, the New Hebrides and British Honduras, which did not achieve independence until just after 1978. The old colonial pension schemes had a different funding basis from the home scheme, but I cannot help but agree with OSPA, which says that

"denial to the few officers still then serving in these territories and who subsequently became married after their retirement of treatment given to their home counterparts is hard to defend".

Although data are scarce, any contingent liability for such cases would not amount to more than a tiny fraction of the departmental budget.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): As my hon. Friend knows, I am an unpaid consultant to OSPA. Does he agree that those colonial servants were vital to the smooth running of some territories, particularly the former Rhodesia? If they had not stayed on, even though they were not part of the United Kingdom's domestic civil service or the Foreign Office, without their continued commitment to that country, there would not have been a period of calm for many years after independence.

Mr. Boswell: I agree entirely. It is one thing to run a colony, but to disengage our country from its responsibilities and achieve a smooth and peaceful transition of power to a successor Government is a genuine achievement. Many of those people put themselves to great personal inconvenience in doing so.

I shall touch for completeness on two minor aspects of my constituent's case, both of which relate to the rules of the Uganda pension scheme, which he joined many years ago. That scheme includes an additional disqualification rule if a marriage is concluded before 55. That seems to be a belt-and-braces approach or an oblique way of ruling out a post-retirement marriage, as 55 was the retirement age. The nature of Mr. Hodson's subsequent service in Hong Kong from 1976 to 1988 was on contract gratuity terms. The Department seems to have argued in correspondence with him that that disqualified as public service under the original Uganda scheme, which is at best nit-picking.

I shall close with the wider issues. British colonial servants, now sadly declining in number and nearly all retired, did a good job and deserve fair treatment. That is easier said than done because of the complexity of the various pension schemes and employments, and I have shared some of those issues with the House tonight.

As a former Minister, I appreciate that the Treasury and others are always vigilant and properly on the look-out for contingent liabilities, Trojan horses and dangerous precedents. I also acknowledge that, in a Department whose vital daily business is the delivery of aid and development resources to very needy people in the third world and developing countries, the matter of discharging traditional responsibilities may not carry the highest priority, but I hope that it carries the sympathy of this Minister and her Secretary of State. I was somewhat disappointed by a written reply that I received from the Secretary of State on 20 June 2002. I asked her

"what plans she has to review the pension arrangements of British colonial officials",

and received this very short, dusty and, if I may say, somewhat uncharacteristic answer:

"None."—[*Official Report*, 20 June 2002; Vol. 387, c. 502W.]

I think that this Minister could do better than that. What is required is a better understanding of what is involved and, if I may put it this way, a determination to achieve fairness in the treatment of my constituent's particular case and others.

That is a legitimate and pressing public concern for the House. I invite the Minister to respond by explaining her understanding of these problems and, I hope, by giving the House some assurance as to her readiness to examine ways of overcoming them.

7.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Ms Sally Keeble): I congratulate the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) on securing this debate and join him in paying tribute to the people who previously worked in the colonial service. I am of course aware of his interest in development issues and colonial pensions, including those relating to Zimbabwe and the former Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, as well as the particular issues that he raised about the variation of clauses and terms in the different pension schemes.

I know that the subject of Zimbabwe pensions is also of considerable interest to the Overseas Service Pensioners Association, which has expressed its concerns on numerous occasions and continues to do so, as does my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami).

I should like to deal first with the points that the hon. Gentleman made about his constituent, Mr. Douglas Hodson, after which I shall deal with some of the other points concerning Zimbabwe and federation public service pensions. I believe that Mr. Hodson was present at a meeting in Daventry that both the hon. Gentleman and I attended. I do not want to speak in detail about the personal circumstances of Mr. Hodson's case. The hon. Gentleman has obviously had his permission to do so, but I do not feel it appropriate for me to speak about such matters across the Floor of the House.

I am glad to have this opportunity to draw the attention of the House to this particular aspect of my Department's work. As the hon. Gentleman said, it is separate from the main business of development assistance, but it is worth pointing out that DFID currently pays and administers some 50,000 pensions to more than 23,000 former colonial public servants. Although some problems have been raised from time to time—they include, in particular, those that he mentioned—it is a major operation and for the most

[Ms Sally Keeble]

part a very efficient one. I pay tribute to those of my Department's staff who have to administer such a complex operation. The type of issues that he raised illustrates why it is so complex. There is a variety of different schemes relating to different countries and periods. Having had to deal with a number of the cases, I know that variations in terms and conditions are widespread. They are sometimes due to the very different terms on which people were employed, which may not be immediately obvious either to the people themselves or to the wider public.

The point that the hon. Gentleman raised in respect of his constituent, Mr. Hodson, concerns pensions for the widows of colonial service officers where the marriage has taken place after the officer's retirement. Under the rules of most of the colonial widows and orphans schemes, second or subsequent wives are entitled to be registered as potential beneficiaries only where the marriage has taken place before the termination of the officer's public service.

Occasionally, colonial pensioners have requested that the colonial schemes be amended to allow post-retirement wives to be registered as potential beneficiaries, in line with what happened in the principal civil service pension scheme, which for ease I shall refer to as the principal scheme. The principal scheme was amended in April 1978 to allow the widows of post-retirement marriages to qualify for pensions.

A similar change to the colonial widows and orphans schemes was considered after 1978 but, whereas the principal scheme was, and still is, a very large and active scheme, the many colonial schemes were not. In fact, by 1978, most colonial officers had already retired and ceased to be contributors to the various widows and orphans schemes. It was therefore not a viable option to change the law for the few officers who were still contributing at that time. The colonial widows and orphans schemes differed from the principal scheme in many other respects, and there was no justification for bringing that single provision into line.

The hon. Gentleman referred to a response given to him by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 1 June last year. The hon. Gentleman also received a detailed explanation on 13 October 1999, which sets out quite a number of the details relating to Mr. Hodson.

I turn to the issue of Zimbabwe public service pensions, and if there is time I shall also deal briefly with pensions paid to former staff of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Although the British Government acknowledge that they have a special responsibility to protect the pensions of certain officers who were employed in the public services of our former dependent territories, that responsibility extends only to those who were appointed by or on behalf of the Secretary of State for the Colonies to serve overseas on expatriate terms in the central Government of a colony. Zimbabwe public service pensioners or those recruited directly to the former Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland do not fall within those protection arrangements—the reason being that such staff were not appointed by or on behalf of the Secretary of State and all served on local, as opposed to expatriate, terms of service.

Southern Rhodesia was a self-governing colony from 1923 and was directly responsible for recruiting its own public servants, including those who were recruited directly from Britain. The British Government were not involved with the recruitment process or the formulation of terms and conditions of service for any Southern Rhodesia or Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland public service staff.

All Zimbabwe public service pensions—to come to the reasons behind the problems highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside—are the responsibility of the Zimbabwe Government. That has always been the case. At the time of independence, the pension rights of both retired and serving Zimbabwe public servants were preserved under the Zimbabwe constitution, which was formulated during the Lancaster house negotiations. The constitution guaranteed that existing pension entitlements would not be adversely affected by any changes in law that came into effect after independence, and that pensions paid externally would not be subject to any deductions. The constitution also guarantees to continue payment of pensions to former Zimbabwe public servants, wherever they reside.

As my hon. Friend said, the major problem with Zimbabwe pensions has been the gradual diminution of their sterling value—in recent times, it has perhaps diminished more rapidly—as the Zimbabwe dollar has fallen against the pound. There is no provision in the Zimbabwe constitution to protect externally paid pensions against adverse exchange rate movements, and the pensions increases awarded by Zimbabwe have not compensated for the shortfall. The problem is not just internal inflation but the exchange rate.

Over the years, this problem has triggered many calls from Zimbabwe pensioners and their pensioner associations—representations have been made directly and through their Members of Parliament—for the British Government to intervene and include Zimbabwe pensions in our pension protection arrangements. Successive Governments have rejected those representations.

Although the Government accept that they have a special responsibility to protect the pensions of officers who were employed under the auspices of the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Zimbabwe public service pensioners do not fulfil the long-standing and clearly defined criteria for inclusion in the arrangements. The terms and conditions of their employment are normally clearly established at the outset.

A more recent problem, which has been the subject of several representations at different times, is the delay that pensioners who live outside Zimbabwe experience in receiving their monthly pension payments. That has occurred in the past, generally due to lack of foreign exchange. On those occasions, the British Government have always reminded the Zimbabwean Government of their responsibilities. We continue to do that. However, we have also been advised that pensioners who are not receiving their pensions should contact the director of Zimbabwean Government pensions. He has promised to examine the reasons for the delay in pension payments. I have received several such representations. It has been possible, through the numbers that have been distributed, for the pensioners to contact the Government directly. The problem of delays has therefore been resolved.

On post-retirement marriages, the small numbers involved mean that it was not considered viable in 1978 to bring the variety of colonial widows and orphans schemes into line with the principal civil service pensions scheme when it was amended to allow the widows of post-retirement marriages to qualify for the pension. That was one of several differences between the various schemes. Some 25 years later, when there are no colonial officers in service or contributing, there is no prospect of revisiting the issue. It is only fair to make that clear.

We acknowledge and sympathise with the many problems that Zimbabwe and Federal pensioners face. However, we would need to breach fundamentally the long-standing arrangements for pension protection if we provided assistance. We understand the deep anxieties of pensioners whose incomes have been severely eroded by the currency depreciation that the gross economic mismanagement in Zimbabwe caused. However, Zimbabwe must deal with the matter; the Government cannot tackle it in the framework of our colonial pension arrangements.

I hope that I have set out some of the framework of a complex matter, which covers a wide range of different pension schemes that affect people who were employed on a variety of different contracts or bases. I hope that that provides some clarity.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: It is most generous of the Minister to give way. My hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Bosworth) and I—and, I am sure, the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami)—all understand the legalities of the position. We are trying to make the point on behalf of our constituents who fled Zimbabwe that, although the Lancaster House agreement did not cover them, if they had not been there during the transition to provide continuity, the British Government would not have been able to make the Lancaster House agreement. We implore the Minister to revisit the issue in the light of the circumstances, which she accurately described, under which the country has been destroyed by the mismanagement of the Mugabe regime.

Ms Keeble: The pension schemes were set up on specific criteria for people who were employed in a variety of countries in different circumstances. When examining the cases that are referred to me, it is clear that officials administer the schemes properly. However, I am also aware that those schemes were clearly drawn up, and that there is therefore no basis for varying them. Some schemes have continued, while others have been closed. No people have served under those terms and conditions for a long time. Unpicking some of the schemes would cause an injustice, as it is impossible to harmonise across the range of different provisions.

Mr. Boswell: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Keeble: I am afraid that we are very near the end of the debate. If the hon. Gentleman, or any other hon. Member, has any remaining problems, he should put them in writing. I shall be very happy to write back in detail, but it would be wrong of me to stand here and pretend that it is possible to harmonise a plethora of different pension schemes to suit the circumstances of a very few people, even though I understand that they have given great service to different Governments.

The people in Zimbabwe were employed on local terms, not expatriate terms. I understand that changing circumstances have left them in a difficult position. I pay tribute to the service that they gave to the wider community and recognise the difficulties that they face, but it would be wrong to pretend that those problems could be rectified by attempting to harmonise the various schemes. That would be impossible. However, if any matters remain outstanding for the hon. Member for Daventry, I should be happy go through them in detail with him.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at nineteen minutes to Eight o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 23 January 2003

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Public Service Agreements

1. **Peter Bottomley** (Worthing, West): If he will make a statement on the system of assessing performance against the targets he has set for outputs from his public spending increases. [92731]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Paul Boateng): The Government have invited the Comptroller and Auditor General to take responsibility for the validation of systems used in reporting on public service agreement targets. The National Audit Office is conducting a pilot study and full implementation will get under way from April this year.

Peter Bottomley: I hope that the Treasury and the National Audit Office will survey passengers, pupils, parents and the police about what they feel about the targets being set and that the feedback will go to Departments. While people still receive letters from hospitals saying that appointments made more than a year ago have been postponed for a further year and that the hospitals hope to receive the funding that is necessary for them to meet their targets—I have such a letter with me—many will need a lot of convincing that the targets for the Departments' work or for the Treasury's standards are being set properly or met. The past five years have been disappointing.

Mr. Boateng: I will, of course, be happy to receive and respond to the letter that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. I know that he takes these issues seriously and that he thinks about them. He will therefore recognise that public service agreement targets represent a major reform in public administration. He will also recognise their importance in focusing Departments on delivery, and that point applies to Departments across the board. He will further recognise the technical challenges in relation to data collection and, yes, the need to ensure that customer satisfaction and opinion are taken into account in measuring outcomes. That is why I know that he will welcome the National Audit Office's involvement. That will produce results that he and I know will assist in making sure that this tool—it is no more than that—becomes effective in promoting delivery.

Alan Howarth (Newport, East): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the question of the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) would be academic if we were to enter the euro? Far from there being increases in public expenditure in Britain, we would be required to accept deep cuts in public investment. Does my right hon. Friend accept that, whereas the Chancellor's prudent interpretation of the stability and growth pact would drive a coach and horses through it, the Commission's destructive interpretation would unfortunately drive another coach and horses through the Chancellor's spending plans?

Mr. Boateng: My right hon. Friend is stretching the question somewhat, but I am bound to say that the questions of the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) are always academic and thoughtful. This one was no exception.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Can the Chief Secretary confirm that the Chancellor has been invited to attend and give evidence to the Public Administration Committee on the question of targets? Will that invitation be accepted?

Mr. Boateng: The Chancellor—or rather the Treasury—has indeed been invited to give evidence. As the Minister responsible for PSA targets, I look forward very much to doing that.

Mr. Howard: I am delighted to hear that the Chief Secretary is going. Will he confirm that, at the Treasury's request, we provided it as long ago as 25 November with a 300-page dossier that shows that the Government have failed or are failing on 40 per cent. of the targets that they set in 1998 and on 75 per cent. of those set in 2000? The Treasury has repeatedly been asked to provide the calculations on which its ludicrous claims are based. Will he now provide the justification?

Mr. Boateng: We have provided the calculations. The true figures are 87 per cent. and 93 per cent. I look forward to studying the evidence that the right hon. and learned Gentleman would seek to produce to substantiate his figures, which, on the face of it, appear to be absolute nonsense.

Mr. Howard: The Chief Secretary has had that evidence since 25 November; it is in our document. Despite repeated requests, he has failed to provide any supporting evidence for the figures that he has just given. Is it not the truth that the target regime is a shambles? Did not the Secretary of State for International Development tell the Select Committee there has been a proliferation of targets and that they are seen as what she described as control freakery? The Chief Secretary's Customs and Excise department described one of its targets as a crude selective measure, and five major Departments, including the Department of Health and the Home Office, have still not published the reports that were promised last autumn. Does this total shambles not tell us more about the Government's failure to deliver on the public services than any of the right hon. Gentleman's weasel words? Is it any wonder that the Chancellor did not have the guts to answer this question himself?

Mr. Boateng: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is going on a bit, but I think that he has missed the point. Is he really suggesting that any management system, business or enterprise worth its name should not use targets? Even he will know from his experience at the Bar that the most rarefied of chambers—I have no doubt that he was a member of a rarefied set of chambers—has targets. It has targets for responding to the telephone and for fee levels. Is he suggesting that we should not have targets because, frankly, that would be absurd?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newport, East (Alan Howarth) is indicative of the fact that Labour Against the Euro is a broad church? Surely the setting up of the Franco-German axis in the past few days strengthens the arm of all of us who are against the euro and encourages the Chancellor to keep weaving and dodging.

Mr. Boateng: As someone who worships and preaches in a broad church—but not that broad church—I must say that my hon. Friend stretches the point, although he is entitled to do so. He might reflect on the issue of targets, however, and in particular whether the 20 per cent. across-the-board cut on spending proposed by the Conservatives would enable us to deliver on our commitment to improving public services, health, education, transport and infrastructure. The cut would be a disaster and I am sure that the whole House—or at least its Labour Members—will join me in condemning that approach.

Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): Can the Chief Secretary tell us how many of the targets that the Treasury claims have been met have been only partially met—or what is commonly known to the layman as not met?

Mr. Boateng: I have a little list, which I am happy to share with the hon. Gentleman in detail. Some 87 per cent. were met or partly met—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] Hold on a minute. Is the hon. Gentleman seriously suggesting that it is not worth setting a target that requires 75 per cent. of 11-year-olds to meet numeracy standards when the Department for Education and Skills has ensured that 73 per cent. of those pupils perform to that standard, which is up from 62 per cent. when the Conservatives had stewardship of the nation's affairs? I think that that is a target worth striving for.

Debt Relief

2. **Ms Julia Drown** (South Swindon): What action he is taking to discourage UK companies from pursuing litigation against heavily indebted poor countries. [92733]

7. **Mr. Mark Lazarowicz** (Edinburgh, North and Leith): What his assessment is of the International Monetary Fund's latest proposal for a sovereign debt restructuring mechanism. [92739]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): To avoid individual creditors blocking the restructuring of poor countries' debt, we are proposing the adoption of collective action clauses on a worldwide basis and we are supporting at the IMF meetings in April the proposed new sovereign debt restructuring mechanism. I can also tell the House that, in the case of vulture funds, we are calling on the World Bank to announce expert support to highly indebted poor countries dealing with debt. I can also announce that the UK Government will provide legal help to poor indebted countries facing those problems.

Ms Drown: I welcome the Chancellor's response. When companies such as Iceland sue Guyana for £12 million, does not that undermine the Government's commitment to debt relief? If Guyana gives in, that will create a further problem because it will be breaking the UK's agreement, through the Paris club, that one creditor should not be given preferential treatment. However, given the huge support for debt relief in this country, surely the big issue is that the customers and shareholders of Iceland probably do not want it to sue in the first place.

Mr. Brown: Because the system of debt restructuring is voluntary, and until we get the collective action clauses and the debt restructuring mechanism in place, moral suasion will remain important. We have to look at individual cases to see what can be done. The Nestlé case in Ethiopia was well publicised. There have also been cases in Sierra Leone, Uganda, which involved Yugoslavian vulture funds, and Nicaragua.

The Guyana case arises from 1976 and involves a company called Booker plc. It concerns the ownership of a plant and Booker is asking for compensation from the Government. The issue will go to collective arbitration. In other words, the international court for settlement of such issues will rule whether the debt is valid. Even if it were ruled to be valid, I would hope that, in the interests of resolving the problem, the company would make the resolution of it part of the general debt forgiveness that is being given to Guyana. I hope that it can be solved on that basis.

Mr. Lazarowicz: Can my right hon. Friend give some indication of the time scale for the establishment of the new debt restructuring mechanism? Will he assure the House that he will take a lead in international negotiations to establish such a mechanism, and ensure that it is established somewhat more quickly than the many years that the IMF said that it would take?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend raises an important point. If we are to have a sensible system of crisis prevention and crisis resolution—after all, nearly 100 financial crises have led to the need for debt restructuring in the past decade or so—we must get a new mechanism in place. Collective action clauses exist in Britain, and we propose them for the rest of the world.

The sovereign debt restructuring mechanism proposed by the IMF board would produce an internationally validated and respectable system to which each country could sign up. That would require a change in the IMF articles of association, which is why some have proposed that, in the meantime, there should also be a voluntary code that banks and bondholders could follow as well.

The important thing is that we see progress, with all countries supporting the need for such a mechanism at April's IMF meeting, and that transitional measures that deal with my hon. Friend's point that there is a need for action on this matter now are put in place. It is in all our interests to avoid the kind of financial crises that have led to poverty as well as economic dislocation in some countries. The proposals from Britain will make a huge difference.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): The Chancellor mentioned Ethiopia. I had the pleasure of leading a parliamentary delegation to Ethiopia in December, and we saw at first hand the absolute desperation of people there, who are already becoming hungry. Is it not iniquitous for Nestlé to claim up to $6 million from that country? Is it not claiming that sum at rather a sensitive time, especially given that the claim arises from a business deal that it did when Ethiopia was under a Marxist Government? Should it not have taken rather more care then? Does the Chancellor agree that the Treasury should join the Secretary of State for International Development, who has been very generous towards Ethiopia recently, in trying to persuade Nestlé to drop the claim completely?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I hope that there is all-party support for resolving the issue. There are 60 million people in Ethiopia. The average income is about $100 a year, which is about $2 a week. There are 40 million people facing starvation. It would seem strange at this point to demand extra repayments from a country that is attempting to reform, having got rid of the Government who incurred the debt with Nestlé in the first place. Nestlé has now said that, although it is important that the money is paid, it will give all that is received to famine relief in Ethiopia.

I think that the hon. Gentleman would agree, however, that we need a system that avoids such problems recurring—or at least if they do occur, one that offers a quick way of dealing with them. That is why we propose the collective action clauses and the new sovereign debt restructuring mechanism for future debts. That is also why we are helping Ethiopia at the moment. I shall meet the President of Ethiopia—as will the Prime Minister—when he is in Britain in the next few weeks so that we can offer help with legal advice and by other means to resolve some of the problems. In addition, as the hon. Gentleman knows, much of the Secretary of State for International Development's aid budget has been diverted to help tackle the famine in Africa.

Adam Price (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): Is the Chancellor aware of reports that point to the IMF's role in turning a food shortage in Malawi into a severe famine? Indeed, the IMF was implicated in the Malawi Government's disastrous decision to sell their food reserves. In the light of that fact, and given that debt repayment last year constituted 20 per cent. of Malawi's budget, would it not be right to write off its debt?

Mr. Brown: The important thing is first to implement the poverty strategy mechanism—in other words, to ensure that IMF and World Bank policies do not run counter to each other, and that we can take the steps necessary, where decisions are being made, to match economic restructuring with social justice programmes. I think that the hon. Gentleman would agree with that.

Only 50 per cent. of the aid necessary has so far been pledged for the famine. Even though countries have given some money, it is simply not enough. I hope that, on an all-party basis, we can support other countries in joining us in giving the money necessary to avoid the famine that is hitting not just Ethiopia but all the countries surrounding Malawi.

International Monetary Fund

3. **Kali Mountford** (Colne Valley): What proposals he will make to the International Monetary Fund at its next meeting to change its regulations. [92735]

5. **Mr. John McFall** (Dumbarton): What progress he has made on the international financing initiative. [92737]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): While there is insufficient support in the international community for new IMF regulations that would increase special drawing rights to release new funds for international development, there is now interest from the IMF, the World Bank, the United Nations and IMF member countries in the United Kingdom's recommendation of a new international finance facility. Today, therefore, the Secretary of State for International Development and I are publishing our detailed proposals for that facility, which would release $50 billion a year in additional aid for investment for the poorest countries to tackle problems of health, education and poverty. I hope that we have all-party support for that British initiative.

Kali Mountford: I am delighted with my right hon. Friend's answer. If long-term investment stability and growth are good enough for the British economy, they must surely be right for developing nations. Is it not therefore right to tell the IMF that, instead of always looking to the short term, it must look at long-term relationships in developing nations between donor and recipient states so that they can make proper economic decisions in their own right and have the economic growth that we enjoy?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right. In return for a commitment from developing countries to pursue policies for stability, growth and the opening up of trade and investment, the international community, particularly the richest countries, should be prepared to say that we will help to meet the millennium development targets: ensuring that poverty is halved by 2015; that every child gets primary education, instead of 120 million being without it; and that infant mortality is cut by two thirds, as is possible with available medical technology. I hope that Britain says unanimously that that is both necessary and urgent.

Mr. McFall: I thank the Chancellor for that initiative. He knows that we have seen a reversal in the fortunes of poor countries over the past few years that has made them even poorer, which is why long-term commitment is essential. What progress has the Chancellor made with his international partners in ensuring that they accept the proposals? We know that aid and debt issues are popular with our constituents, and many thousands of people in our constituencies are signing up on that, so what can we do to ensure progress on that humanitarian objective and achieve our millennium development goals by 2015?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has taken an interest in the matter as Chairman of the Treasury Committee. I believe that the International Development Committee will also take an interest in the progress of the initiative. I have talked to almost all the Finance Ministers who will be present at the G7 meetings and European Finance Ministers' meetings about those matters, and I believe that it is possible to gain support. I hope to be able to announce later what initiative we can take at the G7 meeting in February and the IMF meetings in April.

The fact of the matter is that aid per person in sub-Saharan Africa was $33 a year 20 years ago, but is now only $20 a year, which is simply insufficient, even with all the reforms to meet health and education needs and anti-poverty programmes in those countries. I hope that we can galvanise opinion around the world, but it is also important that the Churches, faith organisations, local groups and non-governmental organisations play a major part, not only in persuading people in Britain of the importance of this but, as they did in the debt campaign, in persuading other countries round the world to support the initiative.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Will the Chancellor look at the IMF regulations on gold in the light of his disastrous decision, against the making of which I repeatedly warned him at the time, to sell most of Britain's gold reserves at the bottom of a long bear market and at $100 a fine ounce below yesterday's close at $360? How much of the taxpayer's money has been lost as a result?

Mr. Brown: The purpose of the sale of gold was to rebalance the holdings of Britain's reserves. It should have been done 20 years ago, so that we had proper balancing and proper risk sharing. I think that the hon. Gentleman will reflect on the question about international development, and agree that he might also wish to support our international finance facility to help the poorest countries.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): When discussing international economic stability, will the Chancellor—having presided over a bigger stock market boom and bust here than in many other parts of the world, thanks to his rapacious policies against the corporate sector—take some advice for a change to stave off a boom and bust in the housing market, which could be deeply damaging to many of our constituents?

Mr. Brown: I know that the right hon. Gentleman is trying to tell the shadow Chancellor how to run Opposition policy on the economy, but we will take no lectures from the former Cabinet Minister on boom and bust policies—15 per cent. interest rates under him.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): When I met the head of the IMF in Rwanda five years ago, he told that me that although IMF policies had been satisfactory, unfortunately all the human capital had been destroyed—very unfortunate. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the IMF has changed beyond description since then, but that it must change further? Could he encourage it to take even greater account of what the IMF terms "human capital"?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right. I praise the work that she has done in international development and her visit to Rwanda, which was important in alerting this country to some of the problems. We are right to praise the IMF for leading on debt relief over the past few years. There was only one country likely to get debt relief; the number is now 27, and it could be 35. There could be $100 billion of debt relief. With regard to the problems of Rwanda, the way forward is the poverty reduction strategy reports that would enable the country to pursue economic policies with the programme of social reconstruction that are in the best interests of that country. On that basis, I believe that we should be providing far more extensive aid for education, health and the anti-poverty programmes of the country. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of education for the future.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The Chancellor's statement is to be welcomed. Does he accept that the IMF must bear some responsibility for letting people know how it is dealing with issues? Many people in our country are confused about what has happened in Malawi. Does the Chancellor agree that the Governments of Malawi and other countries must take some responsibility for their mismanagement of their economies? Having referred to faith communities, does he recognise that hospitals run by faith communities in Malawi are in dire straits partly because the western nations have been recruiting staff here to look after our interests, whereas those staff are needed in countries such as Malawi?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving his party's support to the international finance facility. I believe that, throughout the United Kingdom, parties may wish to support what we are trying to do. He is right that our proposals are not designed to allow Governments to abdicate their responsibility for what happens in their own country. They are designed to strengthen Governments as they try to make the reforms that are necessary. I think that the hon. Gentleman will agree that when only $20 per head is going in aid to the poorest countries, and only 7.5 per cent. of that is going to education and only 3.5 per cent. to health, those are insufficient resources to enable us to say to those countries that we can reach our side of the bargain with them—that we will help tackle the health, education and social problems. It is a bargain—a deal. The countries must reform to make it possible for aid to be used well. We must increase the amount of money that we are prepared to provide. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support.

Foreign Direct Investment

4. **Mr. Nigel Beard** (Bexleyheath and Crayford): If he will make a statement on recent trends in foreign direct investment into (a) the United Kingdom and (b) the European Union. [92736]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): Our year-to-year figures are influenced by a number of factors. Britain's stock of foreign direct investment is at 19 per cent. of the total—the highest in Europe and, after the USA, the second highest in the world. A detailed analysis of recent trends in foreign direct investment will be published shortly.

Mr. Beard: Is there any implication in the figures of a preference for the eurozone at the expense of the United Kingdom among foreign direct investors?

Mr. Brown: I know that this is a controversial issue among some people, but we must consider a range of factors that are in play. The main influence of foreign direct investment is mergers and acquisitions. That is 90 per cent. of foreign direct investment. In the recent stock market changes, there has been very little merger and acquisition activity. Equally, the figures are affected by relative exchange rates and by what decisions are being made in the United States, as opposed to decisions being made in Asia and Japan. It is a complicated picture, which is reflected in the fact that there has been a big change in the relative position of manufacturing and financial services over the past few years. The fact of the matter is that foreign direct investment has risen dramatically over the past 10 or 20 years, but trends are at work, including the restructuring of the international economy, that must be looked at. That is why we plan to publish a full paper on this issue in the near future.

Mr. Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford): As the Chancellor said at the beginning of his reply, inward investment is vital for the UK economy, but to compete, we must have an attractive regulatory and tax regime. Given that, and the fact that business taxes here are already higher than in competing nations such as the United States, Ireland and indeed Germany, why are the Government raising taxes yet again with a £1.7 billion increase in national insurance contributions? Does the Chancellor not realise that this tax on jobs will simply create another burden that business cannot afford?

Mr. Brown: I am surprised at the hon. Gentleman. First, we have cut corporation tax from 33 to 30 per cent. Secondly, we have cut capital gains tax from 40 to 10 per cent. in most cases. Thirdly, we have cut small business tax from 23 to 19 per cent. Those are proportionately bigger cuts than have happened in the United States of America. What also surprises me is that the shadow Chancellor, speaking at a meeting only two days ago, praised us and said that our labour market was more flexible than in other European countries. How can the Opposition have two different views at once, or is that merely the basis on which they now proceed?

Mr. James Plaskitt (Warwick and Leamington): Foreign owners of companies in my constituency tell me that they came to the UK because of factors relating to our flexible labour market, regulatory climate and low tax regime. Does my right hon. Friend agree that while those will continue to be the dominant factors in such decisions, foreign investors in the UK will not indefinitely run a currency risk with the rest of Europe?

Mr. Brown: As I said, a number of issues will determine the future of foreign direct investment. That is why a full analysis is being carried out. It will be published as part of the euro assessment, as I announced to the Select Committee on the Treasury in our evidence at the beginning of September. My hon. Friend must also bear it in mind that one reason why the UK is attractive is not only our tax rates, but the stability of the UK economy. We have now had low inflation for a long time, and while there has been a recession in America, Germany and Japan, our economy has continued to grow. That is one of the reasons why 1.5 million more people are in work than under the Conservatives.

Competitiveness

6. **Mr. Adrian Flook** (Taunton): What recent representations he has received on the effect of Government policy on competitiveness of the financial services provided by the City of London. [92738]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Ruth Kelly): The Treasury regularly receives representations from many sources about the effect of Government policies on the competitive position of the City of London's financial services industry. The agreement on the taxation of savings secured in Brussels earlier this week by my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Paymaster General is a clear demonstration of the positive role that the Government are playing in championing the City.

Mr. Flook: The Minister forgot to mention stamp duty on share transactions. In a globalised market, the City of London operates as a major financial centre, yet that duty affects only British companies, as well as impacting on the value of any individual's pension to a total of £8,000. Will the British Government help to level the field for British companies, and more importantly, help pensioners after the imposition of the disastrous pensions tax introduced by the Chancellor and abolish stamp duty?

Ruth Kelly: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making, but perhaps he could explain to the House why during 18 years of Conservative government, his party did absolutely nothing to reduce or remove stamp duty on shares. Perhaps he could also explain to the House how he would propose to raise the £3 billion revenue—

Mr. Speaker: Order. It is for the Minister to explain the policies of the Government.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Is it not the case that, since 1999, about a third of the international financial service transactions denominated in euros have been carried out in the City of London? Does that not highlight the views of those of us in Labour Against the Euro that the siren voices on the Labour Benches and the eurozealots among the Liberal Democrats are wrong to suggest that membership of the euro is necessary for a successful financial services industry?

Ruth Kelly: The City of London has performed well since the euro was launched. We strongly welcome that. Indeed, it reflects the City's hard work and preparation, with the co-operation of the Bank of England, before the launch. My hon. Friend should be patient and wait for the assessment of the five economic tests, which, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has often said, will be published by the end of the first half of this year.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): How does the Financial Secretary respond to the controversial suggestion by the chairman of the London stock exchange that maximum harmonisation of financial regulation and minimum national discretion is the best way in which to preserve the City's competitiveness in Europe?

Ruth Kelly: I have not heard the comments of the chairman of the London stock exchange, but the Government and the majority of participants in the City do not share the view that the hon. Gentleman outlined. We strongly believe that fair tax competition is the way forward. That is why I emphasised the importance of the agreement that was secured earlier this week and sets a new agenda for sharing information on taxation matters.

Pension Credit

8. **Mr. Michael Jabez Foster** (Hastings and Rye): What estimate he has made of the number of people who will be eligible in October to receive pension credit in the Hastings and Rye constituency. [92740]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): Last year, 3,500 pensioners in Hastings and Rye were receiving the minimum income guarantee. They and others will benefit from the pension credit. Nationally, the Department for Work and Pensions aims to ensure that at least 3 million pensioner households receive their entitlement by 2006.

Mr. Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend on behalf of the pensioners of Hastings and Rye for the enormous difference that the minimum income guarantee has made to their lives. They receive some 30 per cent. more than they would have received under the Conservatives' inflation-only increases.

I also thank my right hon. Friend for the opportunity for those who have saved to take advantage of the new pension credit, which will ensure that thrift as well as work pays. How will she ensure that each pensioner knows how to make the claims?

Dawn Primarolo: The pensioners who receive the minimum income guarantee will be transferred automatically. We will write to all pensioners to inform them of their entitlement. There will be a national campaign supported by local partners—people who have regular contact with pensioners. Pension Service centres will run surgeries, including drop-in surgeries. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Pensions, and the shadow Chancellor, whose constituency is next door to my hon. Friend's, to ensure that all pensioners receive the massive increase to which they are entitled under the pension credit.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Speaker: Order. Many hon. Members are standing, but the question relates to only one constituency.

Equitable Life

9. **Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk): If he will make a statement on Equitable Life. [92741]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Ruth Kelly): The Government appreciate the genuine difficulties that many of Equitable Life's current and former customers face.

The Government recognise the importance of events at Equitable Life. That is why we set up an independent inquiry under Lord Penrose. Our main concern is to ensure that the lessons arising from this situation are learned. That will allow both regulators and the industry to develop the tools that they need to avoid similar incidents in future.

Norman Lamb: I declare an interest as a former policyholder and apologise for not making that clear on the Order Paper. Is not it outrageous that the Penrose inquiry has started interviewing witnesses only this week? What hope is there for the hundreds of thousands of affected people when we have a dog's dinner of four inquiries? They are being conducted by Penrose, the parliamentary ombudsman, the financial ombudsman service and the complaints commissioner for the

Financial Services Authority. What are the Government doing to co-ordinate that to provide some hope of an outcome for all those affected?

Ruth Kelly: I must correct the hon. Gentleman's understanding. One full independent judicial inquiry is being conducted into Equitable Life. The other inquiries to which he refers result from independent decisions made elsewhere. They are of interest but not direct concern to the Government. The Penrose inquiry covers 50 years and examines not only the regulator's actions but those of Equitable Life. Lord Penrose made it clear that he is keen to proceed as quickly as possible, consistent with providing a thorough and authoritative account of the relevant period.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I welcome the fact that the inquiry is under way, as will many people, but does my hon. Friend understand the anger and frustration felt by many of the policyholders at the fact that the market value adjusters that have been put on, taken off—with assurances that nothing further would happen—then put back on again, stems from the decision of the chairman and the chief executive to say to the public and to their policyholders that the funds would sustain their profitability in the long term even though there were no new policyholder entrants? Does she agree that that was a fundamental error in their assessment of how to take the company forward?

Ruth Kelly: I certainly understand and sympathise with the distress felt by the policyholders at Equitable Life. The company has made it clear that it considers itself to be solvent, but it has also pointed out to its policyholders and the regulators that there are fundamental uncertainties associated with its accounts. I believe that policyholders recognise, particularly in the light of the difficulties and uncertainties reflected in the global stock market at the moment, that they are not alone in experiencing either exit penalties or cuts in bonus payments. Of course, that does not make it easier for them, but at least it puts the matter into some sort of context.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): It is not sympathy that the Equitable Life policyholders and those with annuities want, it is action. On 12 December, the Minister told the House that Lord Penrose had

> "begun a programme of witness interviews."—[*Official Report*, 12 December 2002; Vol. 396, c. 388.]

Yet, in another place on Tuesday, Lord McIntosh said:

> "The inquiry started to interview individual witnesses only yesterday."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 January 2003; Vol. 643, c. 554.]

Those answers cannot both be right. Which Minister misled which House?

Ruth Kelly: The conduct of the inquiry is clearly a matter for Lord Penrose himself. When I made the comments to which the hon. Gentleman refers, that was the information that Lord Penrose had made available to the Treasury. It is clearly an independent inquiry, and I think that policyholders expect a thorough, independent inquiry to be carried out and that all the lessons that can be learned are indeed learned.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): This involves not only the Financial Services Authority, the parliamentary ombudsman and Lord Penrose; it also involves the Exchequer. The policyholders require a sign that action will be taken to defend their interests, that the Treasury is not just waiting for Penrose, and that something is going to be achieved.

Ruth Kelly: It was clearly an important decision to set up a full, independent judicial inquiry to consider all the circumstances that led to the situation at Equitable Life. Lord Penrose has said that he will not hesitate to allocate blame where blame is necessary. We set up the inquiry to learn all the lessons that we can, so that this situation does not recur. Action is being taken and it will be seen to be taken.

Oil Supplies

10. **Norman Baker** (Lewes): What recent assessment he has carried out to establish the correlation between the cost of oil supplies and the performance of the British economy. [92742]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): In the last five years, Britain has had to cope with an oil price that has ranged from $10 to $35 per barrel. In these circumstances, and given the changing dollar exchange rates, it is all the more important for the growth of the British economy to hold to a disciplined monetary and fiscal policy. OPEC has said that it seeks an oil price of between $22 and $28 and, following the events in Venezuela, it has recently announced increases in its production target of 1.5 million barrels a day.

Norman Baker: Given the global increase in oil consumption, and the fact that the supply of this finite resource is set to peak and be exceeded by demand, which will inevitably lead to further price increases, and that oil is disproportionately found in the volatile middle east, is it not important to the long-term economy of this country that the Treasury should have a strategy to reduce our dependency on oil? What is that strategy? It is not working, because renewable energy generated only 3.1 per cent. of our electricity last year, compared with 3.3 per cent. the year before. We must reduce our dependency on oil. What are the Government doing about that?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman must wait for the energy paper, but I disagree with him: we have taken measures in successive Budgets to discourage dependence on one sole fuel. I also disagree with his first premise. The international community must act to increase oil supplies at this point, and that is why OPEC made its decision. The initial problem arose from Venezuela, which produces 3 million barrels of oil a day. Ninety per cent. of production has been withdrawn, and it is right to increase production.

Iraq is responsible for 2.4 million barrels of oil a day, 1.7 million of which are exported. It is also right for OPEC to ensure that its supply is established for the months to come.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, while low prices are tempting to motorists, who always want low oil and petrol prices, the British economy—particularly the economy in my area—depends on a relatively high price? If the oil price drops below $8 a barrel, production on the North sea continental shelf shuts down overnight. If the Exchequer is to secure its return from taxation of the oil industry, and if at the same time there is to be a viable oil industry in north-east Scotland and indeed throughout the United Kingdom, the price of oil must be about $20 a barrel, if not slightly more.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend, along with her fellow Members representing north-east Scotland, campaigns consistently for the oil industry and the contribution it makes to the British economy. We are still an oil exporter as a result of the wealth in the North sea. We want to encourage the future development of fields in the North sea, and we will continue to pursue a policy that gives the oil industry huge incentives to develop future fields and the new production that is available from the North sea. Obviously we must balance the need to keep the price low to help the growth of the domestic economy with our needs as an oil producer.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): Did the Chancellor see yesterday's disastrous figures showing that the number of firms operating below capacity is at a 20-year low? Is that due to oil price increases, or does the Chancellor agree with the Confederation of British Industry, which says that it is almost entirely due to a huge increase in red tape and bureaucracy, which is stifling enterprise?

Mr. Brown: I know it is the hon. Gentleman's policy and that of the shadow Chancellor to suggest that Britain is somehow in recession. The fact is that America has been in recession, Japan has been in recession and Germany has been in recession, while the British economy is growing. The hon. Gentleman should be congratulating us.

Development Aid

11. **Mrs. Betty Williams** (Conwy): What discussions he has had with (a) Churches and (b) other faith groups about his proposals for increasing development aid to the poorest countries. [92743]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): Meetings to consult on our proposed international finance facility have been held with the major non-governmental organisations. After private discussion with faith leaders, we will put our proposals on additional aid for investment—an increase from $50 billion to $100 billion a year—to a joint seminar with faith groups at No. 11 Downing street. I wish to thank Churches and other faith groups for their continued support for such an initiative.

Mrs. Williams: I welcome the initiative launched yesterday at Chatham house. Members and friends of Penuel chapel in Bangor, and other organisations in my constituency, will also welcome it.

Does my right hon. Friend accept that the millennium development goals are very ambitious? Does he agree that if they are to be achieved we must build a strong coalition at local, national and international level?

Mr. Brown: As I said yesterday in the speech that I was privileged to make at Chatham house to a conference on these issues, it is important for a coalition to develop between business, Governments, international organisations, and faith groups and Churches, as well as the NGOs. We are arranging a series of meetings to inform people nationally and locally. Today we are publishing a programme for the international finance facility, which will be sent to all Members of Parliament. I hope that they will be able to inform faith groups and NGOs in their constituencies of what we propose. As I said earlier, I hope that there can be all-party support for the initiative.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): In rightly seeking to provide further aid for those who need it most, the Government have specified the importance of streamlining conditionality and enabling greater ownership among emerging markets and developing countries. What did the Chancellor mean by that, what has he done, and what does he intend to do?

Mr. Brown: The whole point of replacing what was called the structural adjustment facility of the International Monetary Fund—which, as the hon. Gentleman knows, was very unpopular with developing countries—with what are called poverty strategy reduction reports is that there is both country and community ownership of the poverty strategies. There is a requirement to consult civil society before the reports are produced. It is conditional on the production of programmes to tackle health and education problems and poverty that grant aid is disbursed by international organisations. Conditionality is now being built into the way in which the World Bank and the IMF view the position, but there is also conditionality in relation to genuine measures to tackle the problems of poverty. The IMF and the World Bank are working closely on that.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): During his discussions, has the Chancellor had any discussions with faith groups on building links with their sister organisations in other countries, particularly in the United States, to urge them to support the millennium development goals? Can he report any progress on urging the United States Government to increase their contribution to development aid and to recognise that to make the world a safer place, there must be a war on poverty as well as a war on terrorism?

Mr. Brown: I agree that a world disfigured by poverty can be neither just nor stable. I think that there is general agreement that action must be taken to deal with poverty. What the United States has done is pledge $5 billion extra aid by 2006. What we are doing is talking not only to the United States Administration but to NGOs and other groups in the United States. I believe that there is to be a joint conference between British and American Churches on aspects of that proposal.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Meaningless verbiage.

Mr. Brown: From a sedentary position, the shadow Leader of the House says that what we were saying on those things was meaningless. I hope that he will withdraw that allegation.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Will the Chancellor take it from someone who spent some years of his life working on development programmes in underdeveloped countries that what the developing countries most need is free access to developed countries' markets, not least in agricultural products, for which the Churches are rightly campaigning? What they do not need is for us to export policies that we now reject in this country, namely, subsidising and protecting our industries. If we recognise that they will not work here, should we not be so demeaning of the underdeveloped countries to suggest that they might work there?

Mr. Brown: It is the opening up of trade and of opportunities for investment that, combined with the programme for aid, will help the developing countries most. The two things must go together. If the developing countries are prepared to open up to trade and to allow private investment to play its role in the development of their countries, we must in turn support them with rises in our aid budgets and with the new international finance facility. The two must go together. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will support the European Union's anything but arms initiative to open up trade for developing countries, so that we get rid of the agricultural protectionism that has been such a problem. I hope also that he will support what must be the other side of the bargain: the increased resources, so that children can go to school, ill health among babies and mothers can be removed, and poverty can be halved at least.

Industrial and Provident Society Legislation

12. **Mr. Gareth Thomas** (Harrow, West): What plans he has to reform industrial and provident society legislation; and if he will make a statement. [92744]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Ruth Kelly): The strategy unit has conducted a review of the legal forms available to social enterprises, including industrial and provident societies. The report made recommendations to improve the current legal framework, which have been the subject of a public consultation. We are currently examining responses received and considering options for taking forward the recommendations.

Mr. Thomas: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that reply and for the way in which she has engaged with the issue of industrial and provident society reform over the past 18 months, but does she recognise that there remain significant unnecessary differences between the accounting requirements and the insolvency and business rescue requirements of industrial and provident societies and companies? Will she consider what further opportunities there are to make the necessary corrections to those regimes?

Ruth Kelly: My hon. Friend makes important points in respect of industrial and provident society legislation. It is the Government's intention to update that legislation in line, for example, with company law when company law is reformed. It is also important that he drew attention to administration procedures during the recent passage of the Enterprise Bill and secured an enabling clause that will allow us to make the changes that he proposes. We are considering what our priorities for the sector should be and hope to make progress.

Child Tax Credit

13. **Mrs. Anne Campbell** (Cambridge): What representations he has received about the child tax credit. [92745]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): Since first announcing the development of the child tax credit and working tax credit in Budget 2000, we have received a large number of representations on all aspects of the system from a wide range of interest groups. We are grateful for the contributions to that process, which assisted in the design of the new tax credits. The Inland Revenue and the Treasury continue to consult informally on a range of tax credit issues, including the child tax credit.

Mrs. Campbell: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the new tax credit will mean a welcome and generous increase in family finances? Will she also confirm that it will be paid to the main carer, who is usually the woman, and that that may lead to quite a sharp reduction in some men's pay packets?

Dawn Primarolo: I can confirm that, for recipients of working families tax credit who will also receive the child tax credit, the average increase could be of as much as £12 a week. I can also confirm that the payment will go directly to the main carer—normally the mother—and that that will result in a transfer of moneys from the father to the mother in April of this year. That is in line with the views of most men. According to a recent poll, 64 per cent. of men said that they believed that support should go to the mother, and 70 per cent. believed that the mother was most likely to spend the money on the children. When the transfer occurs in April and mothers receive the money for the first time, I hope that all hon. Members will remember those poll figures, and celebrate the importance of spending money on children.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): The Paymaster General and the Government constantly rename and reconfigure the tax credits, but will they bear in mind the importance of take-up? For example, what has been the take up, proportionately, of the baby tax credit introduced in April last year?

Dawn Primarolo: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman will support the Government in ensuring that his constituents receive all the money to which they are entitled. I am grateful to hear that he is so concerned to ensure that that take-up takes place. I can confirm that the current tax credits have received a higher take-up than any of the family credit obligations under the previous Conservative Government. Some 800,000 people receive family credit, and 1.3 million people already receive working families tax credit. Millions more will receive the tax credit. We must ensure that they all enjoy the support of the House, and of the hon. Gentleman.

Government Resources (North-east)

14. **Vera Baird** (Redcar): What plans he has to further increase Government resources going into the north-eastern region. [92746]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Paul Boateng): Details of regional distributions of historic Government spending are published annually in the public expenditure statistical analyses. The Government's spending plans for 2003–04 to 2005–06 were set out in the White Paper published last July following the 2002 spending review. This will result in an increase in Government resources going to the north-east region.

Vera Baird: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer, but he will appreciate that, despite the considerable efforts that the Government have made and continue to make, the north-east remains firmly at the bottom of almost every national economic league. Is not it time to kick start our region's economy by relocating at least one Government agency or Department away from overheated London and up to our lovely region? That would be very welcome in Redcar.

Mr. Boateng: My hon. and learned Friend makes a good point, and I am sure that those with direct responsibility for the location of Government offices will hear what she says on behalf of her constituents. She will welcome the fact that we are taking action to reduce imbalances between and within regions, especially in respect of her region. We have given the regional development agencies increased funding and flexibility. There has been an indicative allocation rise for her own RDA, from £227 million in this year, to £240 million in 2005-06. That will help to address the problem that she has rightly pointed out.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): The Chief Secretary will be aware that Teesside airport in the north-east region does not enjoy a direct rail link. Would the Government prefer the limited amounts of public funds available to be put into establishing a rail link to an existing airport, such as Teesside, or would they prefer a completely new airport to be constructed at Finningley?

Mr. Boateng: The hon. Lady makes an important and serious point, which will no doubt be considered by the responsible Department. I have no doubt that the Department of Transport will take into account what she says.

What is interesting, however, is that this is a call for yet more public spending from a party that purports to be committed to reducing public expenditure. It cannot have it both ways. Simply to say that it is a saving is to fall into the same trap as the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) fell into. He landed his party with a commitment to cut 20 per cent of—

Mr. Speaker: Order. Mr. Cousins.

Mr. Cousins: For over 100 years Scotland and Wales have had special arrangements reflecting their special needs—and quite right too—and the ability to make local national priorities within those allocations of things that the people of those areas thought it was right to focus upon. When can the north-east region expect to have the same arrangements?

Mr. Boateng: My hon. Friend makes a serious point that reflects his own passion for regional government. He will have welcomed the announcements made by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister in that regard.

Business of the House

12.31 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): May I ask the Leader of the House please to give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Robin Cook): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 27 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Electricity (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. Followed by a motion to establish a Select Committee on the Lord Chancellor's Department.

TUESDAY 28 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Railways and Transport Safety Bill.

WEDNESDAY 29 JANUARY—Motion to take note of the outstanding reports of the Public Accounts Committee to which the Government have replied. Details will be given in the *Official Report.*

THURSDAY 30 JANUARY—Opposition Day [4th]. There will be a half-day debate on humanitarian contingency for Iraq on an Opposition motion.

FRIDAY 31 JANUARY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week after will be:

MONDAY 3 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the European Parliament (Representations) Bill.

TUESDAY 4 FEBRUARY—Consideration of the First Report Session 2002–03 (HC 171) from the Joint Committee on House of Lords reform.

WEDNESDAY 5 FEBRUARY—Motion on the Police Grant report (England and Wales) 2003/2004.

Motions on the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2003/2004 and the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2001/2002: Amending Report 2003.

THURSDAY 6 FEBRUARY—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Electricity (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

FRIDAY 7 FEBRUARY—Private Members' Bills.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall in February will be:

THURSDAY 6 FEBRUARY—Debate on Southern Africa food crisis.

THURSDAY 13 FEBRUARY—Debate on legal and advice service tackling social exclusion.

THURSDAY 27 FEBRUARY—Debate on the nineteenth Report from the Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee, Session 2001–02 on the New Towns; their Problems and Future (HC 603) and the Government Response (CM 461).

On Thursday 16 January, I informed the House that it was planned to hold the next meeting of the Committee on the Convention on the Future of Europe on Wednesday 29 January at 2.30 pm to consider the fifth and sixth reports of the United Kingdom representatives to the Convention. To avoid a clash with a pre-arranged meeting of the Praesidium of the Convention, it is now proposed that the Committee on the Convention on the Future of Europe meet instead on Wednesday 12 February at 2.30 pm.

The information is as follows:

PAC Report 2001–02

Report No.	*Title of Report*	*Publication Date*
1st	Managing Risk in Government Depts	23 November 2001
2nd	Improving Construction Performance	5 December 2001
3rd	The Cancellation of the Benefits Payment Card Project	6 December 2001
4th	The Renegotiation of the PFI-type Deal for the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds	12 December 2001
5th	MOD: Major Projects Report 2000	28 November 2001
6th	MOD: Major Projects Report 2000—The Role of the Equipment Capability Customer	28 November 2001
7th	Sale of Part of the UK Gold Reserves	19 December 2001
8th	OFWAT: Leakage and Water Efficiency	4 January 2002
9th	Tackling Obesity in England	16 January 2002
10th	The Acquisition of German Parcel	11 January 2002
11th	OFGAS: Giving Domestic Consumers a Choice of Electricity Supplier	17 January 2002
12th	The Radiocommunications Agency's Joint Venture with CMG	23 January 2002
13th	Regulating Housing Associations' Management of Financial Risk	9 January 2002
14th	The Millennium Dome	1 February 2002
15th	How English Further Education Colleges can Improve Student Performance	7 February 2002
16th	Access to the Victoria and Albert Museum	14 February 2002
17th	MOD: Maximising the Benefits of Defence Equipment Co-operation	15 February
18th	Inland Flood Defence	1 March
19th	Ship Surveys and Inspections	15 March
20th	Educating and Training the Future Health Professional Workforce for England	8 March
21st	Better Value for Money from Professional Services	14 March
22nd	The Channel Tunnel Rail Link	21 March
23rd	Inland Revenue Appropriation Account 1999–2000	22 March
24th	MOD: Risk of Fraud in Property Management	20 March
26th	Better Regulation: Making Good Use of Regulatory Impact Assessments	12 April
27th	Medical Assessment of Incapacity and Disability Benefits	10 April
28th	Better Public Services Through Joint Working	18 April
29th	Non-Competitive Procurement in the Ministry of Defence	19 April
30th	The Auction of Radio Spectrum for the Third Generation of Mobile Phones	26 April
31st	Postcomm: Opening the Post	1 May

Report No.	*Title of Report*	*Publication Date*
32nd	The Implementation of the National Probation Service Information Systems Strategy	3 May
33rd	Income Tax Self Assessment	9 May
34th	Policy Development: Improving Air Quality	24 May
35th	Losses to the Revenue from Frauds on Alcohol Duty	17 May
36th	Progress on Resource Accounting	19 June
37th	Handling Clinical Negligence Claims in England	13 June
38th	NIRS2: contact extension	7 August
39th	Giving Confidently: The Role of the Charity Commission in Regulating Charities	3 July
40th	NHS Direct in England	10 July
41st	Ministry of Defence: Major Projects Report 2001	4 July
42nd	Managing the relationship to secure a successful partnership) in PFI projects	1 July
43rd	The use of funding competitions in PFI projects: The Treasury Building	17 July
44th	The misuse and smuggling of Hydrocarbon Oils	18 July
45th	Inpatient and Outpatient Waiting in the NHS	18 September
46th	Inappropriate adjustments to NHS Waiting Lists	18 September
47th	The New Landfill Tax Credit Scheme	25 July
48th	Helping to reduce world poverty	31 July
49th	Ensuring that policies deliver value for money	31 July
50th	Pipes and Wires	8 August
51st	Agricultural fraud: the case of Joseph Bowden	22 August
52nd	e-Revenue	29 August
53rd	Reducing prisoner reoffending	5 September
54th	Improving public services through e-services	28 August
55th	Fraud and Error in Income Support	11 September
56th	Ministry of Defence Combat Identification	21 August
57th	The operation and Wind-up of Teesside Development Corporation	14 August
58th	Improving Student achievement and widening participation in higher education in England	12 September
59th	Delivering the commercialisation of the public sector	15 August
60th	Royal Travel by air and rail	4 September
61st	The management of surplus property by trusts in the NHS in England	19 September
62nd	The New Deal for Young People	9 October
63rd	Construction of Portcullis House, the new Parliamentary Building NB Replied to by House of Commons as an HC Paper	24 July

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the Leader of the House for that statement, and particularly for the news about the Praesidium, which I am sure excited us all hugely.

Today being Thursday—[HON. MEMBERS: "Well spotted"]. I see that I have woken up some hon. Members.

Today being Thursday, we have of course had departmental questions from 11.30 am to 12.30 pm, and now we shall have business questions for however long you deem appropriate, Mr. Speaker. Then a statement is to follow.

By my calculations, that means that for the legislative business before us, a very important Bill to which we are supposed to give our full legislative attention as a House of Commons, we shall have about three and a half hours to consider the seven groups of amendments that you have selected, Mr. Speaker. The arithmeticians among us will readily calculate that that is about 30 minutes per group. That is the amount of time the Government have seen fit to allow the House to do its job of scrutinising legislation—30 minutes for each group of amendments to a Bill for the entire House to give its attention, including all speeches and all consideration. That is the result of the so-called modernisation process, whereby to get Members out of this building as quickly as possible on Thursdays, we are now reduced to that sort of business.

If the Leader of the House will not turn back the clock—that is a bit much to expect at this stage—can we have protected time for our legislative duties? That is all I ask, given that we must have statements from Ministers and so on. Surely, it is more important that we do our job as a legislature than that we all go home early on Thursdays. Therefore, I ask the Leader of the House to give this matter his urgent attention, and I hope that he will give us an undertaking about protected time for legislation.

Yesterday, as reported at column 322 of *Hansard*, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) pointed out that a written ministerial statement by the Deputy Prime Minister has been sneaked out on the very important subject of reduced right-to-buy discounts—something that affects all Members of Parliament and their constituents—yet, to date, we have no opportunity to question the Deputy Prime Minister. We are left with the written ministerial statement and, so far, nothing else. Is that how we shall conduct our business in future? Is the Deputy Prime Minister afraid of the House? Is he ashamed of what he said in his written ministerial statement?

Why is the Deputy Prime Minister allowed to hide behind the written ministerial statement procedure and not come to the House to say what he wants to do and be questioned by Members of Parliament on behalf of their constituents? That is the missing piece in all this. I do not want to hear the Leader of the House say, "Oh well, written ministerial statements are better than the old planted questions", which were their predecessors. I want him to tell us when the Deputy Prime Minister will come to the House to answer for his policies, instead of hiding behind that sordid little parliamentary device.

You will recall, Mr. Speaker, that during business questions on 16 January, duly recorded at columns 819 and 820 of *Hansard*, I raised the matter of the Secretary of State for Defence having somehow allowed to get out into the public domain the matter of Fylingdales on which he was going to make a statement the following day.

On 20 January, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight)—who is in his place beside me—returned to this issue and said with regard to the Secretary of State for Defence that the statement on troop deployment

> "was widely trailed in the Sunday newspapers and in today's media. This appears to be a recurring pattern with the current Secretary of State."

As reported in the same column of *Hansard*, one of your Deputies, Mr. Speaker, said:

> "Mr. Speaker is well aware of the matters to which he has referred, and is deeply concerned about them. I understand that he intends to take them up with the Ministers concerned."—[*Official Report*, 20 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 47.]

That was bad enough, but on 22 January—yesterday—my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) was again obliged to raise a point of order with you, Mr. Speaker, in which he said that

> "on the BBC News website, there was a headline saying "University Funding Shake-up Unveiled."

So what the Secretary of State for Education and Skills was going to say in the House was widely known in the media before he came here. You, Mr. Speaker, said:

> "I share the right hon. Gentleman's concern about this matter. He has written to me; I shall investigate and report back to the House."—[*Official Report*, 22 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 320.]

The Leader of the House shares with you, Mr. Speaker, a responsibility for guardianship of the role of the House of Commons vis-à-vis Ministers, but we are now witnessing casual, serial disregard of the role of the House by Secretaries of State. I should like to hear from the Leader of the House what is he going to do—along, I hope, with you, Mr. Speaker—to force Secretaries of State to drop that practice, to have proper regard to parliamentary process and to come to the House to allow Members of Parliament to hear matters before the rest of the world hears about them.

Mr. Cook: I think that I can begin by agreeing with the right hon. Gentleman that this is Thursday—everything else is rather more conditional than that.

First, we rise at 6 o'clock on Thursdays because the House voted for that, and I remind the right hon. Gentleman that it did so by the largest majority for any of the propositions on which the House voted on that day. I would totally deprecate any suggestion that Thursday therefore becomes some kind of second-class day; it is a full day of parliamentary time. It is very important to demonstrate to the world that we are taking business on Thursdays in the same way as we do on any other sitting day at Westminster.

On the statement on the right to buy, I cannot but rise to the right hon. Gentleman's claim that this is a sordid device. It is vastly more transparent and open than the system of planted questions that it replaced and which was used extensively by the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues in the 18 years when they were in office. It has always been the case that at times Government statements will be made in written form in *Hansard* rather than orally from the Dispatch Box. As for yesterday, when the written statement was made, there was a full, major oral statement on higher education in the House. It is simply not possible for me to arrange for every Government statement to be done orally from the Dispatch Box. If it were, I would have the right hon. Gentleman complaining that we did not have enough time to scrutinise legislation properly. I am pleased to inform the right hon. Gentleman that the Deputy Prime Minister answers questions in the House next Wednesday and will be happy to answer questions on the right to buy or any other issue. As a result of the changes and modernisation, which the right hon. Gentleman constantly deprecates, it is now possible for Members, having seen that written statement, to table an oral question on that subject in time for the exchanges next week.

On the issue of press speculation before oral statements in the House, the reports in the press that preceded the statement on troop deployments did not in any way reflect the full nature of the statement. Many were quite wrong. None was accurate about my right hon. Friend's statement. The statement on the BBC website about the forthcoming higher education statement was wildly wrong. I cannot stop the BBC and newspapers speculating about what might be said in Parliament. We live in a free country with a free press. I was gratified when I tuned in to the "Today" programme on the day of the higher education statement to hear it lament that it had been unable to get a Minister to come and comment on the forthcoming statement. I welcome that. It shows that Ministers fully understand the importance of speaking to this House before the media.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): May I support the request for a debate on the forced sale of rented accommodation at a substantial discount in areas such as the south-west? It has caused untold misery to those seeking affordable housing. It is a proper request and I am delighted that the Conservatives would wish to expose their absurdity in that particular matter.

Will the Leader of the House take the opportunity now or at least before the debate announced for 4 February to reiterate the Government's position on the reform of the House of Lords? I do not know whether in his busy morning he had an opportunity of to read the speech—I suppose it was a speech, but it was actually an extraordinarily bloodcurdling diatribe—from the Lord Chancellor. Yesterday in the other place the Lord Chancellor referred to an imaginary centre of gravity. It is the centre of gravity which the Leader of the House is constantly urging us to reach. On a number of occasions during that extraordinary speech the Lord Chancellor made peculiar references to the issue of hybridity. For example, he referred to

> "my mission in this debate to save us from the parliamentary disaster of hybridity."—[*Official Report*, 22 January 2003; Vol. 643, c. 831W.]

He then made some other references to that. Does the Leader of the House accept that in making this extraordinary statement the Lord Chancellor has not only ignored the mandate of the Labour Party at two successive general elections, but torn up the White Paper to which he put his own name and which advocated hybridity and mixed membership, and ignored the advice of the royal commission set up by the Government, the Public Administration Select Committee of this House and the report of the Joint

[Mr. Paul Tyler]

Committee of both Houses which, in theory at least, his House was debating yesterday as we did on Tuesday? Can the Leader of the House now give us an absolute guarantee that the Members of the other place, who after all have a lot of self-interest in this matter, will not be allowed a veto—that the turkeys will not be allowed to vote against Christmas?

Mr. Cook: First, I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support for the measures that we are taking to curb abuse of the right to buy—*[Interruption.]* Abuse is the correct word. Private speculative companies are going round putting up money on an agreement with tenants that they will purchase the houses from them three years subsequently. That is happening, and I would be sorry if any Member of the House, even among the Conservative party, did not recognise that that is an abuse, and one that we are right to try to curb. The hon. Gentleman said that in some areas of acute housing demand, a real crisis of social housing is being created. That is why, in a limited number of target areas, the Deputy Prime Minister has acted. Some of his proposals will require primary legislation, full debate and examination in this House, in the course of which the hon. Gentleman will have other opportunities to make those excellent points, with which we fully agree.

I have not, as yet, studied fully the Lord Chancellor's speech so I cannot therefore say whether it is a bloodcurdling diatribe. On the whole, however, bloodcurdling diatribes are better studied in the hours of darkness than in the morning. On the question of the centre of gravity, I stress to the House that it is important that all of us—this is not just a matter for me, the Lord Chancellor or the Government—try to identify our centre of gravity on 4 February. That will require Members to show some flexibility, not necessarily insisting on their first and best priority, but finding common ground with others on where the best compromise can be found with the largest support for reform of the second Chamber. I would be surprised if that compromise did not require some form of mixed membership. A year ago, the Government committed themselves to mixed membership of the upper House when we proposed 20 per cent. elected and 80 per cent. appointed. It is not my impression that that White Paper was unpopular because it proposed 20 per cent. elected members; the difficulty with public opinion was in relation to the 80 per cent. appointed. I am doubtful about whether we will remove those anxieties on the part of public opinion by going for 100 per cent. appointed.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Will my right hon. Friend allow a debate on the reopening of the custody suite at Chorley? It seems absurd that a population of 100,000—a constituency of 80 square miles—does not have lock-up facilities for the police, and that prisoners must be taken to Skelmersdale, which is way outside the constituency. That takes much-needed police off the streets: two policemen are required when someone is arrested.

Mr. Cook: I fully understand the anxiety of my hon. Friend, which he expresses forcefully, on behalf of his constituents. In the first instance, as he will appreciate, this is a matter for the local police authorities, not for me, and it would be wrong for the Government to insist on the precise location of police cells. I am sure that his request will be well reported in his locality and will be heard.

Mr. Andrew Mackay (Bracknell): Inevitably, the Foreign Secretary's mind is on the fight against terrorism and the situation in Iraq. Can I urge, however, that he does not take his eye off Zimbabwe? Will the Leader of the House arrange for a Foreign Office Minister to come to the Dispatch Box next week? First, can the House be assured that we will veto Mugabe's visit to Paris, apparently on President Chirac's extremely unwise invitation? Secondly, can we have a fuller response than the one that we received in Westminster Hall, when Ministers said that they were sympathetic to tougher and tighter smart sanctions against the regime, including against business men who are funding that regime?

Mr. Cook: First, I say to the hon. Gentleman—[HON. MEMBERS: "Right hon. Gentleman."] I stand corrected. May I say to the right hon. Gentleman that I fully share his view on the importance of upholding the ban on travel by Mugabe and his associates? Currently, 79 of them are named in the EU ban, and it is important that that ban is upheld and observed by all 15 countries that voted for it, including France. In Monday's meeting of the General Affairs Council, I understand that there will be a debate on taking forward the extension of that ban, which will expire next month unless such a decision is taken. Britain will of course seek to make sure that that ban is extended, and I want that ban to be upheld fully by all member states of the European Union. We will continue to review what sanctions we can take against Zimbabwe that will bring home to the regime our total condemnation of the way in which it is behaving and our particular abhorrence of the way in which it is interfering, with political motivation, in the distribution of food. No civilised person could possibly uphold the idea that food should be denied to people because of the way in which they had voted in the past. We are, of course, also very sensitive to the fact that any decision that we take must not increase the hardship and suffering of the people of Zimbabwe. We want to show that Britain is on their side. Our enemy is not the people of Zimbabwe; our concern is the regime in Zimbabwe.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend and all those involved in the decision on the fact that, today and for the first time, there will be a cross-departmental question time in Westminster Hall on youth policy? When he considers the future business for Westminster Hall, may I urge him to learn from this example and to consider whether we can hold many more of this type of question time?

Mr. Cook: I am very glad that we are holding the innovative cross-cutting question session. That is one of the products of the modernisation agenda that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) keeps condemning. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his part in pressing for this. I very much hope that hon. Members will take part in the session in the spirit in which it is offered. It will provide an opportunity for an informal, reflective exchange of views that can take place not necessarily with the party-political heat that is associated with this Chamber. I am conscious of the fact that the debate will be watched by much of the youth press and by many young people to see how seriously Parliament takes political issues and the political views of young people. If it is a success, as I hope that it will be, we will certainly look for opportunities to repeat this experiment in Westminster Hall.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): To return to the debate that the Leader of the House has announced for 4 February—the second leg of the two-day debate on House of Lords reform—he will recall that, in his important contribution to the debate on Tuesday, he repeatedly referred to the Labour manifesto that committed the party to a more democratic upper House. Against that background, can he give the House an unequivocal assurance that there can be no question of the Prime Minister voting for a wholly appointed second Chamber?

Mr. Cook: I would not seek to give an assurance on behalf of any Member of the House. Seven options will be before the House and any Member is open to vote for any of those seven options. I have made my position clear from the Dispatch Box, and I will do so again on 4 February. There is no collective Government view on the matter, and I would deprecate any attempts to read into the expression of view of any one member of the Government a collective view on behalf of everybody else.

Mr. Tom Watson (West Bromwich, East): After yesterday's statement on higher education, will my right hon. Friend consider a debate on student funding? Many Labour Members seek reassurance from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills that his proposals to allow vice-chancellors to charge differing fees will not mean that kids from the poorest backgrounds will be priced out of going to the best universities.

Mr. Cook: I fully understand that there is great interest in the House in yesterday's statement. I am sure that we will have a number of other opportunities to reflect on and explore its proposals. I invite my hon. Friend to give credit to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills for those elements of the proposals that will particularly assist children who come from the socio-economic groups that are under-represented at university. First, pressure will be applied to make sure that all universities take seriously their obligations to ensure that they offer fair access and seek to open their doors to people who may not have traditionally gone to them. Secondly, the abolition of upfront fees will be a material consideration to students from poorer backgrounds. Perhaps most important of all, the reintroduction of maintenance grants will apply to the students that my hon. Friend mentioned. That means that 30 per cent. of all students will receive a maintenance grant of £1,000. At present, they do not get it, and it will make quite a difference to a number of students who are considering whether they can afford full-time education at university.

Richard Younger-Ross (Teignbridge): May we add our congratulations to the Leader of the House on the decision to hold a cross-cutting debate on youth policy? I am sure that it will be a success. What other subjects is he considering for future debates? Will it be possible to hold questions on vocational education? I ask that, because he might not be aware that agricultural courses are being cut across the country. In my constituency, we have the proposed closure of Seale Hayne college, and it would be helpful if Ministers from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and from the Department for Education and Skills could come along to discuss access to agricultural education.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman makes his constituency point elegantly. I am not sure that it quite adds up to a case for a cross-cutting question session in Westminster Hall. However, I am sure that he will find other opportunities to pursue the matter.

On the hon. Gentleman's question about process, I welcome his support for the innovation that is taking place in Westminster Hall. We will look for other subjects of a broad cross-cutting character that might provide a parallel to the current experiment on youth questions. We will, of course, have to discuss the matter with the Chairman of Ways and Means and seek his agreement. We will carry forward the dialogue in the light of today's question session.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): My right hon. Friend will be aware that there is almost a feeding frenzy in the City over the sale of Safeway. That has important ramifications for employment in west London where up to 1,300 jobs are at risk, with 2,000 to 3,000 jobs being at risk around the country. That could result in a near monopoly situation in the retail sector. Can we have an urgent debate on this matter in the coming week, so that we can examine the powers that the Government have to intervene in this matter?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend draws attention to the many bids that are in for Safeway. I fully understand his constituents' apprehension about what that might mean in terms of employment in his region. We have well-developed mechanisms to maintain competition policy, and the Government have acted to make sure that we streamline and strengthen the requirements of competition policy. Any bid will have to be assessed through those mechanisms in the normal way. I certainly assure him that Ministers will be conscious of the consequences for employment of any such bid. Should there be significant consequences, we will want to look to how we can help any affected area in the way that we have repeatedly done wherever there have been employment consequences before.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): The week after next, we are due to debate the local authority grant settlement. Can the Leader of the House tell us when the final settlement will be announced? At the moment, representations are being made about how unfair the provisional grant is to Dorset in particular, and I would be interested to know when we will hear whether the Government have taken into account the representations that have been made. When will the people of Christchurch, who have been singled out in the whole west country by being effectively deprived of their

[Mr. Christopher Chope]

right to buy, have the chance through their elected representative to make representations to the Government on this important issue?

Mr. Cook: The debate on the local government settlement takes place not next week, but the week after. I fully understand the importance of all hon. Members seeing the final settlement well in advance of the debate, and I will make sure that that point is conveyed to the Department.

On the other point that the hon. Gentleman raises, the written statement made it clear that some of the issues will be taken forward by order and that others will have to wait for primary legislation. Either way will give hon. Members the chance to make what representations they wish. In the event that Conservative Members wish to make representations against the steps that we are taking and to do so on behalf of those who are speculating unreasonably and abusing the system and to maintain the situation in which there is excessive pressure on social housing in their constituencies, I am sure that not only we will wish to hear that. Many of their constituents will wish to hear it, too.

Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): May we have an early debate on the role of political parties in helping the vulnerable? In particular, can my right hon. Friend arrange that all Members of Parliament from the borough of Redbridge are able to take part in such a debate? We would then be able to discuss the closure of the mental health day care centre in my constituency by the Conservative council in the London borough of Redbridge where the Leader of the Opposition is, of course, a Member of Parliament.

Mr. Cook: I am tempted to respond to my hon. Friend's proposal so that all of us can hear more fully of the difficulties of living with a Conservative council and about the priorities of those councils, which are not necessarily helpful to the vulnerable in the community. I recall that, last year, the Leader of the Opposition urged all Conservative Members to spend a week with the vulnerable in their constituencies. It is a matter of regret that, my opposite number, the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, has not yet reported to us on his week with the vulnerable in Bromley. We might invite him to reflect on that and to report more adequately next Thursday when we meet again.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Will my right hon. Friend give more consideration to persuading Ministers to allow more notice to be given of the Committees considering statutory instruments and delegated legislation? At present, we have minimal notice and people are put on the Committees even though they do not want to serve and know nothing about the subject. However, there are also Statutory Instruments Committees for which we would like to volunteer because we are interested in the subject. It is not beyond the capacity of man to organise a system that provides a longer running time for such Committees. That would help to make the Committees meaningful rather than the charade that they are. That is particularly true for Northern Ireland matters where whole Acts of Parliament are considered in Statutory Instrument Committees. Finally, the Northern Ireland Grand Committee is due to meet. What will be its business?

Mr. Cook: On the period of notice, I am advised by the Deputy Chief Whip that that has been doubled from the traditional one week to two weeks for Statutory Instrument Committees. That should help hon. Members. Indeed, it is unusual for us to have more than two weeks' notice of forthcoming business.

On Northern Ireland Orders, we are conscious of the problem for the House, and the particular problem for those who represent Northern Ireland constituencies, of trying to replicate the system of consideration that was available when the Northern Ireland Assembly was in being. We are frank about the fact that we cannot do that in full, but we are considering ways in which the Northern Ireland Grand Committee could be strengthened and whether there are other ways to handle the problem.

Andrew Mackinlay: What business is planned for the Northern Ireland Grand Committee?

Mr. Cook: When I have the details, I will ensure that my hon. Friend is advised of them.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): The Leader of the House is concerned about whether this country, together with the United States, enters into a conflict in Iraq. He knows that all hon. Members are also increasingly concerned about it and interested in it, as are the people of this country. Despite the Government's right to use the royal prerogative, is not it possible for the House to have the opportunity to debate Iraq and whether we should enter into a conflict with it on a substantive motion so that our people, especially the forces that will be committed, know that our troops have the full support of the House and the people of this country in the event of war?

Mr. Cook: As I have said a number of times, it is inconceivable that any Government would commit British forces to action without the full support of the House of Commons. No Government would commit forces to military action in the event of any doubt about that support.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have repeatedly said that we have no problem with a vote on a substantive motion on the commitment of forces. We would welcome that and would arrange it. However, we have a responsibility to the military forces on the precise timing of that. If it can be done in advance, then good and well, but there are obvious inhibitions on introducing a motion that commits British forces to a secret attack at 2 am next Thursday. We must have some flexibility on when the vote may take place. There is no doubt in our minds, and there can be none in the mind of any hon. Member, that action involving military forces must be taken with the support of the House.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): May I bring to the attention of the Leader of the House early-day motion 558?

[That this House remembers with deep sadness the Omagh bombing of 15th August 1998 in which 31 people, including seven children and two unborn babies, were

murdered by the Real IRA; commends the courage of the families of the victims of this bombing in launching an unprecedented civil legal case against five named individuals, suspected of planting the bomb, and the Real IRA; urges the public to continue to contribute to the Omagh Victims' Legal Trust which still requires money to fund the case, expected to be heard in Belfast High Court later this year; and condemns the decision to grant legal aid to two of the suspects, Michael McKevitt and Liam Campbell, who are both known to be very wealthy men as a result of their lifelong involvement in terrorist activity.]

According to the *Daily Mail*, two suspects for the Omagh bombing, Michael McKevitt and Liam Campbell, believed to be prominent leaders of the Real IRA and who have become wealthy men through terrorist crime, are to be granted legal aid paid for by British taxpayers. The early-day motion condemns that. It is outrageous that legal aid should be provided for those suspected of being responsible for the murder of 29 people and two unborn children when private finance has to be raised to support the victims of that crime who can get justice only through an unprecedented civil action. Can time be made available to consider whether the legal aid regulations require amendment so that suspects and victims are treated equally under the law?

Mr. Cook: I fully understand the hon. Gentleman's concern and I am grateful to him for giving me advance notice of his question. I think all hon. Members will agree that, as a matter of principle, anyone who is brought before our courts and charged with a serious offence, such as murder, should be defended. That is an important principle of our criminal justice system. In the event that they cannot afford the defence themselves, it is right also that that should be made available to them at the expense of the state.

The hon. Gentleman says that the two accused people are wealthy. If the *Daily Mail* or anyone else has evidence that they may not have made a full declaration of their assets to the Legal Aid Board, I urge them to share that with the police and the Legal Aid Board. A false declaration not only cheats the legal aid system, but is a criminal offence.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): On Tuesday, I mistakenly criticised your office, Mr. Speaker. I also made another error at column 258 when I wrongly claimed that Lord Lipsey had changed his view on the composition of the House of Lords, for which I apologise. I have also written to him to apologise. Will the Leader of the House allow me an opportunity to set the record straight by confirming that the noble Lord has not changed his unfortunately mistaken views following his elevation to another place?

Mr. Cook *rose—*

Andrew Mackinlay: Say, "I agree. I concur with my hon. Friend."

Mr. Cook: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for his prompt. He will forgive me if I do not instantly reach out for it.

I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) has had the opportunity to put right the record on Lord Lipsey's views. I am sure that he will be appropriately grateful to her for that. I doubt whether her exchange with him has changed either his views or her own. Going through the debate of the past two days, however, I was encouraged to note that about one in three of those who spoke in the other place expressed some support for an elected element within the second Chamber. That is substantial progress on the position a year ago. Although Lord Lipsey may not have changed his views, I am encouraged that there is a certain tide—or at any rate a gentle breeze—in the second place which we must try to encourage.

Mr. Mark Francois (Rayleigh): Will the Leader of the House find time for an early debate on job losses, because it would give me an opportunity to highlight the unfortunate decision announced by Powergen this week to make 210 of my constituents redundant at the facility in London road, Rayleigh? I am sure that he will appreciate that I am extremely concerned about that decision and am keen to do what I can to protect my constituents' interests, including by raising the matter in the House.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to express the concerns of his constituency and community at that loss of jobs. I assure him that, as always, Departments will be willing to consider what might be appropriate by way of assistance to his community to cope with the consequences of a localised redundancy of that order. We are well aware of the difficulty that individuals and communities face as a result of job losses, but we take some pride in the fact that since we have been in office, 1.5 million more people are in work than there were at the time of the 1997 general election, 250,000 of whom came into work in the past year alone.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): I thank my right hon. Friend for making time for a debate on defence yesterday, when many of my hon. Friends and colleagues made a series of excellent speeches against a war with Iraq.

The hon. Member for Congleton—

Sir Nicholas Winterton: Macclesfield.

Ms Abbott: I apologise.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir N. Winterton) said that it is important to have a vote in the House on a substantive motion. It is also important that that should take place before British troops are dispatched to war. The House is aware that there is no precedent for that in recent times, but it is highly unlikely that the tens of thousands of American and British troops massed on Iraq's borders will attack in secret, as my right hon. Friend suggested. The country does not understand why it is possible to dispatch British troops in such a major deployment without a vote in the House on a substantive motion before it happens.

Mr. Cook: First, my hon. Friend draws attention to the fact that the House had an interesting debate yesterday in which the issues were again fully ventilated. That was one of a number of debates in the House on the subject, including one before Christmas when the Government put a substantive motion before it. At that time, the House massively endorsed our approach to

[Mr. Cook]

ensure that we conduct the management of the crisis in Iraq through the United Nations, to which it also gave its full support.

I have no doubt that the House will discuss the issue on a number of other occasions. Indeed, this Administration was punctilious in ensuring that it had many opportunities to discuss issues that affected the deployment of British troops in Afghanistan and Kosovo. We will certainly do the same in relation to Iraq. Whether the vote on the commitment of military troops will take place before or after they are put into action will be judged at the time, but there can be no question whatsoever of the British Government committing British troops if there is any doubt about us securing support for that within the House of Commons.

It is important that we remember also that the matter may not necessarily end with the commitment of military troops. The strategy for which we voted involved ensuring that we uphold the UN resolution. If we can secure the compliance and co-operation of Saddam, there will be no need for the UN to authorise military action to uphold that resolution. The key to making progress and avoiding war rests not in this Chamber, but with Saddam Hussein in complying with his obligations under the resolution.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): May we please have an urgent debate in Government time on the effect of prison overcrowding on rehabilitation programmes for persistent offenders? Given that the prison population is projected to rise from approximately 72,000 now to 109,000 by 2009, that purposeful activity in prisons has consistently declined since this Government took office in 1997, and that 84 per cent. of 14 to 17-year-old thrice-convicted offenders are reconvicted within two years of their release from custody, is not it important that this House has the opportunity to debate the centrality to public policy of rehabilitation programmes if we are to create a peaceful society and the law and order for which all democratically elected legislators rightly pray?

Mr. Cook: I fully understand the hon. Gentleman's concern about overcrowding in prisons; it is shared on both sides of the House. I also absolutely agree with him that arranging creative and constructive activities to assist rehabilitation in prisons is more difficult when wardens are stretched and there is stress as a result of overcrowding. We are certainly considering ways to ease that overcrowding. Indeed, 3,000 new prison places will come on stream over the next year.

Having said that, I must say to the hon. Gentleman, who often takes a courageous and bold idiosyncratic stance—

Mr. Forth: And wrong.

Mr. Cook: One can see the amount of courage the hon. Gentleman requires by the support he gets from his Front Benchers. I shall try to give him more support than he gets from his right hon. and hon. Friends. It would help us to minimise the threat of overcrowding in prisons if we were not urged so often by Conservative Members to lock up even more people, and criticised by them when we do not do so.

John Robertson (Glasgow, Anniesland): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the job losses announced by BAE Systems earlier this week: 265 on the Clyde and 700 in Barrow. Despite the work of the unions, Scottish Enterprise, Glasgow city council, the Scottish Parliament and the elected representatives of the area, and an agreement struck last year to secure the present employment level, here we are again. Will my right hon. Friend arrange a debate on the losses and the company's conduct towards its employees?

Mr. Cook: As a fellow Scottish MP, I fully understand the enormous impact that that will have on my hon. Friend's community and on the wider region. I entirely share his concern. It is indeed a matter of deep regret that a commitment made last year has not been kept by the company. He will be well aware that we will be working with the Scottish Executive to consider whether there is any way in which we can be of assistance to the local community and to those most intimately affected.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Will the Leader of the House arrange either for a Home Office statement or for a substantive written explanation to be put in the House of Commons Library concerning the Prime Minister's answer yesterday to the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), who asked about drug crime in areas outside inner cities—the suburbs and the wider country? The Prime Minister said:

> "we are ensuring that people who need drug treatment are given it".—[*Official Report*, 22 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 296.]

I must inform the Leader of the House that the police recently told me that the waiting list for such treatment in Devon is more than 52 weeks. It would therefore enlighten the House to hear in more detail exactly what the Prime Minister meant in making that pledge yesterday.

Mr. Cook: I am delighted to assure the House and clarify that this Government have greatly increased the amount of funds going into the kind of drug treatment to which the hon. Lady referred. Indeed, recalling from memory, I believe that we are increasing the total volume by 50 per cent. There is of course pressure on the provision of residential treatment in particular. We are looking at how we can widen treatment, possibly by the use of alternatives to residential treatment. However, we have provided substantial additional resources and I have no doubt that we will continue to do so.

I was asked earlier about the business of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee. I am delighted to be able to answer my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay).

Andrew Mackinlay: I have some clout!

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend should never underestimate his clout, which is quite considerable and taken very seriously on these Benches.

I am advised that yesterday a decision was reached to have two sittings of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee. On 4 February, it will sit at 2.30 pm to discuss the Strategic Investment and Regeneration of Sites (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, and on 6 February it will meet to discuss the Budget (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

Pete Wishart (North Tayside): Can we have an early and urgent statement by the Foreign Secretary, so that he can explain to the Scottish fishing community why his Department blocked any prospect of European Union compensation, seemingly to ensure that the British EU rebate would be secured? In that statement, would he describe the benefit to Scotland of being represented by a United Kingdom delegation, which has sold out not only the Scottish fishing industry but any prospect of EU compensation?

Mr. Cook: I rise wearily for the umpteenth time to try to explain to the hon. Gentleman, who represents the Scottish National party, the reality of the fishing industry: there will be no fishing industry if there are no fish.

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North-East): What a surprise.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is surprised by that, but I find that I am repeatedly obliged to make that point from this Dispatch Box.

It is as a result of that UK delegation that the degree of reduction was brought down from 80 per cent. to 45 per cent. Although, of course, I fully understand that the fishing community would have liked a further cut in the reduction, that would have been inconsistent with ensuring that cod stocks survive. I do not believe that that cut would have been secured by a delegation that did not have the clout of the combined United Kingdom behind it.

On the issue of compensation, the hon. Gentleman should not deceive his own people. He knows perfectly well that the British Government and the Scottish Executive are considering ways in which they can increase support for the fishing communities. Several millions of pounds have already gone their way over the past few years in order to compensate for the pressure on the fishing industry. There will be more coming. It is important, though, that we ensure that maximum added value is provided and that we do not end up with a formula by which that added value is then reduced by the rebate.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Given that the Royal College of Surgeons has suggested that there should be one accident and emergency unit for every 500,000 people; that that is regarded as having considerable weight by strategic health authorities all over the country; that that threatens A and E facilities from Northern Ireland to the Isle of Wight, including—particularly as far as I am concerned—hospitals in Hertfordshire; and given that the Government have things called diagnostic and treatment centres, which seem to be a booby prize when one's A and E is shut, will my right hon. Friend agree to have an early debate on such units in our health service?

Mr. Cook: I am not sure that a debate is required, as my hon. Friend has amply and fully made his point. There is a familiar and well-known dilemma in A and E provision—specialists in the field are clearly of the view and have some weight and evidence behind them—that the more specialised the centre, the better the chance of successful intervention. The more specialised centres will of course tend to be found in areas that have the largest populations to serve. At the same time, we must balance that with ensuring fair access to A and E facilities, which is not always consistent with locating them near very large populations. Any judgment on those two aspects is a difficult one to make. It is probably not best made at the centre but by each local health board. I very much hope that both issues will be weighed carefully in order to reach the right outcome.

Excise Diversion Fraud

1.19 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Healey): With permission, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement on this week's Court of Appeal case, known as Stockade, arising from investigations into the Fort Patrick bonded warehouse in 1996–97. Stockade is linked to the London City Bond—LCB—cases, which were investigated by Customs and Excise from 1995 onwards. I wish to inform the House of the actions that the Government have taken to deal with this series of frauds when organised criminal gangs took advantage of weaknesses in the Excise regime.

I can confirm to the House that since 1997 we have tightened Excise controls and made fundamental changes to the management of Customs cases. I can report that the independent inquiry that the Attorney-General and I jointly established in November, which anticipates the implications of LCB for cases like Stockade, is already under way. In 1998, we tightened the regulation of Excise warehouses to tackle the specific loopholes that the criminals were using in the Stockade and LCB frauds, but fraudsters and smugglers constantly change their methods, so the law enforcement challenge is continuous. In 2000, we commissioned the independent Roques review to look at Excise losses and Customs' methods of control. We accepted 62 of the 65 recommendations, and have continued to tighten the duty suspension regime since.

For the first time ever, Customs has made comprehensive estimates of the revenue losses facing all the main indirect taxation regimes, and we now have detailed strategies with substantial new resources in place to tackle smuggling and indirect tax avoidance and fraud. Investigations in Excise cases are necessarily long and complex, reflecting the scale and sophistication of the criminal organisations involved, but the prosecutions that followed in the LCB-related cases have highlighted for Customs issues about the status of informants, the handling of documentation and disclosure of information to the courts. The Government have already put in place important changes to reduce the risk from such problems, which date from the 1990s, but of course in such complex criminal investigations there will always be some cases that fail.

In legislation, we passed the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 to establish a surveillance commissioner and set common guidelines on the use of informants for all law enforcement agencies. Statutory codes of practice enforced under the Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996 govern the process of disclosure in criminal investigations. Far-reaching changes have also been made within Customs. A new chairman was appointed from outside the organisation in January 200[illegible], and new senior staff on law enforcement have been appointed. With new case controls, training programmes and professional standards, the management of Customs investigations is being thoroughly overhauled.

In addition, from April last year and following the recommendation of the Gower-Hammond report, which the Government commissioned, responsibility for prosecution decisions and accountability for Customs' prosecution function has been taken away from Customs and placed with the Attorney-General. Following the collapse of the London City Bond cases in the Court of Appeal two months ago, the Attorney-General and I jointly established the independent Butterfield review. Its terms of reference are to consider the circumstances that led to the termination of the LCB cases, examine the wider issues and advise on whether Customs' current criminal case handling meets statutory requirements and best professional practice. The review has unrestricted access to Customs staff, facilities and papers, and Mr. Justice Butterfield has been asked to report to us by June this year.

The Government are still dealing with the fallout from events that date from the mid-1990s. We have commissioned and acted on independent reports from Roques, Butler and Gower-Hammond. We have made important changes to the way in which Customs investigations and prosecutions are handled, and the independent inquiry to deal with the concerns from this week's case is already up and running. Wherever necessary, we will do more, and the Butterfield review will play an important part in any further reform. It will be of great interest to the House, and I can confirm that a summary of the report and its recommendations will be laid before Parliament.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): I am grateful to the Minister for his statement and his courtesy in allowing me prior sight of it.

The statement is welcome, especially as we have been pressing for it. It stands in marked contrast to the Minister's written statement in November on the London City Bond case, to which he referred today. Why did the Government see fit to smuggle out a written statement then, but finally see fit to speak on the mess and confusion in Customs now? Is it because the Minister realises that there is now a massive dossier of damning indictments against the department? Can he confirm that the collapse of that action cost the taxpayer some £100 million in legal fees? Can he confirm press reports suggesting that up to £2 billion of revenue has now been lost in fraud following that failed sting operation, for which there is nothing to show? Did not the collapse of the LCB case cost the Customs solicitors office alone some £450,000?

It is a disgrace that the convictions of those involved have been overturned by the prosecutors' failure to tell the court of the entrapment techniques employed. Will the Minister admit that up to 100 other convictions are in doubt? What exactly are the implications for compensation from the public purse? It is indicative of the shambles under the Government that their own Attorney-General ordered a judicial inquiry into the national investigation service only for another case to collapse while that investigation was taking place. Is it not the case that the Government have been forced to raise the minimum indicative levels of smuggling fraud following a High Court ruling against the Minister's Customs guidance in the Hoverspeed case last summer?

Can the Minister confirm a written answer of 31 January 2002, in which his colleague, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), said that the Chancellor was not even aware of the issues resulting from the Excise diversion fraud until June 2000—three years after he came to office? Was not the subsequent Roques report supposed to have ended the problems, and why has it failed? Can the Economic Secretary to the Treasury confirm that the Attorney-General was sent a monthly schedule of sensitive cases, including a number involving LCB, on 14 March 2001? Subsequently, has not the Customs solicitors office kept the Attorney-General abreast of developments? If it has, why has the chaos been allowed to escalate?

Does today's statement that an independent inquiry is already under way into this week's events mean that the Minister has consulted the Attorney-General about extending the existing Butterfield inquiry? Is that not needed in the interests of taxpayers and public services on which revenues rely? How far-reaching will Lord Butterfield's inquiry be? Does his remit include investigation of the appropriateness of powers of prosecution? Will there be a further oral statement on the Floor of the House when the inquiry reports?

Ultimately, despite the Minister's weasel words about the mid-1990s, the real truth is that the decision to prosecute was made under the present Government. The decision to spend millions of pounds of taxpayers' money on the case and the decision not to disclose participating informants were taken under them. The collapse of potentially successful major sting action was caused by decisions taken under them. Instead of tax fraudsters, taxpayers have been stung by the Government's action. Is that not why, in a vain attempt to cover their embarrassment, all the members of the Treasury Front Bench, excluding the Chief Secretary, have had to turn out for the statement, outnumbering their own Back Benchers?

The Economic Secretary must now turn his statement into action to reassure Parliament and the public that his guidance to Customs officers and his control over the department is tenable. Was not the Chancellor's aim in paragraph B56 on page 200 of the pre-Budget report, as recorded in a Customs and Excise press release on protecting indirect tax revenues on 27 November last year, to

> "reduce the proportion of VAT which goes uncollected and produce more than £2 billion per year in additional VAT revenues by 2005–06"?

Is that strategy for Customs not seriously in doubt given the departmental chaos under the present chancellorship, and does that not blow another hole in the Chancellor's already downgraded forecasts for public revenue, public borrowing and the public deficit? Is it not plain that since the Government came to office in 1997, Customs and Excise, Britain's oldest revenue-raising body, with a proud history of dedicated professionalism, has been reduced to a chaotic mess? It faces judicial inquiry and police investigation. Its actions have been ruled illegal by the High Court and it is losing more of the theoretical yield of VAT through avoidance and fraud than when Labour came to office. Is the latest loss of taxpayers' money not another damning example of Customs in chaos?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. Before the Minister responds, perhaps I may say to the House that it contravenes the sub judice rule for hon. Members to refer to any case individually in any detail.

John Healey: The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) started by accusing me of smuggling out the statement to Parliament when the Attorney-General and I launched the Butterfield review in November, in immediate response to the collapse of the LCB case. We acted immediately; we informed Parliament immediately; we did so under the procedures established by the House for written statements. Let me remind the hon. Gentleman that the problems with which we are dealing now date to the mid-1990s—frauds that were going on at that time, and investigations that were started and largely conducted then.

The hon. Gentleman accuses Customs in the broadest terms off the back of one case. *[Interruption.]* "Customs in chaos" was the phrase that he used. He needs to understand that modern criminal trials are as much about the process of the trial as about the guilt of the defendants. It is entirely wrong to condemn the entire Customs service as he did. In none of the cases that has been halted so far is there any evidence of wider criminal conspiracy or corruption within Customs. The Roques report that we commissioned in 2000 looked into the matter and reached the same conclusion. Butler examined it and said the same.

Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should take some advice from his right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), who is not on the Front Bench. He well understood, back in 1995 when he was Home Secretary, the problems of condemning an entire service off the back of single cases. He stated, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin):

> "I do not think that it is at all appropriate to infer from particular cases, however serious, generalised allegations about a propensity on the part of the police to behave in the way that the hon. Gentleman has imputed to them."—[*Official Report*, 16 May 1995; Vol. 260, c. 170.]

I suggest that the hon. Member for Eddisbury do his own research, instead of using *The Daily Telegraph* leader writers to do it for him. Their reports this week of £2 billion duty loss are entirely inaccurate. The hon. Gentleman asked for the figures. The duty loss in the LCB case was £340 million. The duty loss in the Stockade case was £89 million. *[Interruption.]* It certainly is not all right, but I remind the hon. Gentleman that the fraud was perpetrated in the mid-1990s. It was going on under the previous Government.

The hon. Gentleman also asked me for detailed figures arising from the potential LCB-related cases and the fallout from them. Eight cases have collapsed so far. We are currently reviewing 20 further cases to judge the safety of the convictions. Thirty-two convictions have been overturned so far and no evidence has been offered against a further 15. Potentially, 93 convictions are susceptible if all the cases that we are currently reviewing are found to be unsafe.

The hon. Gentleman raised the point about sensitive cases. The Attorney-General, Customs Ministers and every law enforcement Minister will review sensitive cases. Listing and monitoring them is part of the effective management of the investigation and prosecution procedures—precisely the processes that were not in place in the mid-1990s, which led to many of the problems with which we are now dealing, following the collapse of the cases.

Finally, I confirm—the hon. Gentleman seems to be in some doubt, even though I made it clear in my statement—that Butterfield will consider the issues at

[John Healey]

stake in the Stockade case. We set him the deadline of June to report jointly to the Attorney-General and me. A summary of the report and its recommendations will be laid before the House.

Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): Hon. Members on both Front Benches have reason to be embarrassed about the matter, which dates back to 1995. The Minister's statement was complacent in its reference, for example, to the fact that in complex criminal investigations there will always be some cases that fail. This is not simply a failure of a complex investigation because of the complexities of the case. We all understand that that will happen from time to time. This goes to the heart of the operation and the way in which Customs and Excise embarked on it.

It is ludicrous of the Minister to say that generalised criticisms of Customs and Excise should not be derived from the case, given that those in charge of the department have been changed, the departments' procedures have been changed, and substantive powers have been removed from the department as a result of these cases.

When, as in the present case, Customs and Excise commit to lawbreaking as part of an operation, as a means of trapping suspects, who gives authority for the law to be broken? Does it reach Ministers' desks? In the London City Bond case, the matter commenced in 1994 under the previous Administration, and continued until 1998 under the present Administration. Was ministerial authority sought for the operation, and if it was, who gave it? Was the then Minister made aware of the contingent liabilities through loss of revenue, which in fact occurred on a massive scale?

There have been a number of inquiries into the matter. Has the Minister ensured that the reports are all in the House of Commons Library so that they can be examined? Why will the Butterfield report not be published in full?

Most important of all, since it is the aspect of greatest concern to the taxpayer, is the question of costs. What is the Minister's estimate of the full potential cost if the Government drop the other cases now subject to appeal? At what stage were Ministers consulted on the liabilities when the decisions were taken to continue with those cases, long after—it seems—the Government were aware of the potential for failure of those cases? Is it not time to separate entirely the investigation and prosecution procedures? The Minister noted that some steps have been taken, but there has not yet been a total separation.

Much bigger costs arise from the loss of revenue. Can the Minister explain the apparent discrepancy between the figures provided by Customs and Excise—in the National Audit Office report, the National Investigation Service put the figure at £579 million in total—and by Ms Jan Wanstall, a senior Customs and Excise official, who was one of those who brought the failings of the case to the attention of the Government and others? Her evidence to the court stated that the losses to the Revenue from that fraud were £1.25 billion—a figure that no one disputed. In her testimony in court, she alleged that that was a matter of the right politics. Will the Minister please explain the difference between those figures?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman criticises the record of the Opposition and of the Government. I suppose he does so because he has no record of his own in government on which to comment. He accuses me of complacency in the matter. I utterly reject that, after everything that we have done to set up the Butterfield review and to make sure that it gets to the bottom of the lessons that are there to be learned in the LCB-related cases.

More importantly, of course it is right that we try to learn the lessons of what went wrong in the LCB cases, but what interests me more, and what I want to know as the Customs Minister responsible, is whether the steps taken by Customs in respect of investigation and prosecution are good enough. Do they meet the statutory requirements that we now have in place, which were not in place in 1995? Do they meet the best professional standards that are now in place and which may not have been in place in the mid-1990s? In particular, can we improve on what is currently being done?

On the hon. Gentleman's next point, no entrapment was involved in the cases. Using informants while allowing fraud to run, as it were, is an accepted, established and common part of law investigation and enforcement, but a question arises about the balance between allowing a fraud to run in order to pursue the investigation and nail those involved, and the scale of the loss of revenue to the Exchequer. It is the judgments that were made in 1995 and 1996 that were perhaps at fault in that regard. In the court cases that have folded at the moment, none of the techniques used in investigation has been questioned or criticised. It is the disclosure about those techniques that has led to the legal problems and therefore the unsafety of the prosecutions.

On the regime to oversee those issues, regulations are in place on the use of informants and statutory systems are in place on standards of disclosure. Of course, I was not involved in the decisions. It is wrong of the hon. Gentleman to suggest that a Customs Minister should be involved in operational decisions. Indeed, his doing so betrays a failure to understand the nature of law enforcement and the difficulty of such decisions.

The hon. Gentleman asked me a couple of other specific questions. To date, the legal cost in the LCB case is £7.4 million and in the Stockade case it is £760,000. He asked me about prosecution decisions and the handling of the cases—a matter that I explained in my statement. Perhaps he did not read the advance copy or listen carefully enough. From April last year, as the Gower-Hammond report, which we commissioned, recommended, we have separated from Customs responsibility for making decisions about prosecution and accounting for the conduct of the prosecutions function and given it to the Attorney-General. Thus it is properly placed in the hands of one of the Government's Law Officers.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. I make a plea for brevity, so as to allow as many hon. Members as possible to be called. Of course, I also have the main business to protect.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): May I congratulate the Government on the statement and on the steps that have been taken over some years to remedy the record of grossly inadequate direction and management in Customs and Excise, which stretched back way before 1997, when this Government took office?

What is being done to remedy the position whereby cigarettes are being exported duty free to Andorra and smuggled back to this country? Is that one of the cases that will be reviewed?

John Healey: I accept my hon. Friend's criticism, as I know will Customs, about previous management problems. The strengthening of the board of commissioners, the appointment of a new chief executive on the law enforcement side and a raft of new staff have all helped to reinforce the capacity of Customs to deal with things in a better way.

On the serious problem of tobacco smuggling, my hon. Friend will be aware that the Public Accounts Committee recently conducted an inquiry and published a report. He will therefore know that Customs is working with each of the major UK tobacco manufacturers on detailed information about production, markets and exports. That will be encapsulated in what we call a memorandum of understanding, which represents a determination to disclose information and co-operate with Customs to stamp out widespread tobacco smuggling. He will be aware that one of the major companies, Imperial Tobacco, is now working more closely with Customs. We have not yet reached a point at which we feel that we can sign that memorandum of understanding, but I can tell him that the signs are at least encouraging.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am a great admirer of the Economic Secretary, as he knows, but he really must answer directly the very pertinent inquiry posed to him by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien). What is the expected impact of the collapse of these cases on the Treasury forecast of an additional £2 billion in revenues by 2005–06 from anti-VAT fraud measures? That forecast was made by the Government at paragraph B56 of page 200 of the pre-Budget report only a few months ago.

John Healey: The figures to which the hon. Gentleman refers are the projected revenue gains that we will achieve from the new anti-VAT fraud strategy that we have put in place—a result, in part, of the additional resources that we are putting into Customs. Those figures were audited, discussed and developed with the National Audit Office. As the publication to which he referred suggests, they take their part in the projection of public finances for the future.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): These are very serious matters, as the Minister knows. Will he confirm that the Butterfield inquiry will take into account all the views of all the counsel involved in the cases that have collapsed? As one of the two shadow Law Officers in the House, I have had discussions with one of the counsel and I think that that would be very helpful.

Will the Minister assist in arranging for his noble Friend the Attorney-General to meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) to discuss the implications of these collapsed cases? Will he concede today that whatever the date when the fraud started, all the relevant decisions that have led to the cases' collapse have been taken since this Government came to power? The decision to prosecute, all the decisions about how the evidence was to be presented and, most crucially and culpably, the decision not fully to disclose the role of prosecution witnesses to the defence have led to the collapse of the cases. Will he now confirm that he recognises that all those Customs and management decisions were fatally flawed and that that is what is costing huge amounts of taxpayers' money and will carry on costing more when compensation claims are taken into account for these and future collapsed cases arising from this shambles?

John Healey: There will always be problems with individual cases, no matter how good the systems and the decisions that are taken, when the complexity of the criminal investigations and prosecutions is such as it was in the series of cases in question. The Butterfield inquiry is an independent inquiry conducted by an esteemed and highly regarded High Court judge. It is proper that it is independent, so the judge will make decisions about how he conducts it. On the basis of the enormous amounts of material relating to the cases that we have already forwarded to the judge, it is clear that he is taking extremely seriously the need to get to the bottom of exactly what went on in the LCB-related cases.

I shall pass on to the Attorney-General the hon. Gentleman's request for a discussion on some of these matters.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): May I congratulate my hon. Friend on the efforts that he has made to get to grips with this problem? May I also encourage him not to take the soft-touch and let-them-off-the-hook attitude of Opposition Members when people commit such offences and there is reasonable evidence to prosecute?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that a tough prosecutions policy is an important part of the armoury that any law enforcement agency, including Customs, has for dealing with organised, systematic and often international criminal fraud gangs.

Adam Price (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): I am grateful for having had advance sight of the statement. On the collapse of an earlier case, Mr. Justice Foley accused the national investigation service of Her Majesty's Customs of having a culture of recklessness—

[Adam Price]

his words, not mine—and referred to a catalogue of illegalities. Will the Minister explain why Customs and Excise should not be brought into line with the police and stripped of control of its own prosecutions? Will he confirm whether any members of the national investigation service are currently suspended pending criminal investigations?

John Healey: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman received a copy of the statement. The courts made no suggestion of systematic corruption or criminality by Customs in any of the cases that the statement covers. I have dealt with control of the prosecution several times already. From April last year, the responsibility for the prosecution and accountability are matters for the Attorney-General, not Customs. That is proper.

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): Although I am a great admirer of the work of rank and file Customs officers, who have a difficult job, will the Economic Secretary assure us that we shall have full disclosure of all the details of the corruption and ineptitude that characterised the Charrington and Haase-Bennett cases, especially the use of criminal informers? Hitherto, senior management of Customs and Excise has been marred by evasion and obfuscation about information that should be in the public domain. Will my hon. Friend guarantee that that will be replaced by a policy of openness and transparency?

John Healey: I am certain that Customs and Excise has never previously published more information about its activities, estimates and analysis of the fraud and smuggling that confronts us. It has never published more about its work and the way in which it makes decisions.

My hon. Friend mentioned the use of informants in two cases. This afternoon, I am dealing with matters that are connected with the LCB case. The use of informants, and disclosure of information about that, is central to questions about the safety of the cases and the convictions. They will also be central to the Butterfield review and inquiry.

Mr. Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon): In January 2002, I posed seven written questions to the Chancellor on the activities of Customs and Excise on the London City Bond fraud trial. Indeed, one was mentioned earlier. Although the Chief Secretary's answers were opaque to say the least and no action ensued, they revealed a murky trail of Customs and Excise not informing Ministers about what was going on, hundreds of millions of lost pounds—owing to criminals being allowed to pursue fraud on the basis that it might lead to catching larger fry—and failed prosecutions.

The Economic Secretary said that we should not base conclusions on one trial. We are not doing that. How many investigations have taken place? I believe that the figure is almost 200. If so, how can he claim that he is about to launch his investigation? Why has not that happened previously? Why has the problem been allowed to continue for so long? Why has a full investigation by the Government not taken place to date?

John Healey: The independent report that we commissioned from Roques in 2000 considered some of those questions and problems; the independent review that we commissioned from Butler also did that. The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the scale of the revenue loss that was caused to the country when the frauds were perpetrated. I have already told hon. Members that in the LCB case alone, there was a loss of £340 million. The Roques report covered that period and calculated that the total Excise loss from fraudulent activities was almost £700 million. I remind the hon. Gentleman that that happened when the previous Government were in charge.

Mr. Djanogly: That is not acceptable.

John Healey: The hon. Member for Eddisbury asked me about revenue loss and I gave him the figures. I remind hon. Members that the problems that we are tackling and the cases that flow from them stem from the mid-1990s and the previous Government.

Mr. Richard Bacon (South Norfolk): When I asked the chairman of Customs and Excise last year how many members of his organisation were subject to criminal prosecutions, before the Public Accounts Committee, he answered, "Seven", although he subsequently corrected that to 17 when I tabled a question to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The Economic Secretary referred to several reports, including the Butterfield inquiry, the Butler report and Roques report, which I am holding. I have read it carefully. He knows that they contain nothing about heroin sting operations in Pakistan. Is not it suggestive that so many inquiries are taking place? Does the Economic Secretary agree that the time may have come for a thorough inquiry into all aspects of the management and operation of Customs and Excise, excluding nothing? It should include the quality of the legal advice available to Customs and Excise—that appears at least suspect—the use and management of sting operations, of bonded warehouses and the Queen's warehouses, of debt management and of heroin trafficking and the criminal involvement of Customs officers.

John Healey: The Roques report contains nothing about heroin in Afghanistan because it was designed to review and deal principally with the problems in the Excise regime and the operation of bonded warehouses. The hon. Gentleman points out the wide range of Customs' responsibilities.

Mr. Bacon: Have a review.

John Healey: I reject the idea that it would be useful to conduct a broad review that encompasses the full range of responsibilities.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk): The Economic Secretary made it clear that Ministers did not authorise the means whereby Customs and Excise conducted the investigations. However, were Ministers kept informed?

If so, who was informed? He did not clearly answer the questions that my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor) asked, when he highlighted the discrepancy between the loss to the Revenue of £1.25 billion in the London City Bond case and the amount of £575 million to which NIS referred. That is a massive difference. What is the reason for it? Are police currently investigating any individual Customs officers in relation to fraud?

John Healey: It simply is not for Ministers to authorise the use of specific techniques or methods of investigation. That is an operational matter. The settlement of responsibilities between Customs and the Minister responsible for Customs means that there is no reason for the relevant Minister to be briefed continuously about the detail of operational cases.

On the figures that the hon. Gentleman cites, I reported to hon. Members that, in the LCB case, £340 million was lost to the Revenue in Excise duty when the frauds were run.

Points of Order

1.58 pm

Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you are willing to consider an abuse of hon. Members' rights. Under the experimental modernisation arrangements for the House, hon. Members were assured that our rights of access to the parliamentary estate and those of the public would be protected. On Tuesday, an enormous anti-war lobby took place outside Parliament, in Central Lobby and in meetings in the House.

Two events caused me great concern. First, members of the public who sought access to Central Lobby had any anti-war literature removed from them, including copies of that day's *Daily Mirror*, which happened to carry a "No War" slogan on the front page.

Secondly, after getting members of the public into the Grand Committee Room for the meeting that we had booked in the evening, Members of Parliament were told at 9 pm that we had to stop because the staff had to go home. Can we consider the precise arrangements so that opportunities for public and democratic debate are not removed entirely even when formal sittings have been completed?

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to make a separate but related point about the effect of the new arrangements. I voted against them because I was especially worried that many hon. Members would be required to be in two places at once. Will you discuss with Mr. Speaker and, if necessary, the Chairmen's Panel, the great difficulty for Front Benchers, like me, and Back Benchers of all parties when they have to be in a Standing Committee Upstairs, conducting the line by line, word by word, clause by clause scrutiny of measures, and in the Chamber? Those Committees clash more than ever before with the business in the Chamber. Under the new arrangements, we are also finding that it is difficult for organisations lobbying us on any issue to meet us for a working lunch—these were particularly helpful before—because now, particularly on a Wednesday, we have important matters such as Prime Minister's questions taking place over lunchtime. It is important, Madam Deputy Speaker, that you pass on to Mr. Speaker and to the Chairmen's Panel how very much more difficult these new hours are making it for us to do the job that our constituents expect us to do.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I shall deal first with the point of order raised by the hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson). I shall certainly draw his comments to the attention of the Speaker, the relevant Committees and Officers of the House. I understand his concern about this matter. On the point of order raised by the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), his comments will have been heard, but I shall certainly draw them to the attention of the Speaker.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We are about to start the debate on the Regional Assemblies

[Mr. Patrick McLoughlin]

(Preparations) Bill. As my right hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House pointed out during business questions, we shall be considering seven new clauses and a number of Government amendments. Mr. Speaker has selected seven groups of amendments to be discussed. We are about to enter into a debate that will be timetabled to three hours. That gives us three hours for the consideration of what anybody would regard as a major Bill. Mr. Speaker has powers under the affirmative resolution procedure not to put the question if he feels that there has been insufficient debate. I realise that that power does not fall to the Chair under the procedures that we are using today. It is most unsatisfactory that so little time should be available for the debate on a very important Government Bill.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that the power applies only to the negative resolution procedure. The House is currently operating under the programme motion that has already been agreed to, and the motion which we are about to debate.

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight): Further to the point of order made by my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), Madam Deputy Speaker. Will you draw to the attention of the authorities responsible for such matters the difficulties that our constituents are having in coming to this place and taking advantage of the line of route arrangements, particularly on Tuesdays and Wednesdays—the days on which the great change has happened since last year? Our constituents have to be at the Victoria Tower entrance by 9.30 am—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. May I say to the hon. Gentleman that this matter has been agreed by the House? He may find it inconvenient, as may some of his and other Members' constituents, but it was agreed by the House. No doubt, his comments will none the less be noted.

Orders of the Day

Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill (Programme) (No. 3)

2.3 pm

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I beg to move,

That, having regard to the Resolution of Standing Committee A, reported on 19th December 2002, the programme order of 26th November 2002 in relation to the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill be confirmed.

As hon. Members know, the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill has recently received detailed scrutiny in Committee, following its Second Reading in the House in November last year. There were nine sittings of the Standing Committee, as well as one day on the Floor of the House when we considered clauses 1 to 4. I am grateful to all those hon. Members who participated in the consideration of the Bill for their constructive contributions.

The Opposition have made a great deal of fuss about the timetabling of the Bill, and a lot of synthetic indignation has been expressed. Such was the provision of time in Committee that it was possible for the Opposition to spend an inordinate amount of the debates arguing about whether sentences should begin with the word "but". Members should be aware of that when they hear the Opposition making further protests about there being insufficient time to consider the substance of the Bill.

The programme motion in the name of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Leader of the House provides that the debate on the amendments and new clauses should be concluded one hour before the moment of interruption, and that Third Reading should be concluded at the moment of interruption at 6 o'clock. This has been agreed through the usual channels and should provide sufficient time to debate the 20 amendments and seven new clauses that have been selected. More than one third of the amendments to be debated have been tabled by the Government, mostly in response to concerns raised in Committee, and I hope that these will generally be welcomed. The Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) and I look forward to an interesting debate.

2.5 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I am disappointed with the Minister's opening remarks. My understanding is that nothing has been agreed through the usual channels. The timetable that we face today has been imposed on us by the Government. The Minister referred to the time available for the scrutiny of this very important Bill in Committee. I think he was being slightly disingenuous, because I stated quite explicitly during an earlier stage of the Bill that I recognised that the time allowed for consideration of the Bill in Committee was probably adequate, and that the problem was that the four key clauses underlying the principles of the Bill that were debated on the Floor of the House had been given a grossly inadequate amount of time. In fact, the House did not manage to debate all those issues.

The issue before us today is that we have a little under three hours left in which to consider a Bill of constitutional significance. That significance has already been recognised by the fact that part of the Committee stage of the Bill was taken as a Committee of the whole House. I would suggest to the Minister that in future the Government show a certain amount of self-restraint. When we have only a short period of time available for Report and Third Reading, the Government must resist the temptation to allow a second Government statement before that business begins. I hope that the Minister will agree with me on this, as he is not shy of debate and is generally keen to engage with important issues such as those that we are discussing today. Although I do not expect him to say anything publicly, I hope that he will privately make his views known to the Leader of the House, because a lot of his hard work preparing for the later groups of amendments—which will probably not be considered this afternoon—will have been wasted, as will the hard work of many Conservative Members, myself included.

The new clauses and amendments that have been selected give wide scope for debate on some of the fundamental issues that have troubled Conservative Members—and, indeed, some Labour Members—during the earlier stages of the Bill. So this is a good selection of amendments, and it will provide a good opportunity to debate the issues that have caused some difficulty. I am only sorry that we shall not get through all those groups this afternoon. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) said in his point of order, seven groups have been selected for consideration. Frankly, it is inconceivable that we shall get to the last of them.

There seems to be a serious flaw in our arrangements and procedures. On Report, new clauses are quite properly considered first, but on this occasion, all the new clauses have been tabled either by the Opposition, the Liberal Democrats or Back-Bench Members. Although I live in hope, I try to be a realist, and it is likely that the Government will resist all those new clauses. It is therefore likely that they will not be added to the Bill. I remain an optimist, but it is also likely that all the Government amendments will be made. They will be voted on, and the Government will use their majority to carry them, but they will not be debated because they appear towards the end of the selection list for today. It will necessarily almost always be the case that the items on the amendment paper that are certain to make it into the Bill will be those least likely to receive proper debate and scrutiny on Report. So the Government get their amendments without any debate or scrutiny, which effectively places the burden of scrutiny on the other place.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Does my hon. Friend agree that it was presumptuous in the extreme for the Minister to imply that, because Government amendments on Report are principally responses to representations made by members of the Standing Committee, this should be an-open-and-shut case? Is it not possible that Members present today who were not so privileged—I was not so privileged—as to serve on the Committee might wish to contribute to constructive deliberation on the amendments?

Mr. Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but it is not true that all the Government amendments are responses to points raised by Opposition Members in Committee—although it is true that at least one group is a direct response to the Minister's resistance of a point raised by them then. Not the least of my disappointment when I learnt that we would probably not reach that group today was due to the fact that the Minister would have no opportunity to proffer his thanks to the Opposition for drawing attention to the issues involved.

Mr. Raynsford: I hope the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that Government amendments Nos. 8, 9, 10 and 11—which are indeed at the end of the list and therefore may not be reached if he and his colleagues speak at length; I hope they will not do so—are a direct response to an amendment that he tabled in Committee. I said then that I would table amendments to meet his objective, and I hope he will accept these amendments as an expression of my appreciation and thanks for his efforts.

Mr. Hammond: I am glad we have managed to get that out of the way. But I think it disingenuous of the Minister to suggest that a debate on seven groups of new clauses and amendments—one important group, the second, contains four new clauses—can be completed in the time available, which is less than two hours and 45 minutes. That is clearly not the case. This has nothing to do with delaying or other tactics on the part of any Members on either side of the House; it is simply a reflection of the inadequate provision of time.

Let me respond to the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) by saying that at least one Government amendment and subsequent Opposition amendments to it are in response to representations received by the Government from the Electoral Commission. Given that the commission is an innovative body, I think that Members would be interested in exploring the process whereby the Government have published a Bill, the commission has made representations to the Government, and the Government—to give them their due—have responded. That too is an innovative process in our constitutional arrangements, involving a new body, which bears scrutiny and questioning. Sadly, it will be subject to neither.

As I was saying before the Minister intervened, it is ironic that changes in our procedural rules designed to make this place more modern and efficient have cast the burden of scrutiny on to the other place—the unreformed other place—which must now do the work that most of our constituents think they have sent us here to do: the work of scrutinising legislation properly before it is enacted.

I shall end shortly, because another irony is that the longer we discuss the inadequate allocation of time the more time we use up. Let me say to my colleagues, however, that the second group of amendments and new clauses will allow debate on what I believe to be key issues. I hope that we reach later groups, and I certainly

[Mr. Hammond]

hope that the debate on the first group is reasonably brief so that we can reach the vital second group, although I do not hold out much hope of our getting much further than that.

It is conceivable that, on some occasions, timetables can work, but if they are to work they must be fair and reasonable. Timetables such as this, providing less than three hours for consideration of a constitutionally significant Bill, bring any timetabling system into disrepute. To the Government's shame, an important constitutional Bill will yet again go through this place on the nod, and another nail will have been hammered into the coffin of our parliamentary democracy.

2.15 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): I shall not take 10 minutes to oppose the motion. I shall make two points.

The Minister is right that the Conservative spokesmen spent a long time debating whether the word "but" should begin a certain part of the Bill, thus wasting a fair amount of the time available, but he was wrong to propose the motion in this way. The two statements have taken up time, and according to our modernised procedures the business of the House ends at 6 pm. That has truncated the time available for this important Bill, which we deeply regret. We cannot therefore support the motion.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): I had not intended to speak, but I was so incensed by the Minister's speech that I felt that I must make some response.

I entirely rebut the claim by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) that time was wasted in Committee. Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), I had the privilege of serving on the Committee, and thoroughly enjoyed it. I felt that the Committee's proceedings were measured and focused, and raised important issues.

As for the alleged killer point that some time was spent in discussing whether the word "but" should feature, does the Minister recall the hon. Member for Manchester, Blackley (Mr. Stringer)—who is sitting behind him—making a point that some of us were making? He said that court cases could take weeks and months, and that tens of thousands of pounds could be spent on deciding the meaning of the word "and" or the word "but" in a statute. It is actually quite important to ensure that legislation is accurate, and a "but" or an "and" in the wrong place can make a big difference.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Might that not be why so much time was spent discussing the word "but"?

Mr. Streeter: I agree. I certainly think that there has been no time wasting or filibustering.

Mr. Hammond: Is not the Minister's point disingenuous? I acknowledge that the Committee did not use all the time available to it. We did not take advantage of the opportunity for a 10th sitting, because we had been able to complete the part of the business that was due to be dealt with in Standing Committee. The problem related to the part that was to be taken on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Streeter: My hon. Friend is right. I was about to make the same point. I thought that the Committee proceedings were measured, sensible and focused; but there was not enough time for debate on the issues that had to be dealt with by a Committee of the whole House. I had prepared two speeches that could not be delivered. I feel that the country has been cheated of a significant amount of wisdom.

Jim Knight (South Dorset): Is there not something bizarre about our wasting time on this debate when we could be debating the Bill, and talking about the word "but" yet again?

Mr. Streeter: The hon. Gentleman is quite wrong.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Surely you can confirm that if there was ever any question of time being wasted you would be the first to point that out to the House, and return it to order.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): The hon. Gentleman is right, but I also ensure that Members have the opportunity to put their points of view. When it comes to wasting time, I will certainly make the necessary decision.

Mr. Streeter: The hon. Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight) was entirely wrong. As I said at the outset, I did not intend to speak in this debate, and I realise that my speech is eating into time that could be spent on the amendments; but sometimes a point of principle must be put on record. I feel that I am well placed to make this point, for, unlike some of my colleagues, I do not oppose timetabling in principle—

Mr. Forth: Shame!

Mr. Streeter: My right hon. Friend disagrees with me. I understand that: I disagree with him. I think that a Government are entitled to their business. I remember from my days in the Whips Office under that great, successful Government of 1992 to 1997 that there were times when the Whips tried to find speakers for debates on the Floor of the House. I felt that that was wrong then and I feel that it is wrong today. I am not against timetabling in principle but there is surely an implied contract which says that a timetable motion that is laid before the House should give sufficient time for hon. Members on both sides of the House—Back Benchers and Front Benchers alike—to discuss in detail the legislation that is before us. The length of time involved will be determined by the weight and substance of the legislation being considered. In this case, we are talking about a constitutional matter that is so important that we had to discuss the first two clauses on the Floor of the House, yet today we have three hours to deal with seven groups of amendments. Not only is it an important matter, as we heard in Committee and when the Bill was discussed on the Floor of the House, but there are profound reservations about the legislation on both sides of the House, including among Labour Members. That is why it is important that these matters get a fair hearing.

At the moment we are rightly discussing the future of the other place and House of Lords reform. It is my strong belief that we have not yet gone far enough in reforming this House but the key issue on which this House fails time and again is proper scrutiny of legislation. One of the key—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the programme motion refers to a particular piece of legislation. Perhaps he could address his remarks to that programme motion.

Mr. Streeter: I was getting carried away with my own incredible eloquence, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise.

We need time to study every piece of legislation—in particular this Bill, which deals with weighty constitutional matters on which hon. Members on both sides of the House have profound disagreements. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) made the point during business questions that there should be protected time for legislation. I strongly agree. I ask the Minister to take that back to his colleagues. What has happened this afternoon is totally unacceptable and unnecessary, and the Government need to think again.

2.22 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am unhappy on two counts. First, I am unhappy about some of the remarks made by the Minister and the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) about the debate that has already taken place in Committee. Secondly, I am unhappy about the very fact of the tabling of the programme motion. I shall deal first with the first point.

I take the gravest possible exception to the casual and gratuitous abuse that has been showered by the Minister and the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton on three serious, committed and diligent parliamentarians, my hon. Friends the Members for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) and for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne). In performance of their parliamentary duties on behalf of their constituents, they have sought in Committee and elsewhere properly and in detail to consider the legitimate policy proposals that have been unveiled by the Government. To suggest that three such serious and earnest Members would be guilty of evasion, procrastination or attempted filibustering is not only untrue but unworthy of the right hon. and hon. Members concerned. These are serious issues and they need to be debated.

Secondly, I am unhappy—I make no apology for the fact—about the tabling of the programme motion. In fulfilment of our responsibilities to our constituents, it is extremely important that we in this place are not inward-looking—that we do not gaze at our own navels—and that we provide a proper context for the consideration of our business, including programme motions.

I know that we do not refer to people in this place other than Members of Parliament but we are aware that, even though there is diminishing public interest in politics, and growing and pervasive cynicism about politics and politicians—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps I should remind the hon. Gentleman that the motion under discussion is the programme motion to the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill. Perhaps he would address his remarks to that motion.

Mr. Bercow: I was turning to precisely that point. I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for getting me to do so.

Matthew Green (Ludlow): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In six minutes' time, the first ever youth question session will take place in Westminster Hall. If Conservative Members force a vote by speaking for so long, they will disrupt the first ever youth question session. Can we have a ruling on that?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Important though that may be, it is not a matter for the Chair.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to you for your protection, Madam Deputy Speaker. Even by long-established Liberal Democrats standards, that intervention was particularly asinine.

On the subject of the programme motion to which you rightly direct me, Madam Deputy Speaker, let us provide the context for members of the public listening to our proceedings and observing them to make a judgment on whether it is the Government or the Opposition Members objecting who are right on this important matter. Let us be clear what we have in mind. In this context, I go back to what was stated from the Opposition Front Bench, if the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton feels able readily to contain himself for a limited period to allow proper attention to be paid to the important debate that needs to take place.

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North and Sefton, East): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman at the moment.

I want to address the point that was rightly raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge. He referred to the number of amendments and new clauses that we have to consider. The point that I want to put on record is this. The Government want us to consider between now and 6 o'clock proposed new clauses and amendments to crucial legislation, the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill—I do not think we would disagree about that—on the subjects of provision for further referendums; the preconditions for holding referendums and definition of regions; the local government review; the commencement of the legislation; referendum questions and statement; order

[Mr. Bercow]

for combination of polls; and directions to the Electoral Commission. None of those matters is trivial. All are important.

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight): Does my hon. Friend agree that he should emphasise in that list the regional boundaries, to which hon. Members on both sides of the House may wish to refer?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We are not discussing individual clauses or amendments but the programme motion.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but the significance of the argument lies in the importance and the number of the proposals that the Government are putting to the House. As you can readily testify, I am being customarily fair-minded about it. I could be extremely hostile to the Bill. No doubt I would be if I had been on the Committee or were going to take part in detailed debate on every aspect of it, but I am making the point that the proposals before us are important. The Government have a mandate, and it is entirely legitimate for them to put forward these proposals.

Dr. John Pugh (Southport): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: I will in a moment if the hon. Gentleman will contain himself for a few moments.

What is not legitimate is for the Minister, suffused with the importance of his proposals and with a righteous indignation welling up in him at anyone's daring to contest their content, should object to other right hon. and hon. Members fulfilling their responsibilities. I do not know, and I doubt that the Minister, despite his estimable talents, could possibly know, how many hon. Members present have received representations on these matters, what those representations have been and whether those representations have necessitated right hon. and hon. Members further debating them on Report. This is the gravamen of the argument against what the Government are arrogantly proposing. It is unacceptable so to truncate consideration of these important matters as to allow approximately three hours for seven new clauses and 20 amendments to be considered on Report.

Dr. Pugh: The hon. Gentleman has said three or four times what the Front-Bench spokesman said once. I see little merit in repeating an argument that was put eloquently from the Front Bench about 10 minutes ago.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman never disappoints: he is almost invariably wrong. On the ground of statistical probability, it is conceivable at some stage in the unspecified future that on the law of averages—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. That may well be the point, but once again I bring the hon. Gentleman back to the motion.

Mr. Bercow: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was saying that the hon. Gentleman might one day be right by accident, but not today. I am sorry that he does not think the matter important. My thesis—

Dr. Pugh: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: No. The hon. Gentleman is hoist by his own petard and cannot have it both ways. He says that we are taking too long, then prolongs matters with inconsequential and irrelevant interventions. My concern is that we shall have only some six and a half minutes to consider each new clause and amendment. I am not a qualified mathematician or statistician, but that is a generous assessment: it assumes that there are no Divisions, and that we have a seamless debate on all the groups of amendments. However, votes will be held, as part of the healthy tradition of British democracy, which retains some pride and vitality in its lungs. That means that the debating time will be even shorter.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) has often pointed out—he did so at business questions today—we are again witnessing the triumph of ministerial arrogance over parliamentary propriety. That is unacceptable. It is a derogation of our duty to constituents. It must be steadfastly opposed.

2.31 pm

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham): I rise to support the programme motion. I had the privilege of serving on the Standing Committee considering the Bill. There was a lot of filibustering in our debates, including an hour spent on the word "but". The Opposition put forward no substantial alternative to the proposals for regional assemblies, although the Liberal Democrats made some vague attempts. A lot of time was spent on anodyne points. This afternoon, the nearly 32 minutes spent filibustering on this motion will eat into the main debate, because the Tories have nothing to say about regional government. They fear that a proper three-hour debate would expose them on this issue.

Jim Knight: Does my hon. Friend recall that, in the debate on the programme motion in respect of the clauses to be debated in the Chamber, we had the same rigmarole, with Opposition Members arguing against the motion but then not staying to take part in the debate?

Mr. Jones: I do recall that. My constituents in the north-east want this Bill, which they consider to be important. The Conservatives are wasting time, and that will not help tackle some of the problems faced by regions such as the north-east. When a referendum is held, I hope that people remember that the Opposition had no alternatives to propose.

2.33 pm

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to the programme motion, and shall begin by dealing with a couple of the points raised by the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones). First, I do not believe that even using the time spent on the programme motion would give us enough time to debate adequately all the substantive business set down for this afternoon.

Mr. Kevan Jones: How will the hon. Gentleman justify wasting time this afternoon to my constituents in the north-east, who are keen for the Bill to become law and who have the right to say what happens in their region?

Mr. Turner: I am not sure that it is my duty to justify that to the hon. Gentleman's constituents. My duty is to represent my constituents. The hon. Gentleman must justify to his constituents the business and decisions of the House, and especially the way in which he votes. I would not dream of treading on his toes by expostulating to his constituents—or to the constituents of any other hon. Member—about the direction in which the House is going.

The House is keen to proceed to the main business, and I shall not detain it any longer. However, many hon. Members not yet present in the Chamber may be aching to contribute, especially in connection with regional boundaries. That applies to those hon. Members who represent parts of the county of Durham that used properly to be part of the north riding of Yorkshire, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins), who represents people detached by the appalling Heath-Walkerian reforms from North Yorkshire. It applies also to my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), some of whose constituents used to be in North Yorkshire.

I could go on, but I see that that would not be welcome. I am sure that the House takes my point, and I hope that the programme motion will be defeated.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 292, Noes 153.

Division No. 60] [2:36 pm

AYES

Adams, Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Caborn, rh Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Cooper, Yvette
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Donohoe, Brian H.
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
George, rh Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hanson, David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Laxton, Bob *(Derby N)*
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, rh Peter
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Morris, rh Estelle
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, rh John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*

Reid, rh Dr. John *(Hamilton N & Bellshill)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Joan Ryan and
Derek Twigg

NOES

Allan, Richard
Ancram, rh Michael
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland)*
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howard, rh Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, rh Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Pugh, Dr. John
Redwood, rh John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rosindell, Andrew
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Smyth, Rev. Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Whittingdale, John
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Angela Watkinson and
Mr. Laurence Robertson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That, having regard to the Resolution of Standing Committee A, reported on 19th December 2002, the programme order of 26th November 2002 in relation to the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill be confirmed.

Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill

Not amended in the Committee and in the Standing Committee, considered.

New Clause 2

FURTHER REFERENDUM ON PETITION

'(1) This section applies if an elected assembly for a region has been established pursuant to a referendum held under section 1(1).

(2) The Secretary of State shall by order cause a further referendum to be held in a region specified in the order if he is presented with a petition requesting such a referendum signed by not less than 5 per cent. of the electors eligible to vote in the region as defined in section 3(1).

(3) The question to be asked in a referendum held pursuant to an order under subsection (2) above is the question set out in section 2(1).'.—*[Mr. Hammond.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

2.49 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment No.12, in page 3, line 15 [Clause 5], leave out 'five' and insert 'ten'.

Mr. Hammond: Mindful of what was said in the previous debate, I shall attempt to be brief. The main issues of concern to hon. Members mostly fall in the second group of amendments, so I hope that the debate on this group will be relatively short.

Clause 1 provides for regional referendums to be held on creating elected regional assemblies. There is no provision for a threshold for turnout or, indeed, a threshold for yes votes. Hon. Members will be mindful of what happened in the Welsh Assembly elections. Clause 5 will give the Government the power to hold repeat referendums—if they fail the first time, they can try again after a five-year gap—so a ratchet effect is being introduced.

The Government need to achieve only a tiny majority on a tiny turnout, once, to create an elected regional assembly. They will need to shift public opinion only momentarily to get their way, and they will get as many goes as they like at achieving that. In effect, in a region where a referendum has been fought and narrowly lost, a sword of Damocles will hang over local government in that region.

Under the Government's proposals, an elected regional assembly will necessarily involve the abolition of one of the tiers in two-tier local government areas. It will be impossible for local authorities in those areas to continue to carry out their functions, to improve the delivery of public services and to recruit and retain good staff with the constant threat of a further referendum just five years down the line, and therefore the possibility of abolition or reorganisation.

This group of amendments consists of two parts. New clause 2 would insert the concept of citizen-initiated recall ballots. If an elected regional assembly were established and 5 per cent. of the electorate in that region petitioned for a new referendum to be held, the Secretary of State would have to call a new referendum and exactly the same question as before would be put.

Jim Knight (South Dorset): The hon. Gentleman says that a sword of Damocles should not hang over people in local authorities because of the uncertainty that their arrangements may change if regional assemblies are created. He is now arguing in the new clause that a sword of Damocles will similarly hang over people because the arrangements might change back again. Is not that contradictory—or is that just what we are used to?

Mr. Hammond: The Bill will allow the Government to hold a second referendum on a whim, but we propose to give effect to the will of the people. We have to have things one way or the other. We need either sensible periods between referendums and sensible thresholds so that a tiny majority in a tiny turnout cannot determine the issue, or a mechanism for going back if it all turns out to be a dreadful mistake.

New clause 2 would allow mature reflection. It would deal with the situation where the elected regional assembly perhaps turns out to be something rather different from what the electors had been led to believe, bearing in mind that no legislation setting out the powers and functions of elected regional assemblies will be available to them at the time of the referendum. It would allow a wake-up call for the silent majority. It would allow a route back from what the Government would like to see as a one-way ratchet.

New clause 2 would allow an assessment to be made based on the experience of an elected regional assembly in operation and the unitary organisation of local government that that necessarily involves, rather than one based only on the Government spin that would be available before the referendum. The threshold of 5 per cent. that is proposed, which is similar to that for mayoral ballots, is a tough target. It is not so easy to organise a petition of 5 per cent. of all the electors in a region.

We oppose the currently proposed elected regional assemblies because they will not address the real problems created by the Government's centralising tendencies and they will not address the issues facing England post devolution, but we do believe in democracy. Certain safeguards need to be put in place because elected regional assemblies are not just matters for individual regions; they concern the whole of England. If those safeguards can be put in place—some of them will be dealt with in the debate on the second group of amendments—we are confident that, in a fair and open ballot where all the people of England have an opportunity to express their views on a settlement for England, the Minister will get his answer. We are confident that our view will prevail.

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham): I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has clarified the fact that the Conservatives will oppose regional assemblies. However, you said in Committee that you recognised that people in the north-east are interested in having a

[Mr. Kevan Jones]

regional assembly. Will the Conservative party in the north-east therefore oppose the establishment of a regional assembly there?

Mr. Hammond: I am sure, Madam Deputy Speaker, that you did not say anything in Committee, but it is important to put on record the fact that I certainly recognised in Committee that there are concerns in the peripheral parts of England about the centralising tendencies. *[Interruption.]* There is nothing pejorative about the word "peripheral".

Joyce Quin (Gateshead, East and Washington, West): Yes, there is.

Mr. Hammond: No, there is not. It is a geographical term, and there is nothing pejorative about it at all.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Christopher Leslie): Can the hon. Gentleman say where the central heart of England is?

Mr. Hammond: If the hon. Gentleman had allowed me to finish, I was about to say that I recognise that there is concern in the geographical periphery of England about the London-centred Government and their centralising tendencies, grabbing power and accumulating it in Whitehall. That is a fair point, and I have acknowledged it in Committee. We simply do not believe that the Government's chosen route is the way to address that issue. We do not believe that it presents a plausible, credible and durable solution for all of England, post the devolution settlement for the nations of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Kevan Jones *rose—*

Mr. Hammond: I said that I would try to be brief; I shall give way once more to the hon. Gentleman and then I want to make progress.

Mr. Jones: Can the hon. Gentleman confirm whether the Conservative party in the north-east will campaign for a no vote in any referendum there?

Mr. Hammond: I suspect that the Conservative party in the north-east will campaign for a no vote in any referendum there. However, we are now dealing with provisions for further referendums if such referendums are held and are unsuccessful from the Government's point of view, and if there is a rejection in relation to amendment No. 12. Indeed, under new clause 2, we want to create an opportunity for a recall ballot if there is a yes vote.

The point is that a fair and open process is not being proposed. Electors are being asked to vote blind. They will not know what the powers of the new assembly will be. They will be asked to vote for regions that have no identity and, in many cases, little credibility. They will be asked to vote for local government reform, the effect of which they will not know until it has happened. The Government want to create a one-way ratchet so that there is no going back. In the absence of any requirement for threshold of support for the creation of elected regional assemblies, with an ability for repeat ballots every five years and because electors will be voting blind, simple fairness and equity demand that there is a way back, and new clause 2 would provide it.

Amendment No. 12 addresses the provisions in clause 5 on repeat referendums. Clause 5 will allow repeat referendums to be called every five years. I have discussed that with business, interested organisations and local government members, and we believe that five years is too short a period for pragmatic reasons. If a referendum were lost, to have the threat of a further ballot in just five years' time would plunge local authorities in that region into chaos. There will be recruitment and retention problems and service delivery problems.

Repeat referendums will effectively create a state of permanent campaign for the ensuing four years or so. That is not in the interests of the citizens of any region. It is not in the interests of good local government, and it is certainly not in the interests of what should be the Government principal objective: improving the delivery of public services. The public want the Government to focus on public service, and they want their local authorities to deliver them. So five years is a recipe for chaos. I suggest that 10 years is the minimum period acceptable from a practical point of view. We tested various other periods in Committee. I hope that the Minister will be persuaded that 10 years is a sensible compromise.

Jim Knight: I listened with care to what the hon. Gentleman said about amendment No. 12, but I do not see any time limit in new clause 2 about the reversal process. Is that an omission or does he think that people should be able to get together 5 per cent. and reverse the result of a referendum at any time?

3 pm

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right. There is no provision for a time limit on repeated recall ballots. I considered that issue. I envisaged that the Minister would raise it. If he is prepared to concede that time limits are sensible and that a recall ballot is a good mechanism and needs to be time limited and if he will propose or accept a sensible time limit on repeat referendums under clause 5, I shall certainly consider withdrawing this new clause. I should be happy if the Minister would table a new clause in the other place which would create a symmetry, so that referendums for the creation of elected regional assemblies and referendums for the winding up of elected regional assemblies on a citizen initiative have an equal, level playing field. The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. If the Minister is prepared to take that on board, at last we are beginning to achieve something.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): If the Conservatives press the amendments to a vote we shall oppose them. They want to pass these amendments because they want to wreck the anti-devolution movement. These powers should be vested in the regional assembly. When the Government introduce a powers and functions Bill for the regional assembly, as I hope they will, I hope that they will put forward a proper constitution for those bodies. When those bodies are created it should be up to them to decide whether there is an opinion in the region that the assembly should be dissolved. It is not for the Secretary of State or Whitehall to decide that after devolution has taken place. The Conservatives may have a point in that the people of the regions should have a way of changing that constitution, but the new clause is not the way to do it.

Mr. Hammond: I have some sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman said, but he often seems to live in an ideal world. Has he heard of the concept of turkeys never voting for Christmas?

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman is into pejorative words today about voters and parts of the country. Those whom he calls turkeys are the people who will vote for the assembly members. If voters want to vote in people who will dissolve the assembly, they will be free to do so. This is an inappropriate system. The hon. Gentleman suggests that we are living in some sort of cloud cuckoo land. He is completely wrong. We want regional devolution because we want the quango state that the Conservatives created democratised. That is what is important. When the quangos have been abolished, it could be up to the people of the region to decide whether they have faith to continue with regional assemblies. We shall vote against the Conservative amendments.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): I support these amendments. The Government are proposing an imperfect constitutional settlement. I cannot really believe that they intend that the long-term constitutional arrangements for this country should involve some parts with elected regional assemblies and others without. That is not a sustainable framework. It is important, therefore, that there is some recall mechanism in place so that the people of the region can undo the wrong which they may come to realise they have done.

We keep talking about the north-east but that is something of a distraction because we are legislating for the entire country. If arrangements need to be put in place for a particular area, let us talk about it, but let us not legislate for everyone just because of one corner—albeit an important corner—of the country. By the way, we in the south-west are peripheral. That is not a pejorative thing to say; it is a fact of geography—we are a long way from the centre. We need mechanisms to undo what may be done. If the north-east goes down this route and votes blind for an elected regional assembly, in a few years time people there may come to think that it is an expensive talking shop and brings them no benefit whatever.

Jim Knight: Is it Conservative party policy to offer a recall referendum for the Greater London Assembly?

Mr. Streeter: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that there is none in place. My answer is that we would not start from here. If the hon. Gentleman believes that the appointment of the Mayor of London has been a terrific success, I invite him to think again.

It may not be just the north-east that votes for an elected regional assembly. We have heard that the north-west does not believe itself to be a coherent region, nor does the west midlands. Other parts of the country have shown little interest in this proposal, but there are defensive reasons why such parts may find themselves voting for an elected regional assembly. They may then have even more reasons to seek to undo that decision in future.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that a MORI poll showed that in the north-west there was 97 per cent. identification with the region? Is he further aware that a BBC poll showed that over 72 per cent. of people in the north-west supported a directly elected assembly?

Mr. Streeter: I was aware of neither. I was basing my assumptions on comments that I have heard the hon. Lady's colleagues make in this Chamber and in Committee as the Bill has proceeded, that the north-west does not consider itself to be a coherent region and there is little interest in this measure.

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North and Sefton, East): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that one of his hon. Friends and I took part in a debate on Granada television, following which there was a telephone poll, and that the majority of people who responded were opposed to a north-west regional assembly?

Mr. Streeter: I hate to intrude on a private grief. Sadly we do not get Granada television in the west country, or at least not very often, unless it broadcasts "Coronation Street".

Although other parts may not want an elected regional assembly it is possible that because another region or other regions have plumped for it, they feel that in some intangible way they are missing out. They might mistakenly follow the same route. People make decisions for all sorts of reasons. Therefore, some sort of recall mechanism should be in place.

I was interested the other day when we debated the House of Lords that an hon. Gentleman spoke powerfully about how in Scotland many people are realising that the electoral settlement of Members of the Scottish Parliament elected on a list system was causing chaos and confusion in Scottish constituencies and wish that more thought had been given to that. I got the impression that many in Scotland wished to undo that particular mechanism. Elected regional assemblies may cause confusion with people who are elected to sit on those assemblies tripping over the toes of Members of Parliament and vice versa, colliding with MEPs going about their duties, and stepping on the toes of local councillors. I predict that there could well be immense confusion about respective functions, responsibilities and powers. That in itself may cause right hon. and hon. Members to reconsider their opinions on whether elected regional assemblies are right. That is another reason why there might be a recall mechanism.

My hon. Friend is right that 5 per cent. is a high threshold. Such a percentage cannot be put together on a wet Sunday afternoon. A lot of people have to sign a petition. That gives the Government all the reassurance that they need that it would not be lightly triggered, but would be available if people felt strongly.

Finally, I shall deal briefly with amendment No. 12, which I would like to support. I know from discussions with local authorities throughout my constituency that

[Mr. Streeter]

there is little likelihood of the south-west going for a regional assembly—I have never met anyone in my part of the region, Devon and Cornwall, who is in favour of it—*[Interruption.]* Hon. Members may disagree, but I remind them that Dorset is not in Devon and Cornwall. No one has mentioned it to me on the doorstep, and I have not had a single letter or phone call to my constituency office saying, "If only we had an elected regional assembly, all of my problems would be over." There is no interest in that in my part of the world.

Because local government is charged with looking ahead and looking around corners, however, it is already planning what might happen if there were a south-west elected regional assembly and what might be the impact on local councils. As I have said previously, West Devon borough council was already having meetings about how it would respond if there were an elected regional assembly, several years down the track, and the Electoral Commission were to conclude that Devon should be carved up into two or three unitary authorities. Its contingency plans have already introduced uncertainty, and if, every five years, the sword of Damocles is to hang over local government—which, as my hon. Friend rightly says, will have a great impact on recruitment and retention and the sense of security and stability—that will be an unnecessary infliction on its exercise of its lawful and statutory duties. I urge the Minister, who is reasonable, sensible, sensitive and impressive—

Mr. Leslie: Which Minister?

Mr. Streeter: Both the Under-Secretary and the Minister for Local Government and the Regions. I hope that they will think about that and change five years for 10 years in the Bill, and that they will agree to a recall mechanism, too.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I support entirely the thrust of amendment No. 12 tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond). I am concerned, however, about the threshold of 5 per cent. I would have welcomed a lower threshold although I wholly support the principle of the amendment.

To illustrate the difficulty of achieving that 5 per cent., I draw the attention of the House to the question that was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) on 20 January. He asked the Minister for Local Government and the Regions,

"how many representations he has received from electors living in (a) the south-east region, (b) Hampshire and (c) New Forest East constituency in favour of the establishment of an elected regional assembly".

The answer given by the Minister was that

"between the dates of 9 May 2002, when the White Paper was published, and 30 November 2002, the office of the Deputy Prime Minister recorded 18 respondents from the south-east who were in favour of an elected regional assembly . . . of whom two were from Hampshire."—[*Official Report*, 20 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 168W.]

In relation to getting a 5 per cent. threshold, I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the fact that there are some 6 million electors in the south-east region.

Mr. Hammond: It is worse than my hon. Friend fears: there are 8 million electors in the south-east region. I understand his concern. I thought long and hard about the figure of 5 per cent. and I tabled it in an attempt to reach for some consensus or centre ground on which I hope that the Minister and I can meet. It does not seem to me an unreasonable suggestion that there should be some recall mechanism. While I know that my hon. Friend takes a rigorous view on these matters, I hope that by going for 5 per cent. I will demonstrate to him that I am reaching out to the Minister in a spirit of compromise.

Mr. Swayne: I am persuaded and reassured by my hon. Friend, who, throughout the Committee proceedings, was entirely reasonable, as he is being now. I will follow his lead and accept 5 per cent. Nevertheless, Labour Members should be reassured that 5 per cent. will be very difficult to achieve.

3.15 pm

Jim Knight: Given everything that the hon. Gentleman has said about the difficulty of reaching a threshold of 5 per cent., would it not have been easier to have listened to the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey)—I know that that is difficult, but on this occasion he is correct. It would be much easier for electors to elect people to a regional assembly and have them dissolve themselves in the same way that electors in the European elections, I am afraid, occasionally vote for the UK Independence party in the full knowledge that it is standing to dissolve a Parliament with which it does not agree.

Mr. Swayne: Turkeys do not generally vote for Christmas. Once an elected assembly is established there is little prospect of it dissolving itself. What this carefully crafted new clause does is to provide a means by which citizens can initiate the political process and exercise people power: power for the greater part of the population as expressed in terms of the 5 per cent. requirement in the petition.

Mr. Leslie: Will the hon. Gentleman, who is moonlighting in his usual role as a Whip, say whether, being so persuaded of the need for a 5 per cent. trigger mechanism, or any trigger mechanism, he feels, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight) pointed out earlier, that that should also be applied to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly?

Mr. Swayne: I do not want to stray from the terms of this debate, which is on the regional assemblies. I am therefore not prepared to be tempted by the Minister to go beyond that brief. I was interrupted in the train of thought that I was drawing to the attention of the House with respect to the difficulty of achieving a petition of 5 per cent. of the electors. As my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge says, the south-east region has 8 million electors. Eighteen responses were received in favour of a regional assembly. In Hampshire, there are more than 960,000 electors—not people, electors—but there were only two respondents in favour of the proposals. The Ministers know their uphill task. They have therefore devised an ingenious mechanism: any response whatever is counted as interest in favour of a referendum. The fact that someone might be wholly against an assembly, and might write to say so, will nevertheless be counted as someone expressing an interest in a referendum. Our task in securing a petition will not be nearly so easy as the method that the Ministers have devised for themselves.

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight): I am shocked and amazed at the implicit duplicity of Ministers if, as my hon. Friend asserts, they should count a clear expression of objection to a regional assembly as an argument in favour of a referendum. I know of the huge amount of work that has been done by our colleagues, MEPs representing the south-east, in campaigning against a referendum. Is he saying that Ministers are genuinely taking such expressions against as expressions of interest in a referendum being held?

Mr. Swayne: I will preface my answer by saying that I am keen to move on to the next group of amendments. My hon. Friend should study the *Official Report* of the Standing Committee, as this was an issue that the Committee considered in some depth. The position is precisely as he fears.

Jim Knight: Does the hon. Gentleman not recall the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) talking about the sword of Damocles and about his concerns about the effects on people in local authorities? Is it not valid for a community to decide to campaign for a referendum so that it can resolve the issue even if it is against an assembly? It is perfectly valid for people to organise for a referendum so that they can say no.

Mr. Swayne: I doubt very much that the people writing to the Secretary of State to say that they do not want a regional assembly have any idea that their letters are counted as though they are in favour of holding a referendum.

My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge has provided a mechanism by which we can put an end to the ratchet effect and can avoid what I described in Committee as African democracy. We want one man, one vote, once. Then the matter will be settled and there will be no going back. That is the reverse of what Ministers have provided for the proponents of regional assemblies. They will be able to go on ad infinitum and hold referendums every five years. It is therefore entirely appropriate to accept amendment No. 12 and to make the figure 10 years. In Committee, I argued for 20 years—a generation—but I will accept my hon. Friend's reasonable compromise of 10 years.

Mr. Andrew Turner: I want to make two points. The first is to admit that I am a little confused by the speech of the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey). The question is, who are the turkeys? He asserted, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), that the description of turkeys voting for Christmas was a slur on the electorate in a given region. I do not think that it was a slur. The epithet "turkeys" was addressed not to the electors in the region, but to the members of the putative assembly.

Mr. Hammond *indicated assent.*

Mr. Swayne *indicated assent.*

Mr. Turner: My hon. Friends nod in agreement, so we have got that clear. The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton was slightly wrong.

My second point was about the threshold that the electors—not the turkeys—would have to achieve under the new clause to enable a second or recall referendum to take place. I disagree with the assertion of my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne), because I have experience of petitions being obtained for a whole range of purposes.

Before 1997, I was pleased to assist schools with the complex but invigorating process of achieving grant-maintained status. It was necessary for 20 per cent. of the parents of the pupils registered at a school to sign a petition for a referendum, which was conducted by postal ballot, to take place. A huge number of parents from almost 2,000 schools were willing to sign a petition. They signed up in such numbers that referendums were called. It is not difficult to reach a threshold of 20 per cent., or one that is even higher than that.

I cite the case of the west Wight ambulance or the Tennyson ambulance, as it is called. It was given to the area by the widow of Alfred Lord Tennyson, who was a distinguished resident of the west Wight. The ambulance serves the area covered by the parishes of Freshwater and Totland, the town of Yarmouth and the parish of Brighstone in my constituency. That area has a population of about 8,000. However, when the Isle of Wight Healthcare NHS trust proposed to redeploy the Tennyson ambulance, I received a copy of a petition signed by 4,000 electors—such was the level of interest in the deployment of a single ambulance. Imagine the level of interest that there would be in the deployment of the many millions of pounds that Labour Members wish to tear out of the grip of electors and hand over to the bogus assemblies. As it would not be difficult to achieve a 50 or 20 per cent. threshold, it is reasonable to propose a 5 per cent. threshold, and my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge is to be commended for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West also referred to people power. Putting power into the hands of the electors is the best way to determine such issues. It is not right to call the electors turkeys. I challenge the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton to tell me when a regional or national Assembly has voted for its own dissolution. If he can provide a substantial example of that, I might be forced to conclude that new clause 2 does not justify my support, but I do not believe that such an example exists.

I want to echo one or two remarks that my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) made on the frequency of referendums. The referendums will be deeply unsettling. They will entail the abolition of a tier of local government and redeployment of a huge number of local government staff and officers. That will make recruitment to those

[Mr. Turner]

posts difficult. It is better to enable local government to operate in a stable environment—indeed, that is the objective of the Minister for Local Government and the Regions—but knowing that the sword of Damocles hangs over the assemblies every five years does not contribute to stability.

Mr. Leslie: Thank goodness the Conservatives objected to the programme motion. They clearly wanted to spend much more time debating the main issues. It is a shame that only two of their Back Benchers are in the Chamber. Perhaps they will flood in later for other groups of amendments.

The Conservatives are using new clause 2 to introduce the right for 5 per cent. of the electorate to sign a petition to requisition a further referendum on the establishment of an assembly once it is up and running. That would be a recipe for uncertainty and extremely disruptive to the operation of an assembly. Elected regional assemblies will be strategic and focus on the long term so they need certainty. What would happen if such a petition was successful, a further referendum was requisitioned and people voted to abolish the assembly? New clause 2 gives no idea of who would take on the assembly's responsibilities. Would they return to Whitehall?

Mr. Hammond: The reason for that is that nowhere in the Bill is there anything about what the assembly's responsibilities might be. The Government are inviting people to vote blind in a referendum for elected regional assemblies. We will have to wait a long time before we see the legislation that sets out their powers.

Mr. Leslie: Well, goodness gracious me, if the hon. Gentleman has not noticed the voluminous White Paper "Your Region, Your Choice", which describes in great detail the roles, functions and activities of elected regional assemblies, he may need to do a bit more research.

A 5 per cent. threshold to trigger a further referendum would be unprecedented in our constitution. No other body has a 5 per cent. threshold for a re-ballot. My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight) asked the interesting question of whether the Conservatives would apply it to the Greater London Authority. The same could be said of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. [*Interruption.*] The Conservatives, including one of their Front-Bench spokesmen, the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne), who is temporarily on the Back Benches, suggested that that was not within the Bill's scope, but I think that they were frightened to answer the question. If they believe that people should be able to challenge a decision to devolve powers and create an assembly or Parliament as a right, they should say whether that would apply to all parts of our country. I am surprised that they could not face up to that.

A 5 per cent. minority being able persistently, vexaciously and repetitiously to frustrate the settled will of the majority of people in a region would be not only a distraction but extremely costly and wasteful. There would be the costs of the referendums and of demolishing an elected regional assembly once it had been set up.

3.30 pm

Mr. Andrew Turner: The Minister suggests that a 5 per cent. minority is unsuitable to cause a recalled referendum. What level of interest does he regard suitable to cause an initial referendum?

Mr. Leslie: That is also set out in the White Paper. We are trying to give people the opportunity to make a choice. We are not talking about the establishment of an assembly, but simply about whether there should be a referendum to establish one. The hon. Gentleman opposes giving people a choice and letting them express their will in a referendum.

It is most unfortunate, but it is important to say that I agree with the suggestion of the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) that the electorate have the perfect capacity to elect people to run these assemblies and then say what those assemblies should be doing. The new clause is not necessary because people would have every opportunity both to consider the merits of an assembly in the initial referendum and to shape that assembly every four years in elections to it.

Mr. Davey: Will it be the Government's intention when they introduce a Bill on the powers and functions of regional assemblies to create a constitution for them to allow an elected party to such an assembly to dissolve it?

Mr. Leslie: Obviously, we shall have to look at that nearer the time, but I imagine that most Members would accept that Parliament is perfectly capable of making a judgment on the continuity issues of any assembly. I believe that that deals adequately with the point raised by hon. Members who want to consider the question of dissolving an assembly.

Mr. Hammond: I do not want to fight the battles of the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) for him, but this is an important point because it drives a coach and horses through what the Minister is saying. Will an elected regional assembly have the power to dissolve itself or not?

Mr. Leslie: Parliament decides to set up devolved authorities and assemblies, so that will be a matter for Parliament.

I am curious about the Conservatives' claim that once an elected regional assembly is established, voters should have the opportunity to change their minds whenever they want. However, amendment No. 12 would deny voters in a region without an assembly the chance to change their minds for 10 years. They want to impose a minimum 10-year gap from the date of a no vote to when any subsequent referendum can be held in the same region. That is completely inconsistent and unfair.

Mr. Hammond: If the Minister is prepared to agree on behalf of the Government to accept the 10-year provision in clause 5, I would certainly be willing to withdraw new clause 2 and retable it in the Lords to include a 10-year lockout.

Mr. Leslie: The hon. Gentleman brings me to my next point: precisely why a 10-year gap is wrong and why we oppose the measure.

Mr. Swayne: Tease!

Mr. Leslie: I should like to tease the hon. Gentleman over what he said in Committee. It was interesting that he argued for a 20-year gap, saying that he wanted to distance himself from the CBI suggestion of a 10-year gap. He said:

> "I am not so concerned about the limit of 10 years that the CBI suggested. I think that our amendment suggesting a limit of 20 years is about right."

When asked by my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones) whether he actively disagreed with the CBI, the hon. Gentleman said:

> "I do in this case. I think that the period should be a generation",

and he repeated that today.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) did not weigh in to support his hon. Friend, as he did in Committee, when he said:

> "The CBI is looking at these matters from the narrow perspective of business . . . However, it cannot be a concluding perspective".—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 3 December 2002; c. 26-30.]

The fact that the Conservatives have changed their mind and accepted the 10-year gap in the space of just one month proves my point. People can change their minds in less than 10 or 20 years. The Government's five-year interval strikes the right balance between a reasonable opportunity for people to change their minds and the avoidance of uncertainty and the repeat costs of a referendum. A five-year gap is a minimum—the exact period will depend on the soundings of opinion taken by the Secretary of State—and there is not a requirement to hold referendums in a five-year cycle. The Government have not plucked that five-year figure from the air. As Members will know, five years is the maximum interval between general elections and is also the standard interval for European parliamentary elections. I believe that five years is the right interval. I hope that Opposition Members will not persist with their new clause and amendment and I urge them to withdraw them.

Mr. Hammond: The Minister is skating on extremely thin ice. In the space of about two minutes, he said that people can change their minds and should have the opportunity of repeat referendums within a period of no more than five years to try to create an elected regional assembly, but then set his face firmly against the idea that, having voted for elected regional assemblies, people may change their mind and wish to do away with them. In response to a question from the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), he made it clear that elected regional assemblies will not have, as the hon. Gentleman would like, the power to abolish themselves. Electors electing those assemblies will not have the UK Independence party option referred to earlier of electing members committed to the abolition of the assembly.

The Minister's position is therefore inconsistent. He put administrative convenience above democracy and displayed breathtaking arrogance, as he said that it is all right for Ministers to have the disruptive power to impose referendum after referendum until they achieve their objective, then a ratchet operates and things can never go back to the way they were before. However, he said that it is not all right for the people the have the power through democratic action to call a referendum and reconsider a decision. I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends and, I hope, all other right-minded, right-thinking Members to support me in pressing the new clause to a division.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 121, Noes 342.

Division No. 61] **[3:37 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burt, Alistair
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Curry, rh David
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland)*
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howard, rh Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, rh Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, rh Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Redwood, rh John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Sayeed, Jonathan

Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Smyth, Rev. Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Whittingdale, John
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Angela Watkinson and
Mr. Laurence Robertson

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barrett, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Byers, rh Stephen
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Caborn, rh Richard
Cairns, David
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Healey, John
Heath, David
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Holmes, Paul
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Laxton, Bob *(Derby N)*
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, rh Peter
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morris, rh Estelle
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purchase, Ken

Quin, rh Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, rh Dr. John *(Hamilton N & Bellshill)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Jim Fitzpatrick and
Mr. Phil Woolas

Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 3

PRE-REFERENDUM

'(1) Subject to subsection (3), the Secretary of State may by order cause a referendum to be held throughout England about the establishment of elected regional assemblies and the reorganisation of local government within regions with elected assemblies.

(2) The date of the referendum must be specified in the order.

(3) No order under subsection (1) may be made unless a draft order under subsection (1)(a) of section (Regional Boundaries) has been published.

(4) The questions to be asked in a referendum held in pursuance of an order under subsection (1) are—

> "(1) Do you support the proposals for the creation of regions in England, as proposed by the Secretary of State and the subsequent holding of regional referendums in regions where sufficient levels of interest exist, about the creation of elected regional assemblies?
>
> (2) Do you support the idea of reorganising local government in areas that currently have both county and district or borough councils into single tier unitary authorities if an elected regional assembly is created?".

(5) The questions must be preceded by a statement from the Electoral Commission, setting out any information it believes requisite for the proper understanding by persons entitled to vote of the questions.

(6) Sections 3 and 4 of this Act shall apply, mutatis mutandis, to a referendum held pursuant to subsection (1).'.—*[Mr. Hammond.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Hammond: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 4—*Certification prior to referendum*—

'.(1) Before making an order under section 1(1), the Secretary of State shall satisfy himself that, during the period of twelve months prior to the laying of the order, neither the Regional Chamber nor the Regional Development Agency within the region to be specified in the order have carried out any activities which they do not have power to carry out and which are intended to influence the outcome of such a referendum.

(2) The Secretary of State shall, prior to making an order under section 1(1) and after satisfying himself in accordance with subsection (1), issue a certificate confirming that he is so satisfied.'.

New clause 6—*Definition of Regions*—

'(1) The Secretary of State may by order define regions for the purposes of this Act.

(2) In exercising his power under subsection (1) the Secretary of State shall define Cornwall as a region.

(3) An order under this section shall be subject to affirmative resolutions of both Houses of Parliament.'.

New clause 8—*Regional boundaries*—

'(1) Before making any order under Parts 1, 2 or 3 the Secretary of State shall—

- (a) invite all local authorities in England (except London) to submit to him proposals for the creation of regions for the purposes of this Act; and
- (b) invite such other persons and bodies as appear to him to represent relevant interests throughout England (except London) to submit to him proposals for the creation of regions for the purposes of this Act; and
- (c) upon receipt of submissions in response to paragraphs (a) and (b) invite the Electoral Commission to comment on the submissions and to make proposals to the Secretary of State for the creation of regions for the purposes of this Act having regard to—
    - (i) the desirability of all regions being, in so far as is not incompatible with (ii) below, of approximately equal population size; and
    - (ii) the need to reflect the identities and interests of local communities
- (d) publish the proposals made to him by the Electoral Commission under paragraph (c); and
- (e) make an order creating regions for the purposes of this Act, having regard to the proposals published under paragraph (d).

(2) For the purposes of this section "relevant interests" means professional bodies, trades unions, voluntary organisations, faith groups, political parties, business organisations and community organisations.

(3) For the purposes of subsection 1 paragraphs (a) and (b), the Secretary of State shall set out a timetable for the giving of responses to him.'.

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

Amendment No. 2, in page 1, line 8 [Clause 1], at end insert—

'(2A) No order may be made under subsection 1 unless a referendum has been held pursuant to section (pre-Referendum) and the Secretary of State has considered the result of the referendum and determined on the basis of it that sufficient interest exists in the creation of elected regional assemblies.'.

Amendment No. 26, in page 1, line 13 [Clause 1], leave out 'made recommendations' and insert

'been directed to prepare to carry out a review'.

Government amendment No. 4.

Amendment No. 15, in page 13, line 3, leave out clause 26.

Amendment No. 3, in page 13, line 4 [*Clause 26*], leave out from first 'region' to end of line 5 and insert

'is as defined in an order made under section (*Regional Boundaries*)'.

Mr. Hammond: Clause 1 grants the Secretary of State the power to call referendums in specific regions. The amendments deal with the pre-conditions for them.

The Government are going off at half-cock. They are so anxious to proceed that they are building on sand. If they want regional devolution and elected regional assemblies, they should start by sorting out the regions. They should then ascertain whether there is a genuine appetite for the regional assembly solution throughout England, including for the local government reorganisation that they have linked inextricably to elected regional assemblies. The third tick in the box before embarking on the devolution road is ensuring that no hanky panky is happening in the regions and that no existing bodies are doing things that perhaps they should not.

New clause 8 is the key to the group. Two big issues have dominated our debates about the Bill in Committee and on the Floor of the House. First, the Government have decreed that local government reorganisation is a necessary concomitant of elected regional assemblies. New clause 3 covers that. Secondly, we must consider the shape of the regions. The Government are accused of focusing on only one or two regions and not proposing a genuine all-England solution. Their proposals thus ignore the fact that many English regions lack coherence and credibility for the purpose that the Government support.

Most regions simply do not stack up.

The areas of the Government offices for the regions, which the Government are now proposing to follow, were created for a completely different purpose, namely, administrative convenience and the delivery of administrative government throughout England. I understand that their origin goes back further than that, because the boundaries on which they are based were originally derived from the wartime division of Britain into direction of production regions for food and agricultural planning purposes. That is quite different from the matter now before us. They were never intended to be coherent democratic units. They have been given spurious credibility by being used as the basis for the regional development agency boundaries, but they were never intended to be democratic geographical units.

There are huge disparities of geography, economic strength and population between the different regions. The north-east region, for example, has a population of 2.5 million, compared with the south-east region's 8 million, which is more than three times as many. The north-east has a gross domestic product of £26 billion, against some £132 billion in the south-east, which is more than five times as much. The north-east region is the smallest, geographically, with 8,500 sq km, while the south-west's proposed region has a superficial area of 23,000 sq km. The north-east has 30 parliamentary constituencies, compared with the 83 that the south-east actually has, and the 96 that it would have if the distribution of parliamentary seats were proportional to population.

So the north-east is by far the smallest region—I do not say that in a pejorative sense—on every criterion, yet the whole structure builds around it. It will almost undoubtedly be the first to go for a referendum, and most hon. Members agree that it is the most likely to agree to an elected regional assembly. Perhaps this is no coincidence. The smaller the region, the greater the chance of a coherent identity in that region—we shall no doubt hear later from the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George), who is not in his place at the moment, about the claims of Cornwall to be an identifiable region—but the Government have set their face firmly against any attempt to create real, meaningful regions.

During the course of our deliberations on the Bill, we have heard from Members on both sides of the House that people in north Shropshire do not regard themselves as part of the west midlands, that Oxford does not have very much in common with Dover, and that south Essex has an entirely different focus from Cambridge or the north Norfolk coast, yet they find themselves in the same region. The south-west region consists of very disparate entities and communities that do not see themselves as a region at all. In our last debate on the Floor of the House, the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) referred to the north-west region as "the fictional north-west". All these regions have a common theme: they have no natural centre, no natural focus and no coherent sense of identity.

Mrs. Ellman: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is totally wrong to talk about the north-west having a fictional identity, when polls consistently show people in the region identifying very strongly with the north-west as a whole? Is he aware that a recent poll conducted by the north-west constitutional convention found that more than 73 per cent. of people in Merseyside wanted a directly elected north-west assembly?

Mr. Hammond: It is not for me to intrude on the private grief on the Labour Back Benches. The words "fictional north-west" were not mine; they were uttered by the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East—another Merseyside Member. I think that this is something that the Merseyside contingent has to sort out for itself, and I shall not contribute further to that particular bit of in-fighting.

Mr. George Howarth: It may surprise the hon. Gentleman that I shall not indulge in a debate with my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs.

Ellman) at this point. Does he believe that it would be possible, within the compass of new clause 3, to establish systems of city-wide government? If so, does he think that that would be a worthy objective?

Mr. Hammond: I was about to mention city government. This is exactly the point that we are trying to make. If a settlement of the English question is to be durable, and if the decentralisation of power in England is to work, it has to start from the bottom up. It has to build on units with which people have an affinity, and with which they can identify. The purpose of new clause 3 is to put in place a consultation process, so that people can say to the Government, "It may take an extra year, but we simply cannot use these Government office regions that were created for a completely different purpose and are completely wrong for this democratic purpose, just for the sake of saving a few months." We must start at the beginning; I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

4 pm

I was about to say that I know many Manchester and Liverpool Members are interested in the concept of city government as another way of approaching the decentralisation of government in England, and that is a perfectly legitimate aspiration. Even among supporters of regional decentralisation, however, there is no agreement.

I was looking—as one does—at the website of the hon. Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland) at the time of the last general election. On that Labour party-liveried website, he extols the virtues of something called the northern region to his constituents. He says:

> "The Northern region would include the counties of Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, Durham and Cleveland; and, if the people of Cumbria wish it, Cumbria".

Interestingly, perhaps intriguingly, that is not envisaged in the Government's proposals, which illustrates one of the problems that they face.

On his four-page website on a regional assembly for the north, the hon. Member for Tyne Bridge quotes the hon. Member for Manchester, Blackley (Mr. Stringer), who was then a Minister, as saying:

> "The Government intend to bring forward legislation that will enable the electorate within the regions to determine whether they want an elected assembly."

The hon. Gentleman quotes his hon. Friend as supporting the Government's proposals. We see now, however, that the hon. Member for Manchester, Blackley has serious reservations, not about the principle of regional devolution but about the route that the Government have chosen, and specifically about the choice and use of the old offices of the regions boundaries.

Many Labour party members who supported the abstract notion of regional devolution had no idea at the time that they were signing up to devolution to the existing administrative regions. It is clear from the White Paper—I confirm to the Under-Secretary of State that I have studied it assiduously—that the Government envisage the offices of the regions working, as the White Paper puts it, hand in hand with the elected regional assemblies. They see an argument for coterminous boundaries. That means, of course, a beefed-up Government office of the regions standing over the elected regional assembly, ensuring that what it does complies with the Government's requirements. It means, in effect, a prefect system.

Joyce Quin: Having followed the debate in the Labour party, I suspect, more closely and for longer than the hon. Gentleman, let me tell him that for a long time the regions covered by the Government office have commanded a wide spread of agreement in the party. They are thought to be the appropriate units on which to build regional government. Regions are not prisons, however. It is perfectly possible for the north-east to co-operate with the north-west or with Yorkshire and Humberside. Rather than always seeing such arrangements as confining, the hon. Gentleman should perceive that this is a new type of politics enabling partnerships to be forged.

Mr. Hammond: The right hon. Lady has underlined the fact that the consensus that existed in the Labour party has started to break down as the details have become clear.

Of course regions are not prisons. What I am suggesting is that if they are to be robust and durable, they must be built on firm foundations. I plead with the right hon. Lady and some of her colleagues from the north-east to understand this. I think they genuinely find it difficult to understand the objection of Members from regions such as the south-east and east of England, which make no sense at all. We understand that their region is probably the most coherent and has the strongest sense of identity. It is also the smallest. Why should we in the south-west, the east and the south-east face the Government's insistence on regions four times the size of the hon. Lady's, with no sense of cultural identity, no coherence and no economic, geographic or historical logic? Why can we not have an input in the process of defining the regions in which we will live and by which we will be administered?

Mr. Kevan Jones: Is not the main point about this Bill that it will give the people in those regions the option of whether they want regional government? Why is the Conservative party afraid of giving people a say in how their regions are governed?

Mr. Hammond: I go back to the website of the hon. Member for Tyne Bridge. The problem is that, if this is to be a durable solution, it must be a solution for all of England, not just part of England. The hon. Member for Tyne Bridge, perhaps sticking his neck out rather a long way, says on his website with the Labour party masthead on it:

> "English Regional Government is the answer to the 'West Lothian Question'. It will promote innovation and variety in the governance of our country."

In other words, it will deal with the post-UK settlement for England. If it is going to do that, it must deal with it for all of England. It must not be seen as a sectional solution that addresses the agenda only of certain parts of the country.

Scotland is a nation. No one could doubt that. London is a city. No one could doubt that, but the south-east region, my region, is nothing. No one feels allegiance to it. No one identifies themselves as a citizen

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of south-east England. The overwhelming majority of people would not be able to define it, unlike the constituent counties.

If a geographical region called London and the south-east were created, perhaps that would have a certain coherence and economic and geographical logic, but it would underline the problem. It would be so overwhelmingly the largest region in the country in terms of population, gross domestic product and geographical area that it would make the system unworkable. Therein lies the problem: the messy, inconvenient fact that England cannot be divided neatly into regions that have any meaning for their people unless the Government are prepared to contemplate a significantly larger number of significantly smaller—in some cases—regions.

Andrew George (St. Ives): The hon. Gentleman is making extremely valid points that imply that the Conservatives might be in favour of devolution. On the assumption that they might be, does he agree that the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones) would be right if the Government gave the people a genuine vote on regions that exist, rather than on synthetic regions that do not and that are therefore destined to fail? The Government will succeed in their plan to establish regional government if they accept the type of flexibility that the hon. Gentleman recommends.

Mr. Hammond: That is precisely my point. I make no bones about it. We shall vote against the Bill on Third Reading, but the purpose of Report is to try to improve the Bill. Unless the Minister deals with this issue, he will not produce a workable solution for all of England. It will be a solution that may or may not work in some of the regions—the north-east is the obvious one in people's minds—but it will not work in the south-east region or the east of England region; I do not think that even the Minister for a moment believes that it will. The hon. Gentleman is right.

The Minister will never create a durable solution that is based on meaningless lines drawn on maps in Whitehall, with as much relevance to the situation on the ground as the lines drawn by colonial 19th century treaty makers on a map of Africa. In unitary areas, the Government propose that regional government will necessarily involve the introduction of another tier of government. In existing two-tier areas, elected regional assemblies will necessarily involve the loss of the historic and much-identified-with counties. Many people will reject that model of regional devolution for a variety of reasons, but the main reason, and the reason why resistance is likely to be least strong in the north-east and greatest in the south-east and east of England, is that people do not identify with the regions that the Government are putting them into.

Jim Knight: The hon. Gentleman says that, by necessity, unitarisation would mean the loss of shire counties, which people identify with. I agree that people identify with the shire county, for example, of Dorset, which I represent, and speaking personally, if there were a unitary structure in my area, I would favour the retention of Dorset as the unitary authority, with the abolition of districts. Nothing has been said by the Government that militates against that.

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Gentleman would therefore move the point of government further away from the local community.

Jim Knight: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again and allowing me to expand on what I said. I should like reinvigorated and re-empowered parish and town councils to represent communities in a unitary county. I am pleased that the Department is giving parish councils more power, but I should like that to be extended.

Mr. Hammond: I look forward to the hon. Gentleman's elaboration of his thoughts for the counties with smaller populations when he makes his contribution to the debate. The Minister has been coy about admitting it, but for the larger and more populous counties a unitary option is unlikely to be appropriate for reasons of sheer size.

Andrew George: The hon. Gentleman is right. My concern is that it is not in the Government's gift to promise unitary counties, although that may be desirable in certain circumstances. The Government are prejudging the outcome and are putting the cart before the horse.

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford) *indicated assent.*

Mr. Hammond: The Minister nods, but the Bill means that that matter is in the Government's gift. The boundary committee will make a recommendation, but the Bill as drafted means that the Secretary of State will be able to implement that in whole or in part, as he thinks fit.

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that we have had frequent exchanges on this matter. The boundary committee will be able to resolve the appropriate and best unitary structure, based on counties or districts, or combinations of districts. The recommendation will be for the boundary committee to make. Technically, as the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government will implement the recommendation, but the independent boundary committee will make the decision. That must be right.

Mr. Hammond: I hoped that the Minister was rising to accept the amendment that he rejected in Committee, which would have required the Secretary of State to implement the recommendations of the boundary committee in full, if an elected assembly were established in a region. However, that is not what the right hon. Gentleman is doing. He has retained the discretion to implement the recommendations, or not, and to do so in full or in part. That provision is contained in the Bill.

Mr. Raynsford: I am sorry to go through this again, but the Committee dealt with this matter in detail. The hon. Gentleman has taken an intelligent and assiduous interest in the matter, and I thought that he would appreciate that the process is modelled entirely on the existing legislation passed by the previous Conservative Government. The existing procedures mean that the Government implement recommendations made by an independent body—in this case, because the structures have changed, that body is the boundary committee.

Mr. Hammond: I had not realised that the Government had imposed a self-denying ordinance to the effect that they would only introduce legislation that exactly mirrored what the previous Conservative had done.

Clause 15(2) states:

> "The Secretary of State my by order give effect to all or any of the recommendations of the Boundary Committee for England".

That looks to me like a clear ministerial discretion to implement, or not to implement.

If the Minister wants the proposed structure to work, he must create regions with which people can identify. The Opposition will vote against the Bill on Third Reading, but we are trying to improve the Bill. If the Minister wants it to work, a necessary precondition is that people identify with the regions—all of them in England, not just one or two—that he is trying to build on.

In Standing Committee, the Minister said:

> "We propose that boundaries for elected regional assemblies should mirror the existing administrative boundaries used by Government offices . . . We believe that those regions reflect a logic in terms of population, geography, economic weight and, in many cases, cultural identity."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 12 December 2002; c. 227.]

I have enough respect for the Minister not to think that he believes that for one minute. It was not sensible of him to say that: to use his term, it is clearly "guff". If the Government cannot trust the people, they should at least consult them. New clause 8 would require proposals to be gathered from representative bodies, business and professional organisations, trades unions, Churches, local authorities and political parties. It would then require the boundary committee to comment on those proposals and to make recommendations to the Secretary of State, having regard to the objectives that regions should be of approximately equal size, where possible, and that the identities and interests of local communities should be respected.

4.15 pm

Joyce Quin *rose—*

Mr. Hammond: I shall not give way, because I am conscious that we are rapidly running out of time and that many other hon. Members wish to contribute to the debate.

I recognise that there is a tension between size and cultural identity, but it is not irresolvable. The second step introduced by new clause 3 is that regions defined under new clause 8, with a draft order produced, should then be put out to consultation with the people in an England-wide referendum. And before the Minister picks me up on it, that referendum includes London, and why not? This is supposed to be an England-wide solution.

The first step is that we ask people to become involved in defining what the boundaries of the region should be. The second is that we put in a referendum to the people of England essentially three questions: "Do you support the proposals for the creation of regions in England, as proposed by the Secretary of State?"—in other words, the regional boundaries that are proposed; "Do you support the idea of referendums for elected regional assemblies in those boundaries in areas where there is sufficient interest?"; and, as a separate question, "Do you support the idea of reorganising local government in those areas that go for elected regional assemblies?"—in other words, an element of decoupling of those questions.

Dr. John Pugh (Southport): If for example, with regard to the first question, people vote for the creation of regions, but on the second question they vote against the reorganisation of local government, is the hon. Gentleman tacitly suggesting that the Conservatives would then support, responding to the people, a four-tier structure?

Mr. Hammond: If the hon. Gentleman had contained himself for a moment he would have heard me say that if there is a strong yes vote on the first two questions and a strong no vote on the third question, the Government will have to think very hard about their compulsory linking of unitarisation with elected regional assemblies. It is a messy business, but that is democracy. There is a need for a wide test of opinion on all three questions.

The Government try to insist that questions can be put on a strictly regional basis, but that is not correct. Post the United Kingdom devolution settlement, post the London government settlement, there is a need for an English settlement, which has to work for all of England. A solution that appeals perhaps only to one or two regions, or one that is built upon the sand of incoherent and unloved artificial regions, is not such a solution. New clause 3 gives a proper opportunity to test opinion England wide. It is more important to get it right than to get it quickly.

I shall very briefly touch on the other new clauses and amendments.

New clause 4 has been tabled specifically to allow an opportunity to discuss issues that were raised in previous debates about whether matters that are not proper are currently going on, in particular in relation to the north-west regional chamber. I shall leave it to other hon. Members, perhaps from that part of the country, to address that issue. The Minister was asked to look into the matter, and he says that he has. This morning he sent out copies of letters that he has sent to the relevant people in the north-west region reminding them of their obligations. But I had hoped to hear from the Minister today whether he had made any investigation of whether any of the matters that have already occurred are improper and represent spending that is not properly authorised for that purpose. New clause 4 would require the Secretary of State to satisfy himself that there is no improper behaviour going on within the regional structure before a referendum can be called.

New clause 6 was tabled by the Liberal Democrats. I regard it as the economy version of new clause 8. Having saved their money, or their drafting time, with the

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economy version of the new clause, they then splashed out on the bolt-on added extra of the Cornwall option. There is no provision for consultation. There is no process. There is just an order-making power for the Secretary of State. The only place that is protected is Cornwall, which would then on the face of the Bill be defined as a region. No doubt the hon. Member for St. Ives will tell us why that is so.

Amendment No. 2 provides that there shall be no regional referendum under clause 1 unless the England-wide referendum under new clause 3 has been held, and of course no England-wide referendum under new clause 3 can be held until the regional boundary-setting process under new clause 8 has been gone for.

That would take a little longer, but it would ensure that what the Government hope to build is at least built on durable foundations.

I must touch on amendment No. 26, tabled by the Liberal Democrats, before I finish. Clause 12 provides for a local government review, and the Government's intention is to require an all-unitary solution in areas that opt for elected regional assemblies. The Government's clearly stated intention is to publish the recommendations of that local government review before a referendum takes place, so that electors will be fully aware of the intended reorganisation of local government in their areas.

Amendment No. 26 quite shamefully seeks to postpone the review until after the referendum. The precondition that requires a review under clause 12 to have taken place would be replaced by a requirement only for the Secretary of State to have instructed the boundary committee to be prepared for that review.

So the Liberal Democrats, whose rhetoric is about transparency in government, have demonstrated by that amendment that the reality is that, when the truth will hurt their cause, they want to conceal it and suppress the boundary review process until after the referendum has taken place. That is typically inconsistent because new clause 7—also tabled by the Liberal Democrats—addresses what we call the pig-in-the-poke problem by deferring the implementation of the legislation until the power of elected regional assemblies has been set down in statute. [*Interrupted*]

I hope that I did not hear the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) say that I was deliberately misleading the House. Perhaps he would like to stand up and say that. If he reads amendment No. 26 very carefully, he will find out precisely what it does: it seeks to postpone the holding of the local government boundary committee review until after the referendum, so that electors who vote in the referendum will not know the changes that the boundary committee will propose to local government in their area when they vote. They will have been deceived.

I shall soon conclude my remarks because of the pressure of time. This group of amendments addresses some of the most serious weaknesses in the Bill. It proposes consultation on the appropriate definition of regions, and it provides for a referendum when the division of England into regions is known, and for a test of England-wide public opinion. It would introduce a proper test of appetite for an imposed local government reorganisation. I strongly recommend to the House the amendments and new clauses that stand in the name of my right hon. and hon. Friends and myself.

Mr. Graham Stringer (Manchester, Blackley): I should like to make one thing clear in response to the speech made by the Conservative spokesman. I voted for the Bill on Second Reading because of the Labour party manifesto commitment to give people a choice about whether or not they wanted elected regional assemblies. I have become persuaded that the detail of the Bill will not deliver what it is supposed to deliver, so it would be wrong to deny people the right to vote against having an assembly.

If the Deputy Prime Minister reaches the judgment that people in the north-west have sufficient interest and they are given the right to participate in a referendum, I hope to persuade them to vote against having an assembly. The reason for that is that this paving Bill has been wrapped up by those who support it with the view that it will somehow solve the West Lothian problem, that it will tackle regional disparities and that it will deal with the democratic deficit that those of us who live in the regions believe exists. We do not have enough say in many of the public bodies that deliver our services.

I came to believe, as we considered the Bill clause by clause in Committee, that it will not do what was outlined in the White Paper. I also do not believe the argument that there is a great deal of desire for it in my part of the world, the north-west. I share the view that the north-west is a recent fiction of the television companies. We can solve the conundrum that was posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman), who rightly commented that MORI polls and surveys conducted by the BBC give different results from those conducted by Granada. If people are asked whether they want more democracy and more say in things, by and large they say yes. That is especially so if one puts it in the context of the years of Conservative Government during which people in the north-east, the north-west and Yorkshire—indeed, most of the regions—were deeply resentful. People will then say, "Yes, we want less of that and more control over our own lives." To put it in a different context—this would be true in the case of Manchester or Liverpool—if people are asked whether they want more bureaucracy, more politicians, elected regional assemblies whose members represent constituencies of a quarter of a million people, or a loss of power from local authorities, they give a completely different answer.

Mrs. Ellman: Does my hon. Friend accept that the proposals in the Bill are not about removing powers from local authorities, but about democratising the powers that exist in an unelected manner in the regions? In particular, they deal with accountability for regional development agencies, housing investment, heritage, sports and cultural funding, and many other areas in which regional decisions are taken on a north-west basis without elected accountability.

Mr. Stringer: The answer to that depends on one's historical understanding of where the money that funds the regional development agencies comes from. Much of the money that used to be in the urban programme was given to the Housing Corporation and to English

Partnerships and has now appeared in the regional development agencies. We are dealing with a historical process that has taken resources from the local level and put them much further up. I do not accept the basis of my hon. Friend's position.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, like my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside, has a long history of supporting regional government. There is a debate to be had, and we are having it. It is certainly necessary to take some control away from the centre and to democratise many public services. However, I am deeply suspicious, given our debates in Committee and on Second Reading, because the Bill proposes unique mechanisms that, as far as I am aware, do not exist anywhere else. When the Government rightly proposed that city and district councils should have the right to decide whether they wanted an elected mayor, the electorate were given the right to campaign and petition for a referendum on that. In other instances of changes in the democratic structures, the Government have stipulated the right way to do it and imposed it. I may be wrong—one's knowledge is not always complete in such matters—but I cannot think of a precedent whereby the decision on whether to have a referendum about a regional assembly is dependent on the subjective judgment of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. When challenged in Committee, my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench were unable to give any indication of what the subjective opinion of the Deputy Prime Minister would be when he came to consider whether there was indeed sufficient interest.

When we looked at the document that was being sent out to various bodies to get information from them, we noticed that question 7 asked respondents to give not only their own subjective impression but their subjective impression of whether other people were interested. As a basis for changing the structure and seeing whether there is an interest, that is entering the land of fantasy. As I said in Committee, given my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister's commitment to this matter, the only real test that the Government will use is whether, in a particular circumstance, that referendum will be winnable.

4.30 pm

Mr. Kevan Jones: I understand my hon. Friend's position, and I understand that some people in all regions, including the north-east, are vehemently against elected regional assemblies. But is it not a fact that the Bill will give local people the say in whether they want a regional assembly? It will not be down to the Deputy Prime Minister, or any Minister. It will be down to the people. What is he afraid of in relation to people being given a choice about whether they want an elected regional assembly?

Mr. Stringer: My hon. Friend has misunderstood what I was saying and what is in the Bill. People in the north-east and the north-west will not be given the right to say whether they want a regional assembly if my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister does not think they are interested enough. The Deputy Prime Minister will have the right to say whether they have that right. My point was simply that the people of the north-east or the north-west should be able to petition to have that right to vote. I hope that my hon. Friend will agree with me on that point.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) said that it was a debate in Committee that led him to present new clause 4. That is what has led to my suspicion that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister wants elected regional assemblies. We have a regional assembly: should that body funded by the Government and by local authorities be allowed to spend that public money to campaign and work for what is clearly a political end and a matter of political dispute between the parties and within the parties?

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions has sent a letter to me and other members of the Committee saying that he has reiterated the legal position to those bodies: unless they are spending private sector money, they cannot campaign on those issues. I shall read just two sentences from the letter printed in the *Manchester Evening News* on 6 December 2002 from the chief executive of the north-west regional assembly. He said that

> "it is essential for the future prosperity of Manchester and the whole of the north west that the region has the chance to elect its own regional assembly."

Some of my hon. Friends will agree with that, but it is clearly a political campaigning statement. The same applies to the following:

> "The north west needs to be one of the first regions to hold a referendum and gain our regional voice."

That is something that one hears within the Labour party, but it is not the role of the chief executive of the north-west regional assembly to voice that. Presenting the information is one thing; campaigning is another. I do not know whether private funds have been given to the chief executive to use facilities to put that out in his name and the north-west regional assembly's name. I hope, however, that my right hon. Friend is sufficiently concerned to find out whether Government or public sector money has been used for campaigning.

Ministers are convinced that the north-east and the north-west should have elected regional assemblies. I think that there are other political priorities. It was a mistake for Ministers, in their Labour party capacity, to say that resources from the Labour party office should be devoted to winning this campaign. I would not want to overestimate the problem, but there is a threat from the British National party in parts of Lancashire. Our campaigning efforts would be better directed at that.

I shall conclude my remarks, as I know that many other Members wish to speak. The need for devolution exists but, unfortunately, the mechanisms in the Bill will not lead to its achievement.

Mr. Edward Davey: It is right that the House should focus on the two key issues: the definitions and boundaries of the regions and the fact that the local government reviews, which the Government seek to link with the referendums on the regions, should be decoupled from them. People outside the House recognise that the Bill requires amendment in both regards. Liberal Democrats have led the opposition on the two issues from the start, and I am pleased that the Conservatives have realised, after the proceedings in Committee, that they are the two key issues and have

[Mr. Edward Davey]

woken up to that fact. Although the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) took 30 minutes to make his points, I am delighted that he has recognised that the Liberal Democrats' agenda for opposition to the Bill is the right one.

Decoupling the local government review from the referendums is one of the key issues, and the hon. Gentleman said that Liberal Democrat amendment No. 26, which would achieve that aim, is wrong and would not allow democracy to prevail. However, it has been our policy for a long time—we have a policy; the Conservatives do not—that the regional assemblies should decide the review of local government in their region. That is the democratic way. We have tabled amendments and, although some of them have not been selected, the hon. Gentleman can read the amendment paper and see them for himself. The fact that he dealt with the Liberal Democrat case by ignoring those amendments does him no credit.

Mr. Hammond: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman hogged enough time, so I will not give way to him on this point. With your leave, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will seek to divide the House on amendment No. 26 because it is so important.

Joyce Quin: I, too, have expressed my support all along for decoupling. Although I support the idea behind the hon. Gentleman's amendment, I do not believe that it is necessary for the regional assembly then to address the issue. Regional government and local government are entirely separate and I regret the fact that there is confusion between the two in the Bill. I am keen for there to be no confusion, so I rather regret the fact that the hon. Gentleman has formulated his amendment as he has.

Mr. Davey: I accept the right hon. Lady's point. It is not the ideal formulation, and the amendments that we tabled in Committee did not take this form. However, we are trying to reach a compromise with the Government. If they are worried, we have tried to make it clear that the referendum could assure the people that the regional assemblies would consider their concerns about there being too many authorities below the regional level. If the Government had accepted the principle in the amendments that were unfortunately not selected, they would have enabled that process to take place.

I accept that the current amendment is a compromise, but I hope that the Government will accept it, as it would help the referendums to be won. If we could argue to the people who are concerned about too many tiers of government that the regional assembly would, after it was elected, consider that point without prejudging the issue, some of those understandable concerns might be allayed. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) feels strongly about that point, as do many of my right hon. and hon. Friends. They want people to have the choice about the structure of local government in their regions. They want the regional assemblies to give them that choice.

Mr. Streeter: The hon. Gentleman has completely misunderstood the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) to whom he will not now give way. We are not at all in favour of allowing elected regional assemblies to decide on the local government review. We have suggested an additional question so that the voters themselves can have their say. That is very different from the hon. Gentleman's proposal.

Mr. Davey: I think that the hon. Gentleman misunderstands me. We want the regional assemblies to consider the proposals made by the boundary committee for England and to put them before the people so that they can vote on them. So the regional assembly would consider them, which is a more devolved approach, and the people would have a choice.

Mr. Hammond: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davey: No, I want to make progress.

It is vital to decouple the two issues. I hope that the other place will take that seriously and Members of all parties will co-operate to ensure that the decoupling works. It makes sense in terms not only of democracy, but of ensuring that the agenda goes ahead.

The second key issue is regional boundaries. New clauses 8 and 6 and amendment No. 15 deal with that in different ways. None of them is perfect, but they offer options. If the Minister is convinced by our argument, I hope that he accepts one of them, although my guess is that he will not. An important issue is at stake, as I think the Minister knows in his heart of hearts. Some regions, such as the north-east, the north-west and Yorkshire and Humber, will have boundaries that are accepted in general. There may be a few complaints about them, as we heard from one or two hon. Members in Committee and today, but that is the case in general for those three regions. However, in other parts of the country there is much debate and concern about the regional boundaries established by the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998, to which the Bill relates.

As the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge said, we should not accept some regions, such as the south-east. They are far too large. People do not identify with them and the boundaries need to be reviewed. I think that that is the case for all the regions except the three that I identified.

Andrew George: My hon. Friend says that, in his heart of hearts, the Minister understands the conundrums that the Government will face when their zones are unacceptable to the people in their so-called regions. We are not attacking the Government, but advising them. Does my hon. Friend share my fear that the Government will find themselves in a straitjacket? They need to return to chapter 6 of the White Paper and recognise the need for flexibility when considering the future of the boundaries.

Mr. Davey: My hon. Friend is right. A series of events will take place. Referendums will be held in the north-east, north-west and Yorkshire and Humber. I hope that those are won and regional assemblies are established there. I predict that a future Government will then ask for a review of the regional boundaries of the remaining English regions. They will have to do that because none of the referendums in the other regions is likely to be won unless they do. People who are strongly committed to regional devolution will be unable to bring themselves to support the campaign because they cannot support a region called the south-east of England.

It would be much better for the Government to admit that and allow the Bill to contain a review of regional boundaries, even if it excludes the three regions with boundaries that I believe are acceptable to the people in those areas. That would enable the referendums in the north-east, north-west and Yorkshire and Humber to go ahead so that we do not stop the movement for regional devolution. It would also allow us to put right the problems in the rest of England.

4.45 pm

Joyce Quin: Given what the hon. Gentleman has said, does he agree that the argument made by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), which was basically that because the north-east was smaller than any other region, it should have to wait until every other region, including the south-east, was happy with its boundaries before being allowed to have a regional assembly, was utterly preposterous?

Mr. Davey: The hon. Lady is right; it was preposterous. The problem for the Conservatives is that because they do not believe in regional devolution, they have no policies—they do not know what else to do. They would be happy to keep the quango state. They support regional government but just do not like any democracy in it. That is why their position is untenable.

I am keen to hear from the Minister in reply to this debate and to give him sufficient time in which to do so, so I shall quickly refer to the other amendments. Although I have some sympathy with the intention of new clause 3, it is fatally flawed because it would prevent a variable geometry—different regions going at different speeds. New clause 4 has something to recommend it. I would be worried about illegal expenditure by the RDAs or other public bodies before the referendums. I certainly oppose amendment No. 2, which is a surrogate turnout threshold amendment. We have had that debate.

The key issues before the House—we will presumably get a chance at least to vote on the decoupling issue raised in new clause 3 and, hopefully, amendment No. 26—are decoupling the local government review and the regional boundaries. If the Government gave way on those two issues, they would have an awful lot more support both in the House and throughout the country.

Mr. Raynsford: This is a complex group of amendments, I shall try to address all the new clauses and to respond as well as I can to the issues that have been raised.

New clause 3 enables the Secretary of State to hold a national referendum across England, including London, which would ask two separate questions. One would be on whether people supported the proposals for the creation of regions and the subsequent holding of regional referendums. The second would be on whether people supported the idea of reorganising local government into unitary authorities where an assembly is created. Amendment No. 2 would mean that no regional referendum about elected regional assemblies could be held until a national referendum had been held.

I am interested in the approach of the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) to the people of London in these and other changes that the Conservatives have proposed. New clause 3 would give Londoners a vote on whether they were supportive of holding referendums about elected regional assemblies elsewhere in England despite the fact that there is no intention that London itself should have an assembly. It already has its own elected city-wide authority following a referendum in which the people of London voted yes. According to the Conservative party, the people of London would be asked to vote again even though, as I understand it, the Opposition have no intention of in any way changing any of the existing institutions in London. What a preposterous waste of time and money.

New clause 3 would also give Londoners a vote on whether they supported the idea of restructuring local government in two-tier areas—despite the fact that London already has wholly unitary local government. So, that proposal makes no sense at all. Under new clause 8, however, London would be specifically excluded from making proposals for changes in regional boundaries despite the fact that neighbouring local authorities outside London could do so. That illustrates the total incoherence, incompetence and inconsistency of the Opposition's approach. It tells us that new clause 3 has no serious or useful purpose. It is simply part of the official Opposition's ill-thought-out tactics to use any means to try to deliver referendums on whether to establish elected regional assemblies.

The Conservatives have made their opposition to regional assemblies clear; the hon. Gentleman stated it again this afternoon. As he will hear later, his noble Friend Lord Strathclyde made a scandalous statement yesterday in the House of Lords implying that the Conservative party in the other place would entirely ignore the views of this democratically elected House and try to stop the Bill becoming law. That comes from a party which accused us of arrogance, yet its unelected friends in the House of Lords are trying to dictate to this House which Bills should become law. That is a very dangerous challenge to our constitution, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman, who has made some disparaging remarks about the Government this afternoon, will immediately condemn his noble Friend's outrageous position.

Mr. Hammond: While the Minister is talking about the unelected and unrepresentative upper House can he confirm that it is now Government policy that the upper House should be wholly elected?

Mr. Raynsford: I put to the hon. Gentleman, who has no elected friends in the Chamber at all, to consider the right of Lord Strathclyde, a Member of the unelected House of Lords, to make the following point in a shameful speech last night:

> "I have something to say to the noble Lord the Government Chief Whip as a word of advice and perhaps even a warning, based on what I have heard of the view of most Members of this House about the general awfulness of elections. His regional assemblies Bill? No chance."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 22 January 2003; Vol. 643, c. 826.]

[Mr. Raynsford]

How deplorable that an unelected House should tell the Commons what legislation should come through and that a Member of the Lords should refer to the "awfulness of elections". I hope that the hon. Gentleman will condemn that deplorable abuse of Conservative powers in the House of Lords.

Mrs. Ellman: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the comments that he has just quoted are easy to equate with an Opposition whose Members cannot be bothered to attend this important debate and who, when in government, set up regional Government offices, clearly with the intention of wielding power in the regions without accountability to the people of the regions?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. Before the Minister answers, time is short, so perhaps we ought to get back to the new clause.

Mr. Raynsford: Of course I shall do so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, while concurring entirely with the views expressed by my hon. Friend.

Thinking about the effect of the Conservative amendments, we would have a long debate on regional boundaries under new clause 8 and amendment No. 3. New Clause 8 would insert into the Bill a procedure for creating new regions. It would involve submissions by local authorities and other "relevant interests" on proposed new regions, after which the Electoral Commission would submit another set of proposals to the Secretary of State. Presumably, there would be a consultation, but that is not explicit in the amendment. An order would then have to be made creating new regions.

The Opposition replaced new clause 1 with new clause 8 so that they could include a provision excluding Londoners from the invitation to make proposals for regional boundaries. As I have already suggested, that is nonsense, as it would be open to people outside London to suggest changes to London's boundaries, but Londoners could not even make a proposal that London's boundaries should remain unchanged—how typical of the Opposition's incoherence. The process set out in new clause 8 could take years, given the resource implications for the Electoral Commission and the lengthy consultation that is envisaged. The consultation proposed by the Opposition would be time-consuming, expensive and unproductive. It would also, on the basis of past experience, be divisive and acrimonious, as most boundary disputes are.

That brings me to new clause 6, which was tabled by the Cornish enclave of the Liberal Democrat party. It would enable the Secretary of State by order to define a region for the purposes of the Bill, and would uniquely oblige him to define Cornwall as a region—another ill thought out proposal. In every other part of the country, the Secretary of State would have freedom to define regions. That curious aspect of the new clause probably explains why the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) did not put his name to it. It gives the Secretary of State extraordinary power to define regions everywhere else in the country—not, I think, Liberal Democrat policy—while requiring him to define Cornwall as a region.

Andrew George: The Minister well knows that the new clause is a probing measure as I have spoken to him about it. If the Conservatives had not spent quite as much time debating the management of time we would have had a chance to debate the issue. There are important issues about the size of regions. The Minister knows that it is not the size of the Cornwall region that is problematic, but the fact that it is politically inconvenient for him.

Mr. Raynsford: I accept entirely the strength of feeling in Cornwall about its historical cultural identity. We understand that very much—indeed, we supported the campaign for the recognition of the Cornish language in which the hon. Gentleman was strongly involved. We were happy to accede because it is right for Cornwall's unique cultural heritage to be respected and preserved, but that is a very different proposition from the designation of Cornwall as a region. Regions are an intermediate tier of Government between the national and local level. A significant number of functions are currently discharged at regional level, such as economic development and planning. To be effective, such arrangements must operate on a large enough scale, and must be properly differentiated from the functions of local government, which should continue to be discharged at a local level. That, we believe, is the right way forward for Cornwall—to benefit from its membership of the wider south-west region in terms of planning, transportation and economic development, while preserving and enhancing its unique qualities through the work of its local authorities, and in particular through Cornwall county council, whose excellent performance was recently recognised by the comprehensive performance assessment. In response to the new clause proposed by the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George), I have to say, in words that will no doubt immediately be recognised by him, na wrav kammenn. That means no way, in Cornish.

Andrew George: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: Briefly.

Andrew George: Ow dysky da, ha clapya da. He has learned well—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Any words that the House does not immediately understand must be repeated and translated immediately thereafter.

Andrew George: I was about to do so, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I said that the Minister had learned well and spoken well, and I am grateful. However, he will ultimately find that there is no way that the people of the Government's south-west zone will accept a region on that basis. He will have to revisit the issue. I urge him not to place a straitjacket around himself from which there is no escape.

Mr. Raynsford: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. As I said before, we have not put a straitjacket around ourselves. In the White Paper we made it clear that there is an opportunity and flexibility to look again at regional boundaries in due course. We do not believe that that is appropriate at present. It would be divisive and would prevent progress towards establishing elected regional assemblies, but there is no straitjacket.

I must make progress, as time is very short. New clause 4, although apparently a sensible proposition as the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge proposed it, is unnecessary and unworkable, and appears to be designed, like so many other Opposition amendments, to wreck the Bill. It would make it impossible for the Secretary of State to begin the process of moving towards a referendum for elected regional assemblies if any individual in either of the organisations mentioned, over which the Secretary of State has no control, should, for whatever reason, step outside their powers in the 12 months prior to the moment when the referendum is to be ordered. It is clearly a wrecking proposal.

Amendment No. 26 from the Liberal Democrats would remove the requirement for a local government review to be carried out by the Boundary Committee before an order causing a referendum was made. Rather, the committee will only have had to be directed to prepare to carry out a review. We believe that any local government review of a region should be carried out before a referendum on elected regional assemblies, so that voters are fully informed of the implications of a yes vote for local government in their region.

We also believe strongly that three tiers of government would be too many. It must be a feature of regional government that where people vote for regional government, it should be against a clear understanding that there will be a unified tier of local government, in just the same way as there is in London, Scotland and Wales. That is the precedent. We think that it is right and that it should apply in the English regions, too.

Finally, Government amendment No. 4 is a minor tidying amendment, designed to make it clear that it is by order that an order under clause 1(1) to cause a referendum to be held is varied or revoked. It therefore makes it clear that any order to vary or revoke a clause 1(1) order would also be subject to the provisions in clause 27, and that the affirmative resolution procedure would apply. I ask the House to support amendment No. 4 and to reject the other amendments.

Mr. Hammond: The Minister often speaks of synthetic anger. We have seen a virtuoso display of synthetic anger from the master himself. He speaks of our amendments being wrecking amendments. They would not have been selected and they would not be on the amendment paper if they were wrecking amendments. They are sensible amendments. The Minister refers to the lack of attendance in the Chamber, on all sides. I tell him why there is a lack of attendance in the Chamber: his guillotine meant that hon. Members in all parts of the House saw that they stood no chance of being called in the debate and went off to do better things.

I am disappointed that the Minister has not listened to our arguments and has rejected all proposals to make his own structure more robust and durable, but I cannot say that I am entirely surprised. I will ask my hon. Friends to vote in support of the new clause. I shall also ask you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, whether we can have a separate vote on new clause 8, and if Liberal amendment No. 26 is pressed to a separate Division, I shall ask my hon. Friends to oppose it on the grounds—

It being Five o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER, *put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair, pursuant to Orders* [*29 October 2002, 26 November 2002 and this day.*]

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 120, Noes 334.

Division No. 62] **[5:00 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, rh Virginia *(SW Surrey)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burt, Alistair
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland)*
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jenkin, Bernard
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, rh Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, rh Michael
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Redwood, rh John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Ruffley, David
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*

Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Angela Watkinson and
Mr. Laurence Robertson

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burnham, Andy
Burstow, Paul
Byers, rh Stephen
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cairns, David
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Doughty, Sue
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
George, rh Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hancock, Mike
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Heath, David
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Holmes, Paul
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Laxton, Bob *(Derby N)*
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, rh Peter
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, rh Paul *(Torfaen)*
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian

Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Jim Fitzpatrick and
Mr. Phil Woolas

Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 8

Regional Boundaries

'(1) Before making any order under Parts 1, 2 or 3 the Secretary of State shall—

(a) invite all local authorities in England (except London) to submit to him proposals for the creation of regions for the purposes of this Act; and

(b) invite such other persons and bodies as appear to him to represent relevant interests throughout England (except London) to submit to him proposals for the creation of regions for the purposes of [illegible]s Act; and

(c) upon receipt of submissions in response to paragraphs (a) and (b) invite the Electoral Commission to comment on the submissions and to make proposals to the Secretary of State for the creation of regions for the purposes of this Act having regard to—

(i) the desirability of all regions being, in so far as is not incompatible with (ii) below, of approximately equal population size; and

(ii) the need to reflect the identities and interests of local communities

(d) publish the proposals made to him by the Electoral Commission under paragraph (c); and

(e) make an order creating regions for the purposes of this Act, having regard to the proposals published under paragraph (d).

(2) For the purposes of this section "relevant interests" means professional bodies, trades unions, voluntary organisations, faith groups, political parties, business organisations and community organisations.

(3) For the purposes of subsection 1 paragraphs (a) and (b), the Secretary of State shall set out a timetable for the giving of responses to him.'.—*[Mr. Hammond.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Motion made, and Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 159, Noes 295.

Division No. 63] **[5:14 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, rh Virginia *(SW Surrey)*
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland)*
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, rh Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, rh Michael
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Pugh, Dr. John
Redwood, rh John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard

Simmonds, Mark
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thurso, John
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Laurence Robertson and Angela Watkinson

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Byers, rh Stephen
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Laxton, Bob *(Derby N)*
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, rh Peter
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Morris, rh Estelle
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, rh Paul *(Torfaen)*
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*

Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Fraser Kemp and
Jim Fitzpatrick

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 1

REFERENDUMS

Amendment proposed: No.4, in page 2, line 16 [Clause 1], after 'may' insert 'by order'—*[Mr. Raynsford.]*

Clause 2

REFERENDUM QUESTION

Amendments proposed: No.5, in page 2, line 24 [Clause 2], after 'statement' insert

'(in as nearly as may be the following form)'.

No.6, in page 2, line 27 [Clause 2], leave out from second 'region' to end of line 33 and insert

'If an elected assembly is to be established, it is intended that:

the elected assembly would be responsible for a range of activities currently carried out mainly by central government bodies, including regional economic development; and

local government would be reorganised into a single tier in those parts of the region that currently have both county and district councils. There would be no such reorganisation of other local authorities in the region.'.—*[Mr. Raynsford.]*

Clause 6

COMBINATION OF POLLS

Amendment proposed: No.7, in page 3, line 29 [Clause 6], after 'may' insert '—

(a) make provision in connection with the combination of polls;

(b) make provision for the creation of offences;

(c)'. —*[Mr. Raynsford.]*

Clause 19

ADVICE OF THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Amendments proposed: No.8, in page 10, line 33 [Clause 19], leave out

'The Secretary of State may'

and insert

'Not later than the end of the period of two years beginning with the day on which the referendum was held the Secretary of State must'.

No.9, in page 10, line 35 [Clause 19], leave out 'Such a direction may' and insert

'A direction under subsection (2) must'.

No.10, in page 10, line 36 [Clause 19], after 'to' insert

'such of the following matters as the Secretary of State thinks appropriate'.

No.11, in page 11, line 6 [Clause 19], leave out 'or revoked'.—*[Mr. Raynsford.]*

Question put, That the amendments be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 323, Noes 118.

Division No. 64] **[5:24 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baird, Vera
Barnes, Harry
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burnham, Andy
Burstow, Paul
Byers, rh Stephen
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cairns, David
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Doughty, Sue
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*

Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
George, rh Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hancock, Mike
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Heath, David
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Holmes, Paul
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Laxton, Bob *(Derby N)*
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, rh Peter
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morris, rh Estelle
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, rh Paul *(Torfaen)*
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Thurso, John
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Fraser Kemp and
Mr. Phil Woolas

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, rh Virginia *(SW Surrey)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burt, Alistair
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland)*
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jenkin, Bernard

Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, rh Michael
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Redwood, rh John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Ruffley, David
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Laurence Robertson and Angela Watkinson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Order for Third Reading read.

5.36 pm

Mr. Raynsford: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

We have had full and extensive debates on the Bill. We debated it on Second Reading and our extensive debates in Committee were widely recognised as being thorough and good tempered. Those debates were followed by a full day's consideration in the House on the first four clauses and now by the debates on Report.

The Bill is in good shape, and it is right that we should now commend it to the other House, where I hope that it will receive a fair and impartial hearing on all sides. I also hope that Lord Strathclyde's sadly unhelpful comments, to which I referred in my speech on the last group of amendments, will not be indicative of the approach that the official Opposition will adopt in considering the Bill in the other place.

The Bill takes forward the Government's manifesto commitment to provide for elected regional assemblies where the people in the regions want them.

Mr. George Howarth: My right hon. Friend is aware that I am opposed to the Bill in principle and that, as things stand, I would be inclined to vote against it on Third Reading. However, he is also aware that, if it were possible to develop new proposals for city-wide government in certain conurbations, I might look more favourably on the Bill. Can he give me any reason for hope about that?

Mr. Raynsford: I know that my hon. Friend has reservations about the regional agenda, but the Government are committed to strengthening city government and ensuring that our big cities and towns have effective representation. We have already considered a range of constitutional changes, including directly electing mayors, and we will continue constructively to explore ways in which we can reinforce the ability of our cities and towns to achieve effective city government. I hope that my hon. Friend will want to engage in a constructive discussion about such issues and that he will feel able not to vote against the Bill tonight.

The principle on which the Bill is based is choice, exercised democratically by the people through referendums in each of the English regions. The Bill is at the heart of our programme to modernise our constitution, decentralise power and deliver better public services.

It is a crucial step towards establishing a democratic voice for the English regions—a voice that has been denied them for too long. We want to give the people of our regions the right to choose; the ability to decide what is best for them; a distinct political voice; a regional level of democracy; and, above all, greater control over regional issues that matter, such as economic development and regeneration, planning, housing, transport, health, culture and the environment. This is an important and exciting Bill and I commend it to the House.

5.40 pm

Mr. Hammond: Although I do not wish in any way to detract from the Minister's achievement in getting this Bill through, he has certainly not won all the arguments, including some with Members on his side of the House. He has had a pretty thankless task in piloting the Deputy Prime Minister's pet project through its parliamentary stages. The Bill is an ill-thought-out measure. It seems rushed and fatally flawed even to some of those who favour regional devolution on the Government's model: first, because it insists on using the inappropriate and irrelevant Government offices for the regions' boundaries to define the regions; and secondly, because it couples the issue of elected regional assemblies with the compulsory unitarisation of local government—on which, to be fair, Liberal Democrat Members have focused throughout the debate.

Elected regional assemblies will create an extra tier of government in the unitary areas and the loss of county councils in most of the shire district areas. That is a high price to pay for assemblies that are based on regions with which, in most cases, people will have little or no natural affinity. The regional assemblies will bring additional burdens of cost—extra costs on council tax payers, extra costs on business in the form of higher rates, and extra costs through the bureaucracy involved in paying for the prestige buildings, salaries and cars that will be demanded.

What powers will the assemblies have in exchange for all those extra costs? Of course, we do not know, because we have not seen a Bill that sets out their powers, and we have learned precious little from the White Paper and ministerial statements. They will have political control of the regional development agencies, but no additional money. They will have influence over central Government decisions and will be able to put forward strategic plans, but always within the context of

[Mr. Hammond]

a national framework and subject to the approval of the Government offices for the regions, which will be standing looking over their shoulders. They will have the planning functions that they have sucked up from county councils, which means that decision making will be more remote from, not closer to, local communities.

Notwithstanding our disagreement with the principles behind the Bill, we proposed constructive solutions throughout its passage, but every one was rejected. Today, the Government have set their face against greater transparency by opposing a new clause that would have encouraged voters to understand the implications for local Government in their region of voting yes in a referendum. They have set their face against a process that would have allowed a building from the bottom up of regions that would have some meaning for the people who live in them—regions that people could respect and even come to love, rather than the irrelevant regions that the Government have chosen to run with. They have set their face against a referendum of all the people of England to test their appetite for elected regional assemblies and the local government reform that the Government insist must go with it.

The Minister has got his Bill through this House, albeit without a proper debate, especially on the first four clauses, which are critical to the Bill, but were very time-limited in Committee. The Deputy Prime Minister has seen his pet project come to legislative fruition, but the Government cannot rely on procedure to avoid the real debate that will take place when the Bill reaches the other place. Because of the Government's approach—the rush, the refusal to compromise, the unwillingness to listen to the people and to create regions that have meaning and might stand a chance of winning the allegiance and affection of their inhabitants—they do not have a lasting and durable solution to the challenge of creating a model for decentralisation in England.

5.44 pm

Jim Knight: I am a keen supporter of the Bill. I was pleased to sit on the Standing Committee that considered it, and I enjoyed the experience. The Bill is the precursor to regional government, which I very much support for four principal reasons.

First, it will increase the accountability of the many regional bodies—quangos—particularly the regional development agencies, which have done some useful work in the south-west, although I have concerns about the boards being accountable through the Secretary of State but not directly accountable to us in our region.

Secondly, regional government will provide a strategic view. The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill is currently going through Parliament, and the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) alluded to the fact that regional assemblies would exercise some planning powers under it. I support that, as it is appropriate to have a strategic approach within which sub-regional groups may mirror counties in many cases and deny what the hon. Gentleman said about the sucking-up of powers. It will certainly join up a lot of thinking. My area is lucky enough to have world heritage status for our coast, which cuts across county boundaries. I look forward to a more strategic approach at a regional level to maximise the benefit of that status.

Mrs. Ellman: Does my hon. Friend agree that any suggestion that boundaries should be drawn around cities would mean the isolation of areas that are not within those boundaries, particularly rural areas, and would not deal with vital regional issues in relation to economic development, population movement and the work of the regional development agencies?

Jim Knight: I am interested by my hon. Friend's intervention, but I have no desire to get involved with the politics of the north-west in answering it. There are times when there is a clear relationship between a core and a periphery. That happens at a national and a regional level, and it can happen between a market town and its periphery. That may give some support to her without necessarily offending some of my other hon. Friends.

The third reason why I support regional government is to provide a regional voice. Clearly, the north-east needs that voice. Even the south-west, however, with its rich diversity, has common strands of economic importance. We rely on agriculture, the defence industry and the tourism industry across the seven counties of the south-west. A clearer regional voice and set of thinking would be welcome.

Mr. Andrew Turner: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that my constituency has many similarities with his and with much of the west country? Will he comment on the Department for Transport's recent airports map, which put my constituency off the coast of his constituency rather than off the coast of the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne)?

Jim Knight: I have no desire to comment on a map that I have not seen. I enjoy viewing the Isle of Wight from my constituency when I am in Swanage, but I accept that, on the boundaries of regions, there are some who would like to be either side. I am sure that parts of Dorset would welcome the Isle of Wight coming home to us, along with its geology. I am content that we should proceed on the basis of the boundaries that we currently have for our regions, because that means that we can have regional government all the more quickly. In addition, the south-west has some common problems, such as our transport infrastructure and a lack of affordable housing, which, equally, a regional government could address.

Finally, we need to resolve what is called the West Lothian question. We have seen the start of devolution in London with the Greater London Authority. We need to continue the process by developing regional government for England. I support the Bill and the fact that it is not imposing regional government on any region, as the electorate will be able to vote for it. It is not an addition of Government in most cases, and certainly not in the south-west, where we can see the unification of local authorities and strong parish councils, as I have argued throughout this debate.

I want to allow other Members to speak, as many want to do so in the limited amount of time available. I urge hon. Members to support the Bill, and I look forward to future legislation to finish off the job of the White Paper and resolve that important West Lothian question.

5.49 pm

Mr. Edward Davey: There is a strong case for elected regional assemblies. The Liberal Democrats have advocated regional devolution for many decades, and it is a real pleasure to see that the Government are, at long last, beginning to take on that agenda.

One argument for regional assemblies is based on the democratisation of the regional government that already exists. The hon. Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight) has made some of the arguments for democratising the quango state that was bequeathed to Britain particularly by the previous Conservative Government. The value of democratising the regional government that exists is that we could, I hope, push for better value for money. Many of these bureaucracies have overlapping responsibilities, vast offices, many chief executives and so on. Much of that can be rationalised in the new regional assembly process. We look forward to that happening and we encourage the Government to go further than they have.

There are three major problems with the Bill. I touched on the first earlier today. The fact that the local government review is coupled with the regional referendums is a big mistake, and the Government will rue the day that they coupled the two. The second major problem relates to the fact that the Government have not allowed for a review of the regional boundaries. In responding to my hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives (Andrew George), the Minister said that there might be reviews of regional boundaries in due course. I hope that that will be sooner rather than later, and it will have to take place before there are referendums in regions outside the north-east, the north-west, Yorkshire and Humber.

The third major problem with the Bill is that it will allow referendums to go ahead without the electors knowing what powers the regional assemblies that they are being asked to vote for would have. That is a mistake. The Minister has cited the precedents in Scotland and Wales, but the Welsh vote was almost lost. One of the arguments used against the creation of the Welsh Assembly was that its powers were not set out clearly enough.

Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davey: I will not give way, because time is tight. It would have made much more sense if the Government had reassured us that they intended to introduce legislation, even in draft form, before the first referendum on a regional assembly took place.

On Third Reading, we have to ask whether the glass is half full or half empty. Our view is that it is important that the cause of regional devolution gets going and that we start a process that has been long awaited. Despite the many flaws in the Bill, we will view the glass as half full and we will vote for its Third Reading. Although the Minister was right to draw attention to the words of Lord Strathclyde last night and to say they were not appropriate, I hope that he will admit that it is the duty of the other place to scrutinise legislation.

Mr. Raynsford: Not to stop it.

Mr. Davey: Not to stop it—the Minister makes a valid point. I hope that noble Lords on all sides will work to amend the Bill in the way that some of us tried to do in Committee.

Andrew George: I want to put on the record that, although I agree with everything that my hon. Friend has said, I am afraid that I have reached a different conclusion. I believe that the glass is half empty. I agree with his analysis and will not try to stop the Bill, but I will not vote for it. I will abstain and I am sorry about that, but much more work needs to be done before it is palatable to us.

Mr. Davey: I certainly understand why my hon. Friend has come to that conclusion. Many of us have had to think very hard about whether we would vote for the Bill because of the many problems in it. I understand why he wishes to take that action, but I urge my other hon. Friends to give the Bill its Third Reading, so that we can move on with regional devolution. The Bill will then move to another place where I hope it will be amended properly.

5.54 pm

Joyce Quin (Gateshead, East and Washington, West): I warmly welcome the Bill and I am glad that it is completing its proceedings in the Commons.

I wish to make two points. First, in parallel with the Bill and complementary to it, the Government are undertaking a soundings exercise to try to find out how keen people in the regions are on holding referendums.

I urge my right hon. Friend and his ministerial colleagues across the Government to give publicity to that. Many other issues understandably dominate the news, but I am keen that people in the regions understand and appreciate what is on offer.

My second point is that devolution has been a success so far, although it has thrown up interesting variations in policy, including enlightened approaches to nursing care, concessions for elderly travel and the establishment of children's commissioners. Although I encourage the Government to devolve functions to the regions of England, I also encourage them to consider some of those enlightened policies for England as a whole because many of them would be of great benefit.

Having said that, I wish the Bill every success in its passage through the other place. I certainly hope that it does not attempt to block it. The Bill is a manifesto commitment and it would be constitutionally unacceptable for it to do so. I wish the Bill every success and hope that regional assemblies will be successfully established, especially in my region of the north-east.

5.55 pm

Mr. Streeter: The Bill is destined to join a growing list of half-baked and ill-thought-out new Labour legislation that has been put on the statute book since 1997. It introduces regional government on a piecemeal dyslexic basis, which will produce an asymmetric and unsustainable constitutional settlement for this great country. It introduces a system of taking soundings on the level of interest in a region which is so vague as to be utterly meaningless. The Deputy Prime Minister may as well open a window in Whitehall and stick his finger in the wind.

The Bill introduces referendums with no thresholds, so even a tiny number of anorak-clad voters can effect constitutional change with no recall and no recourse if mistakes are made. It does not define the functions, powers and responsibilities of the new elected assemblies, and will be a recipe for confusion. It fails to give sufficient information to enable electors to make an informed decision. The Bill locks itself into regions that make no sense whatsoever—

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Streeter: No, there is no time. The hon. Gentleman has just entered the Chamber; I have been here all day.

The Bill locks itself into regions that do not attract local affinity or a sense of identity. How can it be right that Tewkesbury is in the south-west region when it is closer to Scotland than it is to Penzance?

The Bill ushers in a massive and unnecessary upheaval of local government and will almost certainly spell the death knell to historic county boroughs over vast swathes of the country. It will take decisions away from local people and give them to elected regional assemblies, which will be accountable to no one. It is a clumsy, inchoate and incoherent measure. It will not stand the test of time and we should oppose it.

5.57 pm

Mrs. Ellman: I warmly welcome the Bill. It is a vital further step on the road to regional devolution advanced by the Government. Its purpose is to bring more power to the people in the regions, to narrow economic disparities and to stop the increasing flow of populations from the poorer north to the overheated south and south-east. It gives the voice of legitimacy to elected people in the regions to influence Government and European policy to benefit their economic development. It brings accountability to those decisions that are taken on a regional level and brings more focus to them.

The Bill is of great importance to the country. It is of particular importance to the north-west and will be warmly welcomed in my constituency of Liverpool, Riverside. I look forward to it being put into practice and receiving support in the other place. It is a vital measure and I hope that it receives the full support of the House.

5.58 pm

Mr. Andrew Turner: As my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) said, this Bill is deeply defective—and for two reasons. First, however, I should like to deal with the point that the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) has just made about the drift from north to south. It is extraordinary that she can criticise such a drift while at the same time supporting her Deputy Prime Minister's proposals to build houses all over the south of England to encourage people to drift from the north to the south. I find that incoherent.

The first reason why the Bill is unacceptable is that the boundaries of the regions do not match people's aspirations. I say that as someone who represents a constituency right on the edge of the south-east region—as defined by the Government—which has far less in common with Ramsgate and Milton Keynes than with Bournemouth and Portland.

The second reason is the West Lothian question. We must resolve the problem that issues that matter to Members who represent English constituencies, or in future to those who represent constituencies without a regional assembly, can be voted on by those—

It being Six o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair, pursuant to Orders [29 October 2002 and 26 November 2002 and this day].*

The House divided: Ayes 331, Noes 123.

Division No. 65] **[6:00 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baird, Vera
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Browne, Desmond
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burnham, Andy
Byers, rh Stephen
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cairns, David
Calton, Mrs Patsy
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge & Chryston)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Cruddas, Jon

Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Darling, rh Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Davis, rh Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Doughty, Sue
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hancock, Mike
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Heath, David
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Holmes, Paul
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Kevan *(N Durham)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ruth *(Bolton W)*
Kennedy, rh Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness)*
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Laxton, Bob *(Derby N)*
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Chris
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, rh Peter
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marshall, David *(Glasgow Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Meale, Alan *(Mansfield)*
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Morris, rh Estelle
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, rh Paul *(Torfaen)*
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, rh John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Squire, Rachel
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr. Jenny
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill *(Hamilton S)*
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wood, Mike *(Batley)*
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Fraser Kemp and
Mr. Phil Woolas

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, rh Virginia *(SW Surrey)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burt, Alistair
Cameron, David

Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland)*
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Garnier, Edward
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Hendry, Charles
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, rh Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, rh Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, rh Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, rh Michael
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Redwood, rh John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo *(E Devon)*
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Whittingdale, John
Wiggin, Bill
Wilkinson, John
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Laurence Robertson and Angela Watkinson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time, and passed.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 30th January, proceedings on the Motion in the name of Mr Iain Duncan Smith shall lapse, if not previously concluded, at Six o'clock or three hours after they have been entered upon, whichever is the later; proceedings may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and the Orders of the House of 28th June 2001 and 29th October 2002 relating to deferred Divisions shall not apply to them.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Ordered,

That Sir Nicholas Winterton, Mr John McWilliam, Mr Frank Cook and Mr Edward O'Hara be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

NOTICES OF QUESTIONS, MOTIONS AND AMENDMENTS

Ordered,

That Standing Order No. 22 (Notices of questions, motions and amendments) be amended, by inserting, after 'Wales' in line 40, the words 'and the Advocate General'.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

SCOTTISH GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 100 (Scottish Grand Committee (sittings)),

That the Scottish Grand Committee shall meet at Westminster on Wednesday 12th February at half-past Two o'clock to consider a substantive Motion for the adjournment of the Committee, the proceedings to be interrupted at Five o'clock.—[Mr. Heppell.]

Question agreed to.

NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 115(1) (Northern Ireland Grand Committee (delegated legislation)),

That—

(1) the draft Strategic Investment and Regeneration of Sites (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 be referred to the Northern Ireland Grand Committee;

(2) the Committee shall meet at Westminster on Tuesday 4th February at half-past Two o'clock; and

(3) at that sitting the Committee shall consider the instrument referred to it under paragraph (1) above.—[Mr. Heppell.]

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Sentences

6.12 pm

Mr. Andrew Rosindell (Romford): It is with great sadness that I rise to present a petition to the House on behalf of no less than 41,000 constituents of mine and of constituencies neighbouring Romford.

On 14 December 2001 a tragic event took place in London road in my constituency, Romford, where Scott Young was punched in the face, fell into the path of a passing car and was tragically killed. His parents, Kim and Ray, their daughter Clare, the entire family and friends from around Romford and Havering have spent the past six months collecting 41,000 signatures from the local community.

The people of my constituency are outraged that the person who perpetrated that wicked crime received only three years in prison. It is said that within a year he will be released on parole. The Home Secretary today met the parents of Scott Young, and I am pleased that he agreed to take up the case and see what else can be done to bring justice.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Romford and the surrounding areas declares that the sentence given to Yannick Etutu for the manslaughter of Scott Young is entirely inappropriate and should have been much longer.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Home Affairs to review this sentence and introduce legislation that will ensure more appropriate sentences for this type of crime in the future.

And the petitioners remain etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Garrett (Honeywell International)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

6.15 pm

Mr. Colin Pickthall (West Lancashire): I am extremely grateful for having been given the opportunity to discuss this matter with the Minister this evening. For the sake of the record, I want to correct the Order Paper's spelling of the name of the firm, Garrett, which might otherwise alarm workers in another firm.

Just before Christmas, the parent company of Garrett in my constituency, Honeywell International of New Jersey, announced the factory's closure later this year. That ends the jobs of 350 directly employed and highly skilled workers in Skelmersdale. In the time that is available to me, I want to make clear to the Minister the nature of this economic and social tragedy in my constituency. I also wish briefly to comment on a wider issue that it illustrates all too clearly—the bloodless way in which multinational companies can operate and the part that they seem to be playing in stripping Britain of sizeable chunks of its manufacturing industry.

Garrett manufactures turbochargers for passenger car diesel engines and commercial vehicle diesel engines. The firm is the centre of excellence for the manufacture of commercial vehicle turbochargers in Europe. It has operated in Skelmersdale for almost 30 years. Garrett is profitable and efficient, and it has a market. Some 70 per cent. of its production for passenger car turbochargers supplies the Dagenham engine plant. That amounts to a total of 500,000 turbochargers in 2002.

The high quality of the product and the work force are acknowledged even by Honeywell International. The work force at the factory total 470. All the direct manufacturing jobs are to go, leaving design, testing and development personnel in Skelmersdale. Of course, I am very glad for them, however temporary that arrangement might prove—we do not know yet—but the fact that those jobs will remain scarcely moderates the scale of the disaster.

Skelmersdale is a smallish town of 42,000 people and small and medium-sized firms. Garrett is the largest private sector employer in the town. Indeed, I believe that it is second only to the local authority out of all the employers in the town. It is also one of the highest paying firms, if not the highest paying. It is the firm that most workers and young people in the town have, for as long as I can remember, always aspired to get into. Of course, its reputation for training and skills training only exaggerated that bias among the work force.

While unemployment in Skelmersdale has diminished vastly since 1997, it is still a lot higher than the national average, and the majority of jobs in the town are low paid and low skill.

The end of manufacturing at Garrett is therefore a substantial psychological as well as economic catastrophe for the town. Why has it happened? The simple answer appears to be that Honeywell has made the decision because it can. Its central reason is that work will be moved to Romania because wages there are a fraction—an eighth—of those in the United Kingdom.

Honeywell International has three plants in Europe: Thaon-les-Vosges in France, Atessa in Italy and Garrett in Skelmersdale. Its plan is to move the car turbocharger

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work from Skelmersdale to Atessa in the next six months. At the same time, a similar amount of work will move from the Atessa plant to the plant near Bucharest. The manufacture of commercial vehicle turbochargers from Skelmersdale will move straight to Romania later.

The company has given other reasons apart from wages. It claims that there is overcapacity in Europe and that there is no sign of an upturn in demand for several years. It says that it therefore needs to reduce the number of plants. However, it is not doing that; it is simply moving the three around a little and opening another in Romania. It claims that the cost of closing the Skem plant is less than that of closing either the French or the Italian plants. Other multinational companies have presented such arguments and they have often been discussed in the Chamber.

However, perhaps most chilling for us in government is the fact that Honeywell tells us that the customer and supply base is moving to eastern Europe. That means that car manufacturing and the manufacture of the appropriate components is moving slowly but surely towards eastern Europe.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) is present. She lived in Skelmersdale for many years and was a distinguished representative on the county council and district council. She knows all the arguments from her many years in Skelmersdale.

I have supplied the Minister's office with a copy of a paper that Amicus AEEU prepared. I am grateful to Harry Howard of AEEU and John Jones, the plant manager at Garrett, for the information that they prepared for me, and hence indirectly for the Minister. The company's documentation includes graphic illustration of the apparently inexorable move of car manufacturing and component supply eastwards to the low-pay areas of eastern Europe. I am sorry that I cannot read the map into *Hansard*, because it is so graphic.

I have nothing against the development of Romania, and I wish that country well. After some years, Romanian wages and conditions of service may improve—I hope that they will—to match ours. Presumably car manufacturing and other branches of engineering will then start moving even further east. To some extent, that is already happening.

In 2001, Ford at Dagenham applied pressure on the component manufacturers, including Garrett, that supplied its engine plant to relocate to the industrial park surrounding the Dagenham plant because of the express need to make the supply lines as short as possible. After the changes that I have described by Honeywell, the supply line will stretch 1,100 miles to Atessa or 1,500 miles to Bucharest.

Garrett workers suspect—I put it no more strongly because they did not—that the apparently illogical move of the work to eastern Europe is part of what Honeywell describes as the migration of the car industry eastward.

I have no knowledge of Ford's view of this development, but I would be very interested to hear it. I have alerted my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham (Jon Cruddas) to the possible implications of Garrett's move for the Dagenham engine plant. Will Ford tolerate a 1,500-mile supply line for this component? Do not all passenger car manufacturers have a strategy of establishing industrial parks around their assembly plants, in which their component manufacturers will be concentrated? I concede that that makes both economic and environmental sense. I would not suggest for one moment that Ford would follow a component supplier to the other side of Europe. That would be a case of the tail wagging the dog. I suggest, however, that the eastward migration that I have described may eventually involve both.

There may be many factors involved in such a migration of engineering and manufacturing, and this is the second engineering firm to move out from Skelmersdale to Romania in the last couple of years in almost precisely the same circumstances. Those factors include the level of the pound, the fact that we are outside the euro—a fact that Honeywell cited—and the comparative ease with which companies can close down plants in the UK, compared with the way in which obstacles are placed in the way of that in many of our European partner countries.

I know that the scenario that I am describing is not uncommon in manufacturing industry across the north-west. Indeed, I am embarrassingly aware that the Minister and his colleagues in the DTI have rather more Adjournment debates, questions and deputations than they would like, and I am sorry to have to add to that number.

In Skelmersdale, I represent a town with a long and painful history of unemployment and economic disadvantage, which crippled it during the Thatcher and Major years. Since 1997, thanks to its own strenuous efforts, substantial help from the Labour Government, and positive proaction from the county council and the district council, Skelmersdale's economy and, therefore, its community life have improved in a marvellous way. I am very proud of the part that the Labour Government and the Labour authorities have played in that.

Through thick and thin—most of it thin, I have to say—Garrett has been a solid rock of skill and success in Skelmersdale. It is, therefore, bitterly ironic that in the generally auspicious circumstances that we now have, faceless men or women sitting in New Jersey should snuff out such a success story in a game of long-distance chess, by

> "seizing the opportunity to take cost out of our European operation",

as the American representative of Honeywell who came to meet us said to me. I am desperately sorry for the Garrett work force and for those workers in the other firms—not only in my constituency—that supply Garrett, whose jobs will now also come under threat. I am also very angry that we, as a country and as a Government, seem so helpless in the face of these decisions. This is socio-economic crime, and attention must be paid to it.

In summary, I want to put some questions to my hon. Friend the Minister. I am well aware of the restrictions on what he can do about them. First, what advice and help can the DTI offer to the work force and the management at Garrett in relation to combating the closure and coping with its consequences, if and when it happens? Will he be able to find the time to meet workers and management from the firm, or possibly even to talk to Honeywell? Secondly, what, if any, leverage can the DTI bring to bear on an international company such as Honeywell to make it think again on this export of jobs? Thirdly, what is the scale of the exporting of engineering and manufacturing from the UK to eastern Europe and, indeed, to the EU? Would it be possible to break that figure down for the north-west? Fourthly, will the Minister examine the fact that Garrett's move to Romania could have serious implications for Dagenham?

If my hon. Friend cannot reply to, in particular, my third and fourth questions, I hope he will write to me at some point.

As I have said, Garrett is not a weak or a struggling firm; quite the reverse. It is a firm of the highest quality, producing high-quality products, with a first-class work force. Its closure is not just a tragedy for Skelmersdale. It strikes me as a frightening portent of things to come.

6.30 pm

The Minister for Employment Relations, Industry and the Regions (Alan Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall) on securing this debate, and on describing so eloquently the effects that the closure of Garrett—the 90-day period has not ended yet, but the situation looks grim—is having in his constituency. I know how hard he has worked to try to find alternatives on behalf of his constituents.

Garrett manufactures turbochargers for the automotive industry. Let me first say something about that industry, about Government support for it and about manufacturing more generally. I will then deal with the case raised by my hon. Friend. I hope to be able to answer most of the questions that he asked at the end of his speech.

Following publication of the enterprise, innovation and skills White Paper in February 2001, the Department of Trade and Industry established the automotive innovation and growth team. It was chaired by Sir Ian Gibson, former chief executive of Nissan's UK and European operations. It consisted of a strategy team comprising trade unionists, industrialists and others who had been in the automotive industry almost all their lives, and several sub-groups. They would examine various issues such as design, development and manufacture, distribution, competition and the consumer, the environment, and technology.

The team's report was published in May 2002. It contained seven recommendations relating to the future of our automotive industry over the next 20 years, all of which the Government accepted. We are committed to implementing the recommendations—many of which are relevant to the points raised by my hon. Friend—and we have allocated £45 million to the process. Following the report's publication, the DTI's automotive unit was restructured to focus on strong and effective relationships with key companies in the UK's automotive sector and on the team's recommendations. We are arranging to fund supply chain groups across the UK, as was announced at the Birmingham motor show on 22 October. Progress has also been made on implementing the other recommendations: that includes setting up an automotive academy and two centres of excellence, a pilot mobility services project and a retail motor strategy working group. Those initiatives reaffirm the Government's commitment to the automotive sector.

I think it highly unlikely that Ford is preparing to end diesel production in Dagenham, although I will do as my hon. Friend asks and look into the ramifications as set out in Amicus's detailed and comprehensive report. Ford has only just invested £340 million as part of a programme to establish the UK as Ford's European diesel centre of excellence. I visited the site recently, and observed enormous excitement about the amount that Ford is investing.

Garrett is in an assisted area and a European funding area, so there is scope for financial assistance. When companies experiencing difficulties, as is the case with Garrett, contact their local Government office—they must want our assistance in the first place—or regional development agency, they can expect advice and assistance relating to all the issues confronting them. Regional selective assistance, which is administered by the RDAs and which Garrett has received at least four times over the last 20 years, can be used to safeguard as well as create jobs when companies are in assisted areas. In the past three years in West Lancashire there have been nine offers of grants totalling £1.3 million, against a capital expenditure of £14.5 million, creating 355 jobs and safeguarding 79.

As a Government, we have helped more than 3,000 businesses across the country, supported £6 billion of investment and ensured that 135,000 jobs, most of them in manufacturing, which attracts 96 per cent. of all regional selective assistance grants, were created or safeguarded. It is clear that there are measures available to persuade Garrett to retain a presence in Skelmersdale but obviously the final decision rests with the company.

The level of assistance available to support companies, and Skelmersdale in the wider economic context, is considerable, and time after time we have succeeded. We must remember in this debate that it is not Romania, Hungary, Poland or the Czech Republic that attracts the most inward investment in Europe; it is the United Kingdom. We are second only to the United States in attracting inward investment, which is one of the reasons why—I will come to the specific problems of manufacturing in a second—last week's figures showed that, even though there is a global recession in manufacturing, we have the lowest unemployment in this country and the highest employment for 30 years.

In addition to having assisted area status, Skelmersdale is supported by objective 2 money, and under objective 2 priority 1, assistance is available to meet the specific needs of small and medium-sized companies. Operating under two action plans, the north and west Lancashire partnerships and the Northwest Development Agency plans have been awarded more than £40 million to date.

Financial assistance is an important means of support but the full range of regional and national support is much wider. Representatives from the north-west automotive sector have met on a number of occasions to discuss the possibility of setting up a north-west

[Mr. Colin Pickthall]

automotive group. The Northwest Development Agency has completed an automotive sector study seeking to take forward the findings.

We have invested £15 million in a new manufacturing advisory service to spread best practice. The Northwest Development Agency appointed the Manufacturing Institute as the regional centre of manufacturing excellence, designed to provide a range of support measures to help companies to develop "lean" manufacturing processes and to act as a one-stop shop, providing advice particularly to companies in the supply chain.

The Northwest Development Agency also delivers the supply chain programme, which helps and encourages north-west businesses to use north-west suppliers as well as assisting small businesses to devise recovery plans should their main customer reduce production or move from the area.

I turn to the substantive issue. I was extremely sorry to hear the announcement by Garrett of its plans to close the plant in Skelmersdale. As my hon. Friend said, as many as 350 jobs are to be lost, with consequential negative effects, no doubt, both locally and further afield. The effects will be devastating for staff and their families.

I understand that the company has given a guarantee that no one will be forced to leave before 1 May 2003 and is in consultation with staff representatives over the proposed move of production to Romania. West Lancashire district council has already liaised with Jobcentre Plus in order to find out what help could be offered to Honeywell if assistance is needed after the consultation period. On 16 January, an advisor from Jobcentre Plus met with the company to discuss the current situation.

It is obviously essential that Government agencies provide help to the company and most especially to the employees in dealing with the traumatic effects of the closure.

The question of skills, retraining and the redeployment experience of those who face redundancy is crucial both for those affected directly and for the country more generally. The Northwest Development Agency has published its framework for regional employment and skills action—FRESA—the purpose of which is to promote a healthy labour market in which employers and individuals get effective help to meet their employment and skills needs. We have a good record of getting people back into work quickly after plant closures and major redundancies. Ensuring that training is training is crucial to that effort.

The Government are committed to manufacturing, not least because it comprises one fifth of our national output, employs in excess of 4 million workers, produces the majority of our exports and is a key driver of productivity and innovation in the economy. These are difficult times for UK manufacturers, and for manufacturers in Japan, the US and Germany. For the first time since 1974, a synchronised global slowdown in manufacturing is affecting all the world's major industrial regions. We must see the sector through this recession and ensure that it is well placed to take advantage of the upturn, when it materialises.

Here in Britain, traditional manufacturing industries such as car making have been transformed through new technologies and techniques. Computers, robotics, and innovative processes and design have been harnessed for greater efficiency and productivity. The zenith of car manufacturing in Britain was not, as some maintain, in the 1960s. It is now: we export more than 1 million cars a year—five times more than in 1986—and we have nine major car manufacturers in the UK, which is more than any other EU country. We also have the world's most successful motor sports industry, and both Ford and Nissan have established their design centres in London.

I very much regret the Garrett announcement and the terrible consequences that it will have for employees. Representatives of the Northwest Development Agency and other agencies stand ready to talk to the company about options for retaining jobs and capacity at the site. Jobcentre Plus staff are ready to help Garrett employees if those discussions fail to bear fruit. I should be happy to meet trade unionists and managers from the company if my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire wants to set up arrangements with my office.

I have tried to put the matter in the context of what is happening with manufacturing in this country. Manufacturing makes up 19 per cent. of the UK's gross domestic product, compared with 14 per cent. in France, 18 per cent. in the US, and 22 per cent. in Germany. It is therefore wrong to say that manufacturing in Britain is suffering adverse effects that do not hit other countries. Our manufacturing industry needs the skills and abilities to compete effectively. We cannot stop companies moving to countries with low-wage economies, but—like Japan, Germany and the US—Britain has never wanted to compete on low wages, and never will. We compete on high wages, high skill and high added value. We must continue to do so, even through these difficult times.

To sum up: the Government will make advice and help available to the workers concerned in this matter. I will meet those workers, and look at the scale of exportation that could emerge from this, as set out by Amicus. In addition, I shall look at the validity and implications of the Garrett case, although that may be an academic exercise, as we do not live in a command and control economy and therefore cannot prevent companies from locating where they wish.

It is important that we learn from situations such as that described by my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire, and that we continue to help manufacturing businesses to raise their game so that we can develop and maintain a sound manufacturing sector in this country—one that is fit to face the challenges of the 21st century.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seventeen minutes to Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 27 January 2003

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Iraq

1. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): What recent representations he has made to EU Defence Ministers regarding Iraq. [93168]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): Before answering this question, I should be grateful for the House's permission to pay a brief tribute to one of my distinguished predecessors, Viscount Younger of Leckie, who died yesterday. George Younger was a well-liked and respected Member of this House for 28 years from 1964 to 1992. He served as Secretary of State for Scotland between 1979 and 1986 and was Secretary of State for Defence between 1986 and 1989. I am sure that the House will join me in sending our sincere sympathies to Lady Younger and other members of his family.

I have discussed Iraq in the context of talks on a range of defence issues with a number of European counterparts. In particular, I met my French and German counterparts last November and my Italian counterpart earlier this month.

Mr. Swayne: I thank the Secretary of State for his gracious words about Lord Younger.

Given the different views that are now clearly emerging in European capitals, which are reinforced by the remarks of Mr. Solana, are not the emphasis and policy so different as to make nonsense of a common European defence policy?

Mr. Hoon: I am not sure that I agree that there are such different views. The only country that has specifically ruled out the use of military force is Germany. There was an agreement at the Copenhagen summit to support United Nations resolution 1441, and I anticipate that at its meeting today the General Affairs and External Relations Council will again issue a unanimous declaration supporting resolution 1441, making it clear to the Iraqi Government that they have a final opportunity to resolve the crisis peacefully. I do not detect the disunity that may be implied by the hon. Gentleman's question.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Does the Secretary of State not recognise that Britain's position is, far from being in the mainstream, quite isolated from the rest of European opinion, that nobody in Europe believes that resolution 1441 gives authority to take military action and that the overwhelming majority of public opinion in this country and throughout Europe is strongly against military action? Will he confirm that there is no question whatever of Britain, alongside the United States, taking unilateral action to attack Iraq and that instead he will listen to the voices of reason and peace that are so loud in Britain, Europe and the United States?

Mr. Hoon: I believe that I have already answered the first part of my hon. Friend's question. I simply do not accept that Britain is isolated; moreover, in all the meetings and discussions that I have had with European counterparts there is a consistency of view about the need to ensure that Security Council resolution 1441 is implemented. If my hon. Friend looks at the terms of the resolution, he will see that it calls for further discussion by the Security Council before any further action is taken, and that is precisely the British Government's view.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): In wishing the Secretary of State well at this very difficult time, may I ask how many of his counterparts in the European Union have said that they would be prepared to place forces at the disposal of a coalition against Saddam Hussein?

Mr. Hoon: I do not believe that all countries have yet made that announcement. They are all determined, as we are, to seek a political and diplomatic solution to the problem before resorting to military force. I refer hon. Members to the recent statement by President Chirac of France in which he said that it was necessary for French forces to be ready for any eventuality.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): Did the Secretary of State discuss with Ministers the Pentagon battle plan "Shock and Awe", which in the words of the US military strategist Harlan Ullman would have a Hiroshima effect and take down the city, presumably killing thousands and cutting water and power? Is not such a plan a war crime, and will the Secretary of State tell his friends in the White House that we will have nothing to do with such barbarity?

Mr. Hoon: As I have indicated to my hon. Friend on previous occasions very recently, no decisions have been taken about military force. Clearly there have been decisions about the contingencies necessary, and I hope that she agrees that it is necessary clearly to indicate our willingness to use force in order to support the diplomatic and political process at the United Nations, which is supported by this Government.

Mr. Boris Johnson (Henley): Given the widespread anxiety among people who are perfectly willing to be persuaded that there is a case for war against Saddam

Hussein, will the UN weapons inspectors, if they ask for more time to carry out their inspections, be given that time, and if so, how much more time will they be given? Who will decide how much more time they should be given?

Mr. Hoon: I am sure that if the hon. Gentleman is patient and waits a few more minutes, the initial report by the weapons inspectors will be made to the United Nations Security Council in New York. We will be in a much clearer position to answer his questions when we see the nature of that report.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): May I first thank the Secretary of State for his extremely kind words about Lord Younger of Leckie, who was not only an esteemed statesman, but a great friend of many Conservative Members? The right hon. Gentleman's words will be of great comfort to Lord Younger's family.

I question what the Secretary of State calls unity in the European Union on the matter of Iraq. Does he agree that the only person who gains from the present disunity is the dictator Saddam Hussein? No Government have done so much to sell the idea of a common EU defence than this one, but Europe is clearly more divided than ever. As he reads the words of the EU high representative attacking the Government's policy, does he agree with the United States Secretary of State, Colin Powell, that that is the old Europe speaking, or is it, indeed, the new Europe, which is more divided from the US than ever?

Mr. Hoon: Again, I have dealt with unity. On one factual matter, however, the hon. Gentleman should look at the signature at the end of the Maastricht treaty, which first gave expression to the concept of developing European defence. To the best of my recollection, that was signed by a Conservative Prime Minister, presumably supported at the time by both a Conservative Foreign Minister and a Conservative Defence Secretary. He should have regard to that as a matter of historic record. However, I agree to the extent that it is important that there should be unity of purpose, as demonstrated by the unanimous vote of the UN Security Council on resolution 1441 and the Copenhagen European Council. I am sure that it will also be demonstrated by the General Affairs and External Relations Council today. All those bodies have given consistent support to the agreed international position adopted by all countries.

Mr. Jenkin: I think that President Chirac would be surprised to hear that the Government believe that Europe is speaking with one voice on the issue. The Government clearly said this morning that Iraq's failure to make a full declaration in December and its failure actively to co-operate with the weapons inspectors is a material breach of UN Security Council resolution 1441, which says that serious consequences must follow. Even if we cannot get unity in Europe, is that the view of the whole Cabinet? Will the International Development Secretary express that view and stick to it when she appears before the House of Commons on Thursday? How can the Government expect to win public support for their policy if there is any doubt that the Cabinet is united?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman is well aware of the doctrine of collective Cabinet responsibility to which all Cabinet members subscribe. I have no difficulty in pressing on him the various constitutional law text books that I used to read. I can even give him an old tutorial paper if he wishes to study the detail.

On unity, I will not upset the hon. Gentleman further by quoting President Chirac again, but the President has made it clear to French forces that they need to be ready for military action should that be decided by the French Government. That is precisely the position of the British Government. If British forces are needed, they will be available to support the will of the international community.

2. **Paul Flynn** (Newport, West): Whether he intends to amend the information, which he provided for the dossier on Iraq published on 24 September 2002. [93169]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The British Government's assessment of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, published on 24 September 2002, was based on the work of the Joint Intelligence Committee. The dossier provides a detailed assessment of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capabilities, including chemical and biological weapons, as well as efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. There are no current plans to amend it.

Paul Flynn: So much for the value of British intelligence. All the sites mentioned in the dossier have been visited by UN and International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors. The Government say that they have discovered no signs of any weapons of mass destruction and no evidence that those sites were ever used for their production. We also know that on the day on which the report was published, journalists visited the sites and found some of them derelict and the others used for benign purposes. Is it not crazy that the House took that piece of evidence from the Government in good faith, because we now know that it was a piece of vacuous propaganda? Would it not be greater folly if we continue to trust the intelligence that we have and make up more fairy stories about the threat from Iraq, so sending our soldiers to kill and be killed on the basis of further falsehoods?

Mr. Hoon: I am sorry that my hon. Friend appears willing to believe the Iraqi Government before his own Government. It is perfectly likely that since the publication of the dossier of weapons of mass destruction the Iraqi Government have moved large quantities of material. Indeed, there is already some evidence of that. Before reaching the conclusions that my hon. Friend appears to have reached, he should at least have assessed the probability that Saddam Hussein has not co-operated entirely with the weapons inspectors—a matter that, I anticipate, they will make clear in the weeks ahead.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Will the Defence Secretary take the opportunity to reissue that dossier, fully taking into account the assessment of Hans Blix and the Security Council, and will he add to it his own assessment of the humanitarian cost and the cost to the civilian infrastructure of a war in Iraq so that people of this country can decide whether they support such an effort?

Mr. Hoon: Of course, since the publication of the dossier, a United Nations Security Council resolution has been passed authorising the weapons inspectors to go about the task of investigating the whereabouts of weapons of mass destruction, so it would not make sense at this stage to attempt to duplicate their work. They are doing that work on behalf of the international community and we support their efforts very strongly.

Mr. Bill Olner (Nuneaton): Does my right hon. Friend not connect the weapons of mass destruction that Saddam Hussein now has with the weapons of mass destruction that we know he used against his own people in the past?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend is quite right. Indeed, one of the significant omissions from Iraq's declaration before Christmas concerned its failure to account for large amounts of chemical and biological equipment recorded by UNSCOM way back in 1998. It has made no effort whatsoever to explain to the world what has happened to those items and, indeed, to a range of other materials that clearly fall into the category of weapons of mass destruction.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): The Government have produced a dossier on weapons of mass destruction, and have produced a separate dossier on human rights abuses in Iraq. The third string in their justification for what is happening at the moment is the alleged links between Saddam Hussein and terrorist groups, particularly al-Qaeda. Will the Secretary of State produce a dossier laying out precisely what those links are, as some people believe them to be a little thin?

Mr. Hoon: We are aware that there are well-established links between the Iraqi regime and terrorist organisations. The links with al-Qaeda are much less strong, as I have made clear to the House over a period of time, and certainly the case for a connection with the events of 11 September 2001 is not at all persuasive. Nevertheless, it clearly can be argued that Saddam Hussein has consistently supported terrorist groups. Part of the concern, as set out by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister the other day, is that at some stage his weapons of mass destruction may fall into the hands of terrorist groups willing to use them.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): One of the moral justifications given by Britain and the United States for contemplating war against Iraq in 2003 is that in the 1980s Saddam used chemical weapons obtained from us and other major powers against the Iraqi people. Is speculation that we may use nuclear weapons against the Iraqi people designed to demonstrate our moral or our military superiority?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend proceeds on a wholly false basis. The use of force against Iraq would be in support of an agreed United Nations position once there had been a discussion in the UN Security Council on the proper course of action. I want to make it clear to my hon. Friend that efforts to bring Iraq into line are efforts of the international community—something with which I would have expected him strongly to agree.

Defence Capabilities Initiative

3. **Mike Gapes** (Ilford, South): If he will make a statement on Britain's contribution to NATO's defence capabilities initiative. [93170]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Mr. Adam Ingram): The United Kingdom has long supported and worked towards the improvement of NATO's capabilities. We have a good record among allies for implementing improvements related to NATO's defence capabilities initiative, and have made a significant contribution to the Prague capabilities commitment—a new initiative launched at the summit in November.

Mike Gapes: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that reply. Does he agree that a world where one country spends the equivalent on defence of that spent by the next 15 added together is not entirely healthy? Does he agree that the best way that Europeans, particularly countries such as Germany, can exert more weight in current debates is not to cut their defence spending but to make a greater contribution to the collective defence of NATO, so that the European collective voice is backed up by capabilities and we are not always dependent on one hyperpower?

Mr. Ingram: I agree with the general thrust of that question. Given this country's commitment to a substantial increase in our defence budget, we are setting standards that—hopefully—our European neighbours and allies will follow. To improve the capabilities set out in the various initiatives—whether that be the NATO capabilities initiative or one in the European Union—requires expenditure, but that must be properly targeted to deliver the broad range of capabilities that we desire.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Will the Minister take this opportunity to set right a no doubt inadvertent error made by the Secretary of State at the previous Defence Question Time? In answer to a question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) on the percentage of gross domestic product spent on defence, the Secretary of State said:

> "There were periods during the Conservatives' control of defence when the percentage was higher, but equally there were periods when it was lower."—[*Official Report*, 9 December 2002; Vol. 396, c. 4.]

The House of Commons Library has published figures showing that the percentage is now much lower than at any time since the 1930s, and we are on the brink of a major war. Will the Minister please set the record straight?

Mr. Ingram: I will study what the House of Commons Library has said and write to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the decision taken in Prague to set up the NATO response force was indeed to make NATO more effective in changed circumstances. Does he believe, however, that decisions on that force acting out of area will be made by NATO and beyond the diktat of the United States?

Mr. Ingram: NATO operates as a collaborative partnership; it can succeed only on that basis. That is why, increasingly, effort has been put into ensuring that capabilities are lifted progressively, so that we can deliver on the key objectives. As the contributions made by NATO allies will be part of that collaborative whole, the international response to any threat will be one that I know my hon. Friend would always want. That is clearly NATO's underlying principle, and one to which the Government strongly adhere.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): May I associate myself with the Secretary of State's comments about Viscount Leckie? When he was George Younger, I worked with him as a special adviser at the Ministry of Defence. He worked tirelessly on behalf of the armed forces, and the Secretary of State's comments will be much appreciated.

We all agree that it is very important in any multinational military operation that any casualties from so-called friendly fire are prevented. Concern has been expressed by retired and serving soldiers that UK armed forces deployed to the Gulf do not yet have credible electronic identification friend or foe equipment. In reply to my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) during last Monday's statement on Iraq: Further Contingency Preparations, the Secretary of State said:

"action is in hand to procure the necessary equipment to ensure that the equipment used by our forces is in every way compatible with the equipment that the United States is using."—[*Official Report*, 20 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 37.]

Will the Minister tell the House whether that equipment is being procured from Britain, America or some other NATO country? Secondly and most importantly, when does he expect our equipment to be operationally effective with IFF in the next few weeks?

Mr. Ingram: We are currently involved in a procurement process to enhance the technical capability of our equipment, but the matter is much more profound and complex than that. There is a range of other issues that need to be addressed. That procurement is not a matter that we discuss openly, nor do we clearly identify the equipment that we are putting in place. I know that the hon. Gentleman would expect such a rule to be rigorously applied. We do not divulge all our technical capabilities, for very obvious reasons.

Iraq

4. **Dr. Nick Palmer** (Broxtowe): What assessment he has made of the progress of weapons inspections in Iraq. [93171]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): We maintain regular contact with UNMOVIC and the International Atomic Energy Agency about the progress of inspections. Dr. Blix and Dr. el-Baradei will be reporting to the United Nations Security Council later today. Dr. Blix had a meeting with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 17 January at which he told the Prime Minister that, although the inspectors had encountered no direct obstruction in carrying out their tasks, the onus was on Iraq to be more proactive in its co-operation.

Dr. Palmer: Polls consistently show that two thirds of the public are prepared to support the Government in military action if the inspectors report consistent obstruction and the Security Council endorses that. I have had that view confirmed by my own constituency poll. However, there is widespread concern that we will plunge in, regardless. Does the Secretary of State agree that if the inspectors ask today for more time to reach a conclusion, most people would want Britain strongly to support that request?

Mr. Hoon: As I indicated to the House earlier, it is probably best that we should wait the relatively short time before Dr. Blix reports to the United Nations Security Council to see what, if any, requests he makes. I draw my hon. Friend's attention to what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said yesterday, namely, that the inspectors have

"got to be given the time to do the job".

That is the British Government's position. We want to see them complete the task set out by the Security Council, but we want them also to be allowed to carry out that task by the Government in Iraq.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): I associate myself and my right hon. and hon. Friends with the words of condolence to the family of Lord Younger. Does the Secretary of State agree that the weapons inspectors must be given the time to perform their tasks, and that it should be the United Nations, after listening to Dr. Blix, that should decide on the timing of such inspections? It was the strong view of many members of the armed forces whom I met last week in Kuwait, that any force should be UN-authorised, and that although there are concerns about climatic conditions in the Gulf, it should be the UN, not the weather, that determines the timing of any conflict. Can the Secretary of State confirm that British forces remain under US Centcom command and will stay under Centcom command if hostilities break out? What plans are there to redirect or withdraw British forces, should the US engage in military action in which the UK does not participate?

Mr. Hoon: I would have been much happier with the hon. Gentleman's question if he had said not that the weapons inspectors require more time, but that they require to see disarmament. That is central to the United Nations Security Council resolution, around which there was a unanimous view on the part of the Security Council. We want to see the Government of Iraq accepting their responsibilities to disarm under Security Council resolution 1441. That is the position of this Government and of the other 14 members of the

Security Council, as well as of the European Union, NATO and every other responsible Government in the world.

Mr. Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon): Does the Secretary of State give any credence to the rumours that the United Nations inspectors have not been getting the level of information that they required from western intelligence sources? If that is the case, why is it the case?

Mr. Hoon: I know that there are rumours to that effect, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman, as I assure the House, that this country in particular has co-operated fully with the weapons inspectors and has ensured that both equipment and information have been made available to them, which I believe has allowed them better to do their job.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): What credence does my right hon. Friend attach to recent reports that the issuing of protective clothing to Iraqi troops is proof positive, despite denials, that Saddam Hussein has and intends to use weapons of mass destruction? Does that mean that the issuing of protective clothing to British troops means, despite denials, that we have such weapons and also intend to use them?

Mr. Hoon: The authenticity of the report is obviously a matter for the BBC, which I think was first responsible for broadcasting it. That particular report is certainly consistent with previous reports that this Government have received and, indeed, with the dossier that we published last September. Obviously, it is a matter of grave concern to this country and other members of the international community that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction, including the sort of chemical weapons against which it would be necessary for Iraq to protect its forces with the sort of equipment that the BBC has described. I can assure my hon. Friend that such chemical weapons are not part of the United Kingdom's arsenal.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Since the Kurds of northern Iraq are likely to be in the front line of any military action, and since chemical and biological weapons have been used against the Kurds in the past, has any consideration been given to providing the Kurds with protective clothing in the event of military action?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend is right to express concern about the population of northern Iraq. That is precisely why British forces risked their lives in order to protect people in the area because of previous appalling attacks on the Kurds. Obviously, we do not control the ground in northern Iraq, which is a difficult part of the world. While it is arguably safer than many other parts of Iraq, it is still extremely dangerous territory.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): May I press the Secretary of State further on the question asked of him by my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Djanogly), which I think is one of the key questions? I believe that the Prime Minister is absolutely sincere in saying that Saddam has weapons of mass destruction, and I understand that this is not a game of hide and seek. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept, however, that what the public do not understand is that while the Prime Minister is saying there is clear evidence, the UN is finding so little? May I press him further to reassure the general public and the House that all the information that he has that convinces him that Saddam is in possession of such weapons is passed to the UN inspectorate, so that we can get clear evidence in front of the British people?

Mr. Hoon: I do not think that it is a great surprise to the weapons inspectors that there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Weapons inspectors have been in Iraq over many years since the end of the Gulf war, bearing in mind that it was a condition of the ceasefire that Iraq should abandon its programmes for the development of weapons of mass destruction. I accept that the issue is convincing the present set of inspectors that they have found proof on the ground that there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, but, equally, I invite hon. Members to look carefully at the terms of the UN resolution. It is a question of ensuring the co-operation of Iraq with the terms of that resolution. There is an obligation on Iraq to produce the material that it has. Although it has made a declaration, it is already clear that that declaration is insufficient, but we certainly await the further report of the weapons inspectors to take the matter further at this stage.

Wind Farms

5. **Mr. Gareth Thomas** (Harrow, West): What assessment he has made of the impact of wind farms on military radar; and if he will make a statement. [93172]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): Trials conducted by the Royal Air Force in 1994 and 1997 found that a wind farm in direct line has a detrimental effect on civilian and military radar performance, as the rotating blades can be a source of interference. The turbines can appear as genuine aircraft targets that could either mask aircraft responses or desensitise the radar within the sector containing the wind farm, and they can also cause an unquantifiable general effect on radar.

The Ministry of Defence is currently assisting with a Department of Trade and Industry sponsored study, which is being undertaken by Qinetiq, on the effects of turbines on radar systems. The aim is to identify ways in which adverse impacts can be reduced, including technical adaptations to turbine design. That study began in September 2001 and is due to be completed shortly.

Mr. Thomas: Given the potential impact on military radar, I recognise the need for the Ministry of Defence to examine each planning application for a new wind farm, but does my hon. Friend acknowledge the anxieties of several wind farm developers about the Ministry's occasional lack of speed in deciding whether to lodge an objection to a wind farm? Given the wind farm industry's considerable potential to create new jobs and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, will he consider carefully further action to speed up the Ministry's consideration of such matters?

Dr. Moonie: Yes, I shall. Every proposal to the Ministry of the Defence receives a full appraisal by at least seven separate technical advisers, each with their own specialism. The criteria for the case-by-case consideration are the effect of the development both on the ability to train our pilots safely and operational capability. We are members of a steering group on wind energy, which is considering ways to speed up the process. Between July 1996 and November 2002, our experts had to consider some 1,900 proposals from wind farm developers throughout the United Kingdom. In 2002, we were consulted on a total of 952 developers' proposals, to which we have objected to 248 so far.

Defence Information Infrastructure

6. **Mr. Richard Bacon** (South Norfolk): What the budget and planned delivery dates are for the defence information infrastructure. [93173]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Mr. Adam Ingram): The Ministry of Defence currently spends approximately £500 million per year on its information infrastructure and related services. The defence information infrastructure programme, which will bring together all the Ministry's information networks in a single managed service, will be subject to competitive tender and is expected to deliver significant savings over current expenditure. The defence information infrastructure will be delivered incrementally, and current plans are for an initial operating capability by 2005.

Mr. Bacon: The public sector's record in managing information technology projects over many years can best be described as chequered. Given that the Ministry of Defence recently had to write off costs relating to the defence management system, what special project management measures are being taken to ensure that the defence information infrastructure programme, which is so important to the UK's defence, is provided on budget and on time?

Mr. Ingram: We are learning from the mistakes of the past all the time. The Office of Government Commerce is designed to capture such experiences and ensure that we identify the shortfalls and weaknesses in some big, expensive and important IT projects. As I said, the project will be provided incrementally. It has received a high level of oversight, and a McKinsey study has examined various aspects of it. We are alert to the problem of industry promises that are not always fulfilled. We are therefore putting better management resources and high-level oversight into the project. We are also keeping a close ministerial eye on it.

Iraq

7. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): What assessment he has made of the military effects of bombing Baghdad. [93174]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): There has been no decision to take military action against Iraq. It is still not too late for Saddam Hussein to decide to accept United Nations resolutions and thereby avoid the necessity for any kind of military action.

Mr. Dalyell: I echo the tribute to George Younger.

Do not we have to think things through? Are not there three horrendous scenarios? The first is bombing on a Dresden scale, which would create unthinkable reverberations in the Arab world and destroy one of the world's great cities. The second, heaven help us, is street fighting in the alleys and sewers of Baghdad. Only those who, like me, have seen them can imagine the horrendous task of British and American forces in that situation, where the opponents know the sewers and alleyways. The third is the siege of Baghdad and, presumably, starvation of the population. If the Secretary of State knows any other scenarios, he should tell us because such matters should be thought through.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, at least for suggesting that we should think things through. That is precisely the British Government's position. I invite him to think through Iraq's history and its failure to comply with a series of international obligations, going back to the ceasefire provision that I mentioned earlier. It gave Saddam Hussein 15 days in which to co-operate with abandoning his programme of weapons of mass destruction. The process continues. There were some 26 United Nations obligations before what was described as the final opportunity for Iraq in resolution 1441 to comply with the will of the international community. It therefore remains up to Saddam Hussein and his regime in Iraq to comply with the decisions of the international community. I am sure that my hon. Friend would strongly support that.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): Given that our quarrel is not with the Iraqi people, but with their dictator, what discussions has the Secretary of State recently had with the Secretary of State for International Development to ensure that once the bombing of Baghdad has begun—and thereafter, we hope, quickly comes to an end—we can put in place an immediate humanitarian relief and rescue package to demonstrate our commitment to the Iraqi people?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman is certainly right that we have no quarrel with the Iraqi people, and nor have we ever had. However, it is important that the regime in Baghdad accepts the will of the international community. We set out very recently the aims and objectives of our policy in relation to Iraq, which certainly include rebuilding and restoring in Iraq a degree of representative government, and that is something that we are determined to achieve. I do not want to go into details of aftermath planning of the kind that he mentions, because that implies the inevitability of military action. Military action is still neither inevitable nor imminent.

David Winnick (Walsall, North): Should not the Secretary of State bear it in mind that the dire warning given by my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow

(Mr. Dalyell) used exactly the same words that he used in relation to the liberation of the Falklands, to Kuwait 12 years ago, and, much more recently, to Kosovo? On all those issues, he was wrong and was proved to be wrong. If military action is to be avoided, is there not a need for Iraq's criminal and murderous regime to be far more honest about weapons of mass destruction? How many Members of Parliament, if my hon. Friend had to hazard a guess—

Mr. Speaker: Order. That is enough questions for the Secretary of State to be going on with.

Mr. Hoon: I accept that there are those who are sincerely opposed to military action in any circumstances and those who are opposed to military action in most circumstances. I would put the Government into the second category. We want to avoid military action if at all possible. A political, diplomatic route remains available to Saddam Hussein, and we believe that he should take that route and comply with the wishes and decisions of the international community.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): May I pursue the point made by my friend and colleague of 40 years, the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell)? I am one of those who believe that, if it is definitely established that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction and is in a position to use them, we will certainly have to disarm it, but I hope that all the tactical and strategic considerations will be borne in mind. Speaking as somebody who, as a very young officer, led patrols in a hostile Arab city much smaller than Baghdad 53 years ago, I put it to the Secretary of State that as Baghdad is a city of 5 million people, if Saddam Hussein withdraws, as I suspect that he will, his entire army inside Baghdad, so that the city has to be taken street by street and house by house, the casualties—not only on our side, but on the civilian side—will be absolutely enormous. Even the German army in 1871—

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Hoon: I believe that I have probably answered the hon. Gentleman's question already, but I point out to him that he assumes that those 5 million people will be fighting for Saddam Hussein.

Mr. Dalyell: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. In view of the fact that the issue of Baghdad needs more exploration, may I be considered for an Adjournment debate on that subject?

Recruitment

10. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South): How many new recruits have joined the armed services in each of the past two years, having completed all training courses. [93177]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): The number of new recruits in the financial years 2000–01 and 2001–02 were 22,960 and 23,578 respectively. The time taken to complete full training varies, with some trades requiring well in excess of two years, but the numbers completing basic training and joining the trained strength of the armed forces in the past two years were 16,600 and 17,040 respectively.

Mr. Cunningham: Given the number of young people joining the armed forces and the possibilities of a first-class career, but given also the build-up in the Gulf, can the Minister reassure us that there will be sufficient British forces for the peacekeeping missions around the world for which they are renowned?

Dr. Moonie: Yes, I can assure my hon. Friend that that is so. What is important is the proportion of those whom we recruit to initial training that we manage to bring through on to the full trained strength. Over the past few years, we have put a great deal of effort into improving the training stream to try to ensure that we lose fewer people on the way.

Patrick Mercer (Newark): The Army remains stubbornly short of about 6,000 men. We stand on the brink of war, yet sections of the Army have had their recruiting suspended. Can the Minister explain that?

Dr. Moonie: Recruiting has held up very well this year and we have reached 16,990 new recruits in total after eight months, which is 68 per cent. of the target. The Army has not stopped recruiting and it has not stopped initial training. Due to a successful Army recruiting year, the numbers have exceeded available training places for the remainder of this financial year. As a result, a small number of Army recruits who were due to commence initial training in March will be offered places in April and May 2003. There will be no effect on any immediate operational activity.

Mr. Brian Jenkins (Tamworth): Would my hon. Friend like to hazard an estimate of the percentage of those recruits who are from ethnic minorities within and outside this country?

Dr. Moonie: I can answer that very briefly—not sufficient, but the numbers are increasing. There are gratifying signs that we are recruiting more effectively from ethnic minorities, and we shall continue to put a great deal of effort into increasing the percentage.

Armed Forces (Gulf)

11. **Mr. George Osborne** (Tatton): If he will make a statement on the size of United Kingdom armed forces on duty in the Gulf. [93178]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): UK armed forces on duty in the Gulf region include about 1,000 Royal Air Force personnel supporting patrols over the no-fly zones and about 1,500 Royal Navy, Royal Fleet Auxiliary and RAF personnel supporting our contribution to the campaign against international terrorism. As part of our continuing preparations for possible military action in Iraq, a relatively small number of service personnel are working in liaison and planning teams in the Gulf region.

In addition, a wide range of personnel from all three services perform defence diplomacy duties throughout the Gulf region.

Mr. Osborne: Does the Secretary of State agree that many thousands of those soldiers face weeks of anxiety and uncertainty as the campaign in Iraq hots up? Will he join me in condemning those insurance companies, such as Norwich Union and Prudential, that refuse to provide life assurance cover to them? When does he plan to talk to those insurance companies so that at least that part of those soldiers' fears and anxieties is addressed?

Mr. Hoon: The situation was dealt with effectively on behalf of the insurance companies by the Association of British Insurers, which indicated that the recent report in *The Times* was "misleading and inaccurate". Those are its words. It went on to say that life cover for members of the armed forces can usually be purchased at standard premium rates, that existing life insurance policies will continue in force and that armed forces personnel are encouraged to recognise the long-term nature of life insurance. So, there seems to be a clear view from the insurance companies that policies will continue to be available.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff, West): One anxiety faced by our armed forces in situations where there may be conflict is the possibility of casualties due to friendly fire. Given the revelations from the investigation of the friendly fire killings of four Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan last year, will the Secretary of State tell the House what representations he has made to the United States authorities on the issuing of amphetamines to US pilots when they go into combat? Given that the side effects include irritability and heightened awareness all round, will he confirm that he has made representations to his US counterpart on the use of amphetamines in any military action?

Mr. Hoon: I dealt with that question the other day. A disciplinary inquiry is under way in the United States, where the use of amphetamines by two pilots has been alleged, and the House should await the result of that inquiry before I comment on it.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): The Secretary of State obviously did not hear the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch), so I shall repeat it. Are the British forces in the Gulf currently under US Centcom command, will they remain so if hostilities break out, and what plans are there to withdraw or redirect British forces should American forces engage in hostilities without British participation?

Mr. Hoon: The question asked by the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne) related to British forces on duty in the Gulf, and I answered that. Those on duty in the Gulf are currently performing acts of planning and liaison with relevant authorities, and not simply with the US authorities.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Is the Secretary of State aware that, if British forces are used in the war against Iraq, there will be concern not only about the military effect of action but about its politically destabilising effect throughout the Arab world and throughout the entire Muslim world from northern Nigeria to the streets of Bradford? Does he agree with the President of Egypt, Mr. Mubarak, who said a few months ago that, if America and Britain attacked Iraq without an explicit UN resolution, not one regime in the middle east would be able to contain its population?

Mr. Hoon: I have had conversations with a good number of representatives of various countries in the Gulf and the wider middle east. Their views were not in accord with that expressed by my hon. Friend. Clearly, there are concerns about the destabilising effect of possible military action, should it prove necessary. However, there are stronger concerns about the politically destabilising situation of allowing Saddam Hussein to continue in power, particularly if he develops and is able to use weapons of mass destruction. I do not believe that views on what is politically destabilising are necessarily as consistent as my hon. Friend might suggest.

May I assume from what my hon. Friend said that, if there is a second UN resolution authorising the use of force, she will strongly support it?

Iraq

12. **Mr. Mark Prisk** (Hertford and Stortford): What progress his Department has made in its contingency arrangements for military action against Iraq; and if he will make a statement. [93179]

14. **John Barrett** (Edinburgh, West): What plans he has for the use of military forces in Iraq. [93181]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): No decision has been taken to use military force in Iraq. It is clear that Saddam Hussein will comply with international law only when diplomacy is backed up with a credible threat of force. That is why it is necessary to prepare our armed forces for any military operations, as set out in recent statements to the House.

Mr. Prisk: On 7 January, the Secretary of State said that, to tackle the dreadful problem of friendly fire, which has been referred to already, the Government would

"acquire new equipment that will be available in time for any potential conflict".—[*Official Report*, 7 January 2003; Vol. 397, c. 28.]

Has that equipment been acquired? Will it be fitted to protect every operational vehicle, and not just some?

Mr. Hoon: New equipment is being acquired, as I have told the House more than once. Combat identification is not just about fitting equipment. We must also ensure that our forces and those with which we are in coalition are aware of our positions, and aware of accurate and agreed target identification, tactics and other techniques and procedures. That is a complex process, and it is under way with those responsible for preparing and planning for the necessity of any military operations in Iraq.

John Barrett: If there is no specific UN mandate for military action against Iraq, what will the Secretary of State do to receive the backing of the millions of people in this country who are against action being taken in their name without such a resolution?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman anticipates a situation that has not yet arisen. I assure him that this country wants effective action to disarm Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction. I believe that the country will strongly support the Government's efforts to achieve that laudable end.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): Pentagon officials were quoted this weekend referring to

"an aerial bombardment so intense that Iraqi forces will be disabled and demoralised, making a ground assault unnecessary."

Despite what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon), does he plan for and will he commit British troops to such an assault on Baghdad? If so, is it not incumbent upon him to make some estimate of the humanitarian cost of such action?

Mr. Hoon: I assure my hon. Friend that all decisions taken by the British Government in relation to any possible action against Iraq will be in conformity with international law, the humanitarian element of which is significant.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): The Secretary of State has said that he would prefer a second UN resolution before any military action, but that he would not feel bound by the unreasonable use of the veto. If another country uses the veto—as is provided for within the rules of the UN—what does he think is within the UN charter that gives him, the Prime Minister or George Bush the right to decide that it is unreasonable and ignore it?

Mr. Hoon: It is important that we allow the process set out in resolution 1441 to unfold without anticipating what might or might not happen in the future.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The Secretary of State's gracious tribute to the late Lord Younger will be widely appreciated, not least by his son James, who happens to be a constituent of mine. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that studied inactivity is not an option; that appeasement, whatever the intentions of those who advocate it, is invariably disastrous; and that, if we do not take the steps and show the moral courage necessary to act, if it is unavoidable so to do, future generations will not forget the fact and will not forgive it, either?

Mr. Hoon: It is clear that the policy of containment, if it has not actually failed, is certainly failing. Therefore, it is incumbent on the international community—as the unanimous vote of the Security Council in November recognised—to take action to deal with the threat posed by Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Certainly we do not have the choice of doing nothing. Saddam Hussein has a choice: he can choose to disarm, or, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made clear, the international community will have to disarm Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) made clear, the Government can count on possibly stronger support from the Conservative Opposition than from many of the Secretary of State's own colleagues if the taskforce goes into action. If it does, is it not the case that it must be adequately defended? Is he content that, out of our three aircraft carriers, only one is available? Is he content that that one has been converted to the role of a commando and helicopter carrier largely because of the paying-off of Fearless before Albion became available? Is he also content that the most experienced pilots of Sea Harriers will not be deployed? Is he not worried that some will feel that that may have less to do with the availability of alternative land-based aircraft and more to do with the fact that if the Sea Harriers and their pilots distinguish themselves in any conflict, it will show how unwise it will be to phase out the Sea Harriers—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State only has to answer one question.

Mr. Hoon: I suppose that I should congratulate the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) on his obsessions, but he should not allow them to get in the way of sound military planning.

Mr. Bercow: He has a doctorate in it.

Mr. Hoon: We have sound military advice from those responsible as to how best to configure the force that is being planned to take military action in Iraq, should that be required. [*Interruption.*] I am getting some helpful advice from Conservative Front Benchers that the hon. Member for New Forest, East has a doctorate in obsessions. I thought it better to suggest that he had a doctorate in armchair generalship.

Africa (Conflict Prevention)

13. **Hugh Bayley** (City of York): What assistance his Department is giving to conflict prevention in Africa. [93180]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Mr. Adam Ingram): The Ministry of Defence contributes to the Government's conflict prevention efforts in Africa in close co-operation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development through the interdepartmental conflict prevention pool. Together, we are also working with our partners in the G8 and Africa to increase the impact and effectiveness of existing and emerging conflict reduction efforts.

Hugh Bayley: In view of the important contribution that British military advisers have made to the search for a durable peace in southern Sudan, will my right hon. Friend look at the prospects for building a ceasefire between the Ugandan Government forces and the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda? Will he especially take advice from our high commissioner in Kampala on the views of members of the Ugandan Parliament who come from northern Uganda as to whether it might be possible to broker a ceasefire there as well as in southern Sudan?

Mr. Ingram: My hon. Friend is a specialist on all matters relating to Africa and raises a most important issue: how we take forward conflict prevention. At all times, we must examine the whole range of practical options that can be delivered. I shall certainly take account of the views that he has expressed and ensure that they are actively considered.

Child Support Reform

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr. Andrew Smith): With permission Mr Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the implementation of the child support reforms.

As the House knows, the Government are reforming the child support system to ensure that more children benefit from regular maintenance. That will get support more effectively to parents with care and their children, help non-resident parents meet their responsibilities and tackle child poverty.

The new scheme will be more transparent and easier for parents to understand. It will also be easier for the agency to calculate maintenance and enforce payment so that children have the support that they need. It will be based on a simple rate so that non-resident parents will know in advance how much maintenance they must pay. For example, non-resident parents with net incomes of £200 to £2,000 a week will be expected to make payments—based on 15 per cent. for one child, 20 per cent. for two and 25 per cent. for three or more—from their net weekly income; that is, after tax, national insurance and pension contributions, and after the same percentage allowance for any children in their new family.

For non-resident parents with net incomes of less than £100 a week and those receiving income support and jobseeker's allowance, child maintenance will be set at a flat rate of £5 a week. For those with incomes of between £100 and £200 a week, there will be a sliding scale. There will be specific provisions for cases where the care of children is shared.

The introduction of the child maintenance premium will mean that for the first time parents with care receiving income support or income-based jobseeker's allowance who are on the new scheme can keep up to £10 a week of any maintenance paid for their children. That will give them a real stake in making child support work.

The changes we have brought in since 1997 will help, too. The Child Support Agency is more customer focused. Levels of compliance have increased; the agency now collects over £200 million more each year in child maintenance than it did five years ago. The number of complaints is well down; for example, those referred to the chief executive by Members of the House have fallen 28 per cent. over the past three years.

Last March, my predecessor, now the Secretary of State for Transport, announced that the introduction of the new scheme would be delayed until the Government were confident that the new information technology worked effectively. That was the right decision and was generally welcomed on both sides of the House, as well as by voluntary groups.

Last September, I wrote to all Members updating them on progress. I said that testing of the computer system had been progressing satisfactorily over the summer so that we were in a position to pilot the new IT for some cases on existing rules. Those pilot arrangements have worked well and are operating across the country. Both senior officials and I are now satisfied, on the basis of the careful and comprehensive testing, that the system will deliver the level of service that our customers have a right to expect.

I am pleased to tell the House that new cases will be calculated using the new rules from 3 March this year. New cases are those where liability for maintenance begins on or after 3 March. They will come on to the system at a rate of 30,000 a month. I should remind the House that we always planned to introduce the changes in a phased way. We will start in March with new cases, and then convert the existing 1.1 million cases later, when we can see how the arrangements are working.

However, some existing cases will be brought across to the new scheme earlier than others—primarily those that become linked to a new case. For example, if an application calculated under the new scheme were made by a parent with care in respect of a non-resident parent who was already liable for maintenance in a different case, it would be neither fair nor workable for people to have liability simultaneously under two different schemes, so it is best to move those linked cases on to the new system together. We will, of course, write to existing clients to explain how they will be affected by the changes and to tell them that they need do nothing further until they are contacted by the agency.

I am satisfied that the IT system will deliver a level of service that is acceptable, but with any new system of this size, even after exhaustive testing, there will be some bugs to be sorted out. We have put in place systems and procedures to deal with that. We are also improving arrangements for responding to inquiries from the public, advice agencies and hon. Members. Tomorrow, I shall write to hon. Members with details of an MP-specific hotline that is already in place in all the agency's business units. The agency will do all that it can to ensure that the new system gives a better service to clients.

On the financial implications of this announcement, my predecessor told the House in his statement on 20 March last year that there would be additional costs. The system has proved to be more complex than had been originally thought, and we have reached a negotiated agreement with EDS to share those costs, with it meeting its share under the contract. The amount that the Government will pay has risen by about 7 per cent. over the term of the contract. Although any extra cost is unwelcome, an increase on that scale is not at all unusual for a complex project—whether in the public or private sector—and it is justified to deliver this important reform.

The implementation of the new IT system is the key to bringing in the much-needed new child support scheme, with its better, fairer and simpler system for calculating maintenance. It will help us to target resources to make sure that more maintenance is actually paid, getting more money to children more quickly. That is the right policy. I believe that the decision that we took to delay implementation last March was right, and that it is the right decision to proceed now.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. In fact, more than that, I welcome it with some relief after years of delay.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that the new IT system was originally promised for October 2001; then April 2002; and then, in March last year, it was delayed with no new date fixed at all? Although millions of families have been kept waiting, the latest CSA annual

[Mr. David Willetts]

report—in typical new Labour style—claims that it has already delivered the change agenda. It says, "target achieved", with one of those ticks in the box as well.

Will the Secretary of State tell the House about the reasons for that delay? We need to know, not least because it is very relevant to the bill for the delay. EDS says that the problem is that Ministers kept interfering in the details of the system. Ministers may, understandably, have a different version of events, but we know from the Secretary of State's statement that the Government will now pay more as a result of that delay. That implies that they accept some responsibility for what has happened. The Secretary of State did not tell the House how much more they will have to pay. We are talking about a project valued at hundreds of millions of pounds, with very significant cost over-runs. How much of that cost will be borne by the taxpayer? The House is entitled to know.

There are 1.5 million children in families covered by the CSA. We all know the problems of the CSA, which have been brought to the surgeries of all Members of the House. Can the Secretary of State give the House any more information about the handling of existing cases? More than 1 million families are still in the dark after today's announcement. When will they be moved on to the new IT system and the new formula? One Minister said in a Committee that it would take a year; another said that it would take five years. What is the Secretary of State's estimate, which will enable existing cases to know where they stand?

The Department has several major projects on its hands. The Secretary of State is introducing a new system for paying benefits in the spring, the national rollout of Jobcentre Plus, the new pensions service, the new pension credit in the autumn, and all the Chancellor's pet tax credits, which are also being changed. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am pleased that Labour Members welcome all those changes, and I hope—especially if they have welcomed them—that they, like me, will seek an assurance from the Secretary of State that they are all on time, on budget and deliverable. Surely the lesson from the disaster with the IT project for the CSA is that the Government have significant problems delivering all these changes. Will the Secretary of State learn lessons from that sorry episode and apply them to the other big projects piling up in his Department? Millions of families will face uncertainty and delay unless he can guarantee to the House that the projects will be delivered on time and on budget.

Mr. Smith: I thank the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) for his welcome—lukewarm though it was. I confirm the timetable. As my predecessor said on 20 March last year, it was right to delay, rather than rushing in an incomplete and unready system. I thought that that was generally understood on both sides of the House. Let us remember why we must modernise and improve the child support system: the Conservatives rushed it in 10 years ago. They had the benefit of good will on both sides of the House. I think that they now accept that the system collapsed under its own weight, as it was overly complex, and the IT was not ready. That is why we have had to put in place these reforms.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether additional cost had come about because policy had changed. The policy has not changed. As he knows, the basic features of the system are as set out in the 1999 White Paper. The reason that additional costs were incurred was that the project, including the interfaces with the legacy systems that we inherited—IT systems that were designed, for the most part, in the 1970s and built in the 1980s—was much more complex and required a lot more work than was originally envisaged.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the extent of the extra expenditure. I said that it was 7 per cent. more across the life of the project. The total cost of the project, across its life, goes from some £427 million to £456 million. He asked, too, about the handling of existing cases. The staff who have been employed have been striving to make the unsatisfactory existing system work as well as they can. As I said, the level of complaints has gone down. In terms of compliance, case compliance has been running at 71 per cent. and cash compliance at 68 per cent., which contrasts with the figures when the Conservative party was in charge and struggled to get compliance running at above 50 per cent. Everybody accepts that there are limits to what one can do with the old system that the Conservatives introduced. It needs replacing, and it is right to proceed as we are doing.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the changeover of existing cases. As I said in my statement, we will reach a decision on that, sensibly, once we can see how the new system is working out in practice.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the lessons to be learned. There are lessons to be learned from this and indeed other major IT projects across the years. Principal among them is the need to give even closer thought to the specification and management arrangements when the contract is originally concluded. Thanks to the work that the Office of Government Commerce is doing, and the gate procedure that is now in place on all major projects, those lessons are being learned and applied. Perhaps the most important lesson is not to inherit a system that does not work from a Government who did not work for families or for children.

Paul Holmes (Chesterfield): I thank the Secretary of State for giving advance sight of his statement.

The Liberal Democrats would have preferred to hear today that the Government were adopting our proposals to pass all the administration of child support over to the Inland Revenue, which already administers child benefit, will administer child tax credit and already has the names, addresses and tax records of everyone with children.

However, given that the Minister is now going ahead with the long-delayed attempt to streamline the existing system, if the Government and EDS are sharing the extra costs of the 18-month delay, does that mean that both were at fault in the delay?

Is it true that the appeals service is budgeting for up to a million new complaints as a result of the new system, as one internal newsletter suggests? When existing cases are eventually switched to the new system, is it still the Government's intention to switch them all at once, on the same day? If so, will the new computer system cope? Constituents who see friends on the new system will be asking us when they will be switched to it. What should we tell them?

Finally, can the Minister clarify why the new scheme starts on 3 March rather than 5 April, the start of the new financial year? The rhetoric so far has been of streamlining and simplicity, but the fear is that the chaos has only just begun.

Mr. Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks and his welcome, such as it was, for the introduction of the new system.

The hon. Gentleman asked about levels of compliance and general performance under the new system. I referred to levels of compliance under the existing system: cash compliance at 68 per cent. and case compliance at 71 per cent. With both of those, we expect to achieve 75 per cent. under the new system, so there will be a clear improvement.

Bringing on to the system all 300,000 recipients of income support who will attract the child support premium is an enormous gain. Taking that with the efficiency improvements in existing cases, we anticipate that some 80 per cent. of parents with care will be better off as a result of the new system.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the changeover of existing cases and whether that would be a big bang. We shall have to phase in the changeover of the existing 1.1 million cases. As to the date, I said in response to the hon. Member for Havant that we need to review the progress and working of the new system before setting it. Of course, I understand the attraction, when people see the benefits of the new system, of wanting to do that as soon as possible, but it makes sense with any big IT rollout to do it only when one knows that the system is working properly. That is what we shall do.

The hon. Gentleman asked why the date was 3 March rather than some time in April. This represents a big step forward, a big improvement for parents with care and a fairer system for non-resident parents as well. Other things being equal, the sooner it is introduced, the better. I am sure that if I were announcing it for April, the hon. Gentleman would be asking why it was not for March.

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North): I remind my right hon. Friend that the original child support legislation required three further pieces of primary legislation. The computer system that was put in to operate it has now suffered more than 1,000 days when it has been either partially or totally shut down. The Opposition should bear that in mind.

I return to the child maintenance premium. Had we been on the original timetable, many single parents would have been receiving it from this April. The delay is not their fault. Is there any possibility of bringing that in before transferring existing cases to the new system, so that those children are lifted somewhat out of the poverty that they are in?

Mr. Smith: I thank my hon. Friend, who takes a close interest in these matters, for his pertinent reminders of the sheer chaos in the original child support system. We have had to tackle that and introduce reforms steadily to improve it before changing to the new system.

I understand the case that my hon. Friend makes on the child maintenance premium. I assure him that we considered the matter very carefully, but had we sought, before existing cases switched to the new IT system, to link those receiving maintenance with the child maintenance premium, that would have added another layer of complexity to a very demanding IT delivery programme. As I said, we are trying to manage and reduce the risks associated with that, so that we can deliver to an acceptable standard, and therefore decided, perhaps unfortunately, that it was not possible to make that link.

Mr. Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield): While the Secretary of State's announcement is good news, in that the technology has at last caught up with the will of Parliament, may I remind him that these changes, with a simpler formula, are not in themselves a panacea because there will be a significant increase in the element of rough justice that results? I urge him and his colleagues to understand the need to be robust in facing down those who will seek an excuse not to pay their maintenance when society rightly expects them to do so.

Mr. Smith: The answer is yes. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's remarks, which are all the more striking because of his previous responsibilities in this area. Although there is an element of rough justice in the greater simplicity, people can at least see where they stand and understand the basis on which the assessment is made. Sadly, that is not true of the vast majority of cases under the old system.

As the hon. Gentleman said, we need to be robust, and we certainly shall be. One of the advantages of the change is that it will release staff resources to focus on enforcement rather than on assessment and reassessment. I shall be pleased to pray the hon. Gentleman in aid when we need to be robust.

Angela Eagle (Wallasey): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we do not need to take lessons from the Conservative party, which bought from America an off-the-shelf computer that does not even recognise British national insurance numbers? I welcome the fact that we can now replace that and run a much simpler system. Will my right hon. Friend say a little more about how the simplified system will enable staff to spend more time chasing the approximately 30 per cent. of non-resident parents who currently pay nothing?

Mr. Smith: Yes, indeed. My hon. Friend is right; I believe that the current system came from Florida, where they produce such good voting machines. My hon. Friend is right to point to the improved capacity that we will have to chase those who pay nothing. That is in addition to the advantages to the child maintenance premium, which, in benefit and payment terms, will provide an incentive where there is none—apart from the child bonus—for families on income support and jobseeker's allowance.

We now have an opportunity to increase the level of payment and, more generally, to reinforce, where appropriate, the importance of non-resident parents meeting their responsibilities and having contact with their children. I hope that because the new system makes

[Mr. Smith]

it easier to address financial issues, it will do rather less to sour relations between parents with care and non-resident parents.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): For some years now, the CSA has been adept at collecting straightforward amounts of maintenance from people on PAYE—fathers, generally speaking—so that their children are properly maintained. What in the new system will help the CSA to collect money from people in small businesses and those whose financial circumstances are complex or opaque? Let us face it: the CSA has not been good at collecting money from such people, and children all over the country are being short-changed. Will the Secretary of State assure us that the new system will help the CSA to perform that task?

Mr. Smith: Yes, it will. It is simpler and more straightforward, and there is not the same scope for the endless special pleading that is almost designed into the existing system, with the 100-plus pieces of information that may be relevant to an assessment. In addition, as I have said, it will release staff resources for a more dedicated enforcement effort. We collaborate closely with the Inland Revenue and we will have access to its records, which should help with the problem of the self-employed that the hon. Gentleman identified.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): May I commiserate with the Secretary of Secretary, because once the Government decided not to base the reform on a simple tax rate he was presented with a reform that would be difficult to deliver? So may I congratulate him on extending way into the distance the date on which we bring existing claimants on to the new active register? Does he accept, however, that given that the reform was announced in 2000, many of our constituents feel a sense of grievance about the level at which they pay maintenance? Will he help them to sue EDS for compensation for the further delay of what is a necessary reform?

Mr. Smith: I thank my right hon. Friend for his congratulations and commiserations. I am sorry to say, however, that I cannot support his plea for money to sue EDS. As I said, we have a long-term partnership for delivery with EDS. I am satisfied that the system will work. We have reached an agreement with it on how the costs are to be shared. That has both incentivised levels of performance and secured the best deal for the taxpayer achievable in the circumstances.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): While the Secretary of State makes the changes, will he take another look at the procedures for attachment of earnings orders? I am worried that the CSA is not rigorous enough in ensuring that employers pay regularly when it has made an order, because the liability remains with the parent whose wages are being deducted. If a company goes broke after making no payments to the CSA for weeks the parent with responsibility is still required to pick up the tab.

Mr. Smith: I should be pleased to look into any cases that the hon. Lady draws to my attention and will raise with officials the issue that she poses. It is important in operating the new system that attachment of earnings and so on are enforced in a way that is business friendly. However, we must also respect client privacy. For example, arrangements will be made for clients to be rung at home rather than at work; we are learning from past mistakes.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton, South-West): Since the Minister first mooted changes to the 10, 15, 25 per cent. and so on, he has published a Green Paper on pension reform. I notice that the percentages refer to net income, including pension contributions. The Green Paper sets out a lifetime savings in pensions of £1.4 million. Will he assure me that, to use his word, "robust" action will be taken to stop recalcitrant non-resident parents boosting their pension contributions, thereby depressing the amount that they should pay for their children?

Mr. Smith: The system is simple and straightforward. My hon. Friend invites me to add complexities and bureaucratic regulation to it. I am sure that similar invitations will be made along the way. I understand his point, but we will best get money to parents with care and the children who need it by keeping the system simple.

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire): As one who bears as many ministerial scars as many others do in relation to the Child Support Agency, I simply say that although we are all equally vociferous and critical of our relative roles in making the agency work, we should never forget that collectively as a House it was our failure to keep our eye on the ball as the legislation was passed that caused many of the difficulties that both Governments have sought to repair.

Will the right hon. Gentleman do his best to look at two issues that remain at the core of concerns? The first is the repeated messages issued by the Child Support Agency bearing erroneous figures that people are asked to accept and the frequent changes that it makes to those figures. If the new system does something about that, it will be greatly welcomed. Secondly, on the phase-in, I urge the Secretary of State to remember that people feel a sense of injustice if they know that they will pay less in future, yet are forced to pay more for a lengthy period of time. Will he do his best to make sure that the phase-in period is as tight as possible?

Mr. Smith: Yes, the new system, as I said, is much simpler, so it should dramatically cut the errors that, we recall, were made when the CSA started nearly 10 years ago. We all remember people coming to our advice surgeries clutching half a dozen envelopes that they had received in a fortnight all giving different assessments based on different criteria. That has been getting better, as I said, but to operate effectively the system must be kept simple, which is why we have cut dramatically the 100-plus variables that were previously part of the calculation.

As for the feelings of resentment or frustration that people may experience because the new system will operate on a more favourable basis, that is why, along with the merits of everybody knowing where they stand and being treated consistently, and all recipients of income support and jobseeker's allowance getting the child premium, it makes sense to move to C-day—conversion day—as quickly as possible. Just as it would have been wrong to rush the initial move to the new system until the IT was right, I shall not speculate about a date until I know when we can deliver.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): The new transparent and fair system is welcome, but we must have regard for the fact that, under the old system, a third of children did not receive the maintenance to which they were entitled and that both parents are responsible for paying maintenance. Will my right hon. Friend act to ensure that children who are being denied maintenance receive urgent consideration by the Child Support Agency to ensure that they receive their entitlement? The CSA was guilty of maladministration under the old system, so will he agree to an appeals procedure to determine the level of compensation to be paid by the CSA when maladministration has occurred?

Mr. Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for his welcome, and am pleased to confirm that, of course, we will step up action so that payment is made to parents with care who are not currently receiving it. I shall look at his point about compensation, but I think that there are established procedures on the levels of compensation arising from ombudsman cases. As for reminding people of the importance of meeting their child support obligations, despite the banter between parties about the history of the CSA, there is a unity of purpose in the House. It would be good if a united message could go out from the Chamber that we all believe that both parents need fully to meet their responsibilities for their children, whether financial or otherwise.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): The Minister will be all too aware of many absent parents' sensitivity about child support payments. Members have said that among our constituents who will pay less under the new scheme than they do at present there will be a tremendous urge to be transferred to the new system of payment. Will the right hon. Gentleman help the House a little by giving a possible time scale and say what is the earliest date for the transfer of existing payments? With reference to a previous question, can he explain how he will begin to transfer those people to the new system? Will the phasing-in be based on an alphabetical, regional or other system?

Mr. Smith: I am afraid that I cannot offer the hon. Lady much comfort. For reasons that I have given, I shall not be tempted to speculate about dates without knowing how the new arrangements are working. She says that those who look forward to paying less will welcome an early move, but there is another side to the equation: those who receive more now than they will in future might not look forward to the move quite as much.

As a result of the sometimes significant shifts that can be involved, we shall phase in changed assessments, which could take more than five years, so that people do not face too sharp an increase or fall in the sum they are paying. I will set out the basis on which the conversion of cases will take place when we are ready to do so. I am not in a position to do so at the moment.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): May I seek further assurances on whether the changes will have any bearing on the many self-employed, non-resident parents who seem to get away with paying very little towards their children's upkeep despite a fairly affluent lifestyle?

Mr. Smith: Yes, indeed. As I have said, as a consequence of the simplicity and greater efficiency of the new system, we shall be able to devote more resources precisely to that. Moreover, it will be possible for a parent with care who believes that the lifestyle enjoyed by the non-resident parent is inconsistent with the income declared to draw that to the CSA's attention. If parents with care are still dissatisfied, they are ultimately able to take the matter to appeal at a tribunal.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): May I amplify the points about not only companies but all aspects of self-employment? I have examples in my constituency of people managing to hide the true extent of their earnings by clever accounting through partnerships or companies. The fixed formulas described by the Minister may not necessarily help such cases. How will the CSA deal with those who hide their true earnings through self-employment, and how will it manage to extract the information when it appears to have no clear responsibility for taking draconian action to find out what people really earn today?

Mr. Smith: We will collaborate closely with the Inland Revenue on these matters. It has had the task on occasions of identifying the true level of income or profit that people earn. We will pursue that closer collaboration and will act on the information available. We shall also pursue liabilities and accrued debts that much more vigorously because our staff will not have to spend so much more time perpetually assessing and reassessing cases as a result of circumstances never catching up with the string of appeals and procedural devices exploited by those who want to put off payments. I am sure that some will try to hide their true income and so on, but it will be progressively harder for them to get away with that.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): I very much welcome the Secretary of State's announcement. As someone who has introduced quite a few IT systems, I am aware that the prediction of completion dates is more an art than a science. We should simply accept that as a fact. Will he advise the House, however, on the precise implications of his assertion that about 30,000 cases a month will be brought into the system? How does that compare with the number of new cases that arise? Does the figure represent the capacity of the system—in other words, when we start to deal with new cases, it will take about 30 months to transfer 900,000 cases? Will he elaborate a little on that?

Mr. Smith: The 30,000 figure is the flow of new cases into the CSA. It is not constrained by the ability of the system to cope with them; it is the number that the system has to be able to cope with. It will be added to, as I explained, as more and more linked cases come on stream.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Will the Minister give some reassurance on enforcement, especially of current cases? My constituent, Mrs. Gowman, is owed

[Mr. Simon Thomas]

£50,000 by her ex-husband, Mr. Bruce, because the agency sat on her enforcement and took no action for 15 months. Will the Minister assure my constituents and others that agency staff will not use the introduction of the new system to take their eyes off the ball on current enforcement cases, and that enforcement will be considerably improved?

Mr. Smith: Current enforcement cases will also benefit from the ability of staff to concentrate more on collecting existing liabilities and debts. For reasons that the hon. Gentleman will understand, I cannot discuss an individual case on the Floor of the House, although I shall be happy to look into it if he sends me details.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): The Secretary of State laid great stress, rightly, on levels of compliance. Will he give a precise figure for the level of compliance among self-employed non-resident parents? He has already answered a number of questions from Members who are clearly worried about the level of it. If we are to measure the extent of the existing problem with this category of parents, and to measure any improvements under the new system, which he is confident will be achieved, we need that figure.

Mr. Smith: I think I can remember the figure, but I am not certain, so I shall let the hon. Gentleman know what it is. His question is perfectly reasonable. The figure will be well short of the 68 per cent. for cash compliance and 71 per cent. for case compliance, on average. I will let him and the House have the figure, so that we can assess progress against it.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the statement today and on loosening the Gordian knot that was left to him by the Opposition. Compliance is essential. My former constituent, Mr. Barr, has been evading his responsibilities for 10 years. The Department has thrown the book at Mr. Barr and tried to seize his house and everything else, but still failed. Our noble Friend Baroness Hollis, who is sitting not a million miles away, has tried extremely hard to try to solve the case, but as long as self-employed people with large private pension schemes can get away with violating their obligations, the entire system is brought into disrepute. Will my right hon. Friend assure us that compliance will be dealt with properly at last?

Mr. Smith: Yes, I am determined that that should be done. For the reasons that my hon. Friend and others have pointed out, it is crucial both to confidence in the system and to people's basic sense of fairness that self-employed people, like employed people, meet their responsibilities.

I now have the figure that the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) asked for. The compliance rate for self-employed people is 34 per cent.—as I said, well short of the average.

Angela Watkinson (Upminster): What can be done under the new IT system to check the accuracy of the information provided not just by the non-resident parent, but by the caring parent, to avoid the sort of injustices about which we have heard—overtly successful business people who are able to produce books that show that the business is not in profit, and at the other extreme, people such as a postman in my constituency, who is paying CSA payments for one child which represent 33 per cent. of his gross income and 50 per cent. of his net income? Clearly, both cases are unjust.

Mr. Smith: Yes, indeed. That is why the new formula is so much fairer, as well as being so much more straightforward, and why it was widely supported in the extensive consultation. Just about the only information that parents with care have to supply is how many children they have and whether they are on benefit. The only other factors that it might be material to take into account is whether, for example, the non-resident parent is contributing towards the costs of accommodation or education. There is provision in the new system to take that into account.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Members of Parliament will have an increased case load of complaints consequent upon the very simplicity to which the Secretary of State has drawn attention, as a result of the fact that the new system takes into account far fewer individual circumstances. The pay-off will be the increased number of payers who are not paying now. What targets has the Secretary of State set for that?

Mr. Smith: The target for compliance, both for cases and for cash, is to be 75 per cent. I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The pay-off is money getting to the parents with care and the children who need it, and what the system does more generally to reinforce people honouring their responsibilities as parents, whether as parents with care or as non-resident parents. The hon. Gentleman points to more complaints. Putting the new cases on the system will result in some complaints—we would get complaints about the introduction of any system—but by and large, given that for many people their payments will be less and the new system will be more straightforward, I should have thought that they would welcome it. What we must prepare for and explain carefully is conversion of the existing cases. However, as I said, with regard to MPs receiving more inquiries from constituents, I shall remind them tomorrow of the dedicated helpline that they and their staff can access.

David Cairns (Greenock and Inverclyde): I am very grateful for the reminder about the helpline.

One of the things that will prevent the CSA from working full-time on calculating compliance will undoubtedly be its having to answer the many thousands of calls that it will receive from those in existing cases, who have, understandably, been left none the wiser following my right hon. Friend's statement. Do we not owe it to those people, who have been long suffering and patient, to contact them directly and explain what we are trying to do, be honest about what has gone wrong and express our firm commitment to move them on to the new system as soon as the computer will allow us to do so?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend makes a very good point; for the reason that he gives, we shall write to those in all existing cases, explaining exactly what is going on.

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire): The Secretary of State will know that all of us in the House would want payments by non-resident parents to be both fair and reasonable, but as a third of non-resident parents are not making any payments at all, the question of enforcement is on the minds of my constituents who are parents with care responsibilities. On the sanctions that it is open to him to use, where no payment is made both persistently and wilfully on the part of the non-resident parent and no attempt is made to establish contact with the children, what further steps will his Department take to remove driving licences? He already has that power. How many driving licences have been taken away, and does he plan to increase the number under the reforms?

Mr. Smith: The penalties have been increased. I shall certainly keep a very close eye on the matter to see whether we need to strengthen them still further. On the withdrawal of driving licences, the fact that it is being drawn to people's attention and that such a threat is hanging above them works all the more effectively when the licence is not removed; they cough up the money that they owe.

Point of Order

4.17 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am sure that you and many hon. Members will have seen in the weekend press extensive coverage on the Government's imminent announcement about the contract that is to be placed for two new aircraft carriers. As you know, the order in which questions for oral answer appear on the Order Paper is not a precise science. Of course, I do not accuse you of having any involvement in the matter, which is decided by random selection. However, amidst many questions about Iraq today, there was one about procurement, and it is most unfortunate that it was withdrawn even as proceedings here were under way. I cast no aspersions on the hon. Member for Glasgow, Pollok (Mr. Davidson), whose question was withdrawn; it may be that he was caught on the train, or whatever. None the less, will you do two things for me? First, will you make inquiries to ensure that no pressure was brought to bear—

David Cairns (Greenock and Inverclyde): Have you met him?

Mr. Howarth: I have to say that I think that it is most unlikely; I regard the hon. Member for Glasgow, Pollok as a friend and he is a very fine man.

Given the controversy about the contract, I hope that no pressure was brought to bear on the hon. Gentleman, although I think it unlikely; otherwise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will you make it clear to hon. Members that, if they can give the House as much notice as possible, it is a courtesy to the House that makes the planning of such questions rather easier? For the benefit of those who sit elsewhere in the Chamber, I hope that we can put it on record that the reason why the House was unable to discuss the issue is that there was no opportunity to do so.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I am not sure that I am in a position to rule on pressure—or non-pressure—that is brought to bear on hon. Members. However, I appreciate that it is unfair for many reasons when questions are withdrawn in the way in which the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) described. He has put his point firmly on the record.

Orders of the Day

Electricity (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

4.19 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stone): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Bill contains provisions that merit further investigation. Erskine May and Standing Orders explicitly state that public Bills to which the Standing Orders relating to private business apply are subject to certain proceedings that are additional to the normal stages in passing public Bills.

Indeed, the Speaker has defined a hybrid Bill as

> "a public Bill that affects a particular private interest in a manner different from the private interests of other persons or bodies of the same category or class."

My experience on the Aircraft and Shipbuilding Industries Act 1977, when I had the pleasure of being the legal adviser to the ship repairers, showed that it was not obvious that the Bill was hybrid. It required a great deal of analysis, which must also take place in this instance. I simply draw attention to the fact that Erskine May says that if, on examination, it appears to the Public Bill Office that Standing Orders relating to private business may apply to a public Bill, it does not necessarily mean that matters will be got right first time. We therefore give notice that we wish, with the leave of the House, to have the matter examined in further detail.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving prior notice of his point of order. Mr. Speaker has given the matter careful consideration, but he does not find the Electricity (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill to be hybrid in any respect. The Bill is an enabling measure that gives the Secretary of State authority to incur expenditure on British Energy, a private sector group that is engaged in nuclear generation, or to acquire a British Energy undertaking. However, it does not require her to do so. The nuclear generating industry to which the Bill applies is a specific class for the purpose of legislation. The other member of the class is British Nuclear Fuels Ltd., a wholly publicly owned company, which is not adversely affected by the provisions of the Bill.

In reaching his conclusion that the Bill is not hybrid, Mr. Speaker has examined the precedents for such Government action under the Rolls-Royce (Purchase) Act 1971, the British Leyland Act 1975 and the Port of London (Financial Assistance) Act 1980.

4.23 pm

The Minister for Energy and Construction (Mr. Brian Wilson): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Before we even begin our consideration, we have a fascinating vignette in which the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) reveals himself 27 years later as the man behind Maxwell-Hyslop.

The Secretary of State came to the House on 28 November last year to make an announcement on British Energy. That company is Britain's only private sector nuclear generator and our largest single electricity generator. It was in serious financial difficulty, and the Government had provided it with a loan facility since early September to enable it to continue to operate.

British Energy proposed a restructuring plan to return the company to financial viability in the private sector. That was a complex deal, which required the participation of several financial stakeholders. The Government were prepared to play their part in the restructuring by providing financial support for BE's nuclear liabilities. They were prepared to underwrite BE's enhanced arrangements for decommissioning and contribute significantly to the historic spent nuclear fuel liabilities.

However, we were always conscious of the risk that BE would not be able to deliver the deal. It was therefore important that Government were alert to the alternative scenario of the possible failure of the deal and fully prepared for the company to go into administration.

In her statement, the Secretary of State made clear her intention to introduce legislation that would tackle either eventuality: successful restructuring or administration. That is the purpose of the Bill. I want to re-emphasise that throughout our dealings with British Energy our key objectives have been nuclear safety and the security of electricity supplies. It might be helpful if I explain that a little further.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Wilson: I want to make a little progress.

As hon. Members will be aware, an unplanned business failure of British Energy could have jeopardised those objectives. Nuclear reactors, self-evidently, have their own special safety requirements. One cannot simply shut down a reactor and walk away if one runs out of money. For example, for as long as fuel remains inside, the cooling and safety systems must be operated, and funding is required to ensure that that is possible. Likewise, if BE stations were suddenly forced to stop generating electricity with little advance warning, there would be serious consequences for the security of electricity supplies.

Mr. Lansley: The Minister will recall that as recently as early December he was saying that the energy White Paper would be published early in the new year. Will he concede that, notwithstanding the urgency of the Bill, it would be far better if we had sight of the Government's more general proposals for energy in the White Paper? Can the Minister explain why it has not been published so as to enable the debate to take place in that context?

Mr. Wilson: We had this little exchange during trade and industry questions last month. I do not know why the Tories are so worried about timing—it is not as if they are going anywhere. I said that it would be published early in the new year, and it will be. We had a discussion on Report, in relation to academic institutes, about what was meant by early in the new year.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): By Hogmanay?

Mr. Wilson: Hogmanay was late that year. The White Paper will be published at the end of February or the beginning of March—I will not put a precise date on it. Everybody with an interest in these subjects agrees that it is better to get it right than to be pinned down to a specific date. Elements of the British Energy issue also have an impact on the timetable.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): There is a pretty general consensus that this contingency legislation is needed, but there has been speculation that it indicates the Government's preference for rejecting some of the performance and innovation unit's recommendations and introducing new nuclear power stations. Will the Minister confirm that the Bill is without any prejudice towards that end and that the Government recognise that such a policy would face widespread opposition?

Mr. Wilson: I congratulate my hon. Friend on getting in early, but I do not recognise the validity of his comments. No such conclusion or interpretation could be extrapolated from what I am about to say.

I return to the Government's policy objective in relation to the Bill and to our dealings with British Energy. It is essential, first, to guarantee nuclear safety and, secondly, to maintain the security of electricity supplies. Failure to act as we did would have jeopardised those two objectives, which remain vital and will continue to be our priorities. As we move forward, we also need to factor in longer-term considerations, especially how to deal with those of British Energy's nuclear liabilities that already exist as a result of previous stations' operations. It is vital that they are dealt with safely and effectively, but we must consider how to do that at the least cost to the taxpayer while ensuring that electricity generation from those stations contributes as much as possible to the nation's needs. All that applies irrespective of whether the restructuring succeeds or fails.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): The Minister mentioned security of supply, which is one of the two main reasons underpinning the Government's actions in this regard. Does he not accept that the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets has estimated that over-supply in the UK electricity market is about 22 per cent., which is precisely the figure that British Energy supplies to the electricity market? The security of supply issue cannot be addressed through British Energy alone and he is, at very best, taking a short-term approach in the Bill.

Mr. Wilson: I shall not quibble over the hon. Gentleman's figures, but if there is 22 per cent. overcapacity and 22 per cent. is taken out, that will leave us without much margin. That seems to be a pretty fundamental arithmetic calculation. Of course, many issues relate to security of supply, but I would have thought that there is a pretty broad consensus in the House—irrespective of the history, as this is the reality—that we get about 22 per cent. of capacity from nuclear. Therefore, the idea that we can countenance its withdrawal over a short period, or even the medium term, is not viable.

I know that there are some in the House who would want all those nuclear stations to be shut down tomorrow. I strongly disagree with that view. For one thing, the sudden shutdown of a nuclear reactor is not a practical option. Reactors take many months to defuel and the infrastructure is not set up to allow all those stations to defuel their reactors at once. In practical terms, it would be many years before that process were complete.

Beside that practical point, however, there is an equally important argument on the economic rationality of such a move. Those stations more than cover the additional costs of their operation. To put it another way, continuing to run them generates surplus revenue, which can then be put towards paying for the liabilities that are already incurred and cannot now be avoided. Shutting down those stations and forgoing the financial contribution that they could make towards their liabilities would be economic madness, which is doubtless why it commends itself to the Liberal Democrats.

On 28 November, we identified three key outcomes that the company would have to achieve if the restructuring package were to succeed. The first was that it would need agreement from existing creditors to a temporary freeze on payments and a write-down in the value of what they were owed. The company is engaged in a dialogue with its creditors to achieve that.

Secondly, it was recognised that the company would need to sell the north American part of its operations. Since the November statement, it has announced that it has successfully entered into a binding agreement to sell Bruce Power in Canada. That will be subject to a shareholder vote on 10 February. The third part of the restructuring package was the implementation of a new trading strategy. The company is negotiating with potential trading partners.

The negotiations with the various counter-parties to achieve those three outcomes are in the hands of British Energy and are clearly commercially sensitive matters for that company. The House will therefore fully understand that it would not be appropriate in the circumstances for me to be drawn further on those specific matters today.

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston): Given that the emissions trading regime is coming from the European Union, does the Minister believe that British Energy can benefit from that? Will he assure me that generators will not be given an opt-out when the trading regime is introduced?

Mr. Wilson: My hon. Friend raises an interesting question. Of course, the emissions trading directive is still being negotiated, but, in its current form, it includes electricity generators from the outset of the scheme. I can certainly say today that the Government have no plans to seek an opt-out for the electricity generators.

I know that Members are interested in the wider details of the British Energy case, so I hope that that background information and progress update have been helpful. If I may, I shall discuss the specific provisions of the Bill. Perhaps I should say first that successful implementation of the restructuring plan also depends on receiving formal approval of that plan from the European Commission under the state aid rules and provisions on rescuing and restructuring firms in difficulty. We are preparing that plan, which is due to be submitted to the Commission by 9 March.

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): Does the Minister concede that one burden placed on British Energy has

[Mr. George Osborne]

been the climate change levy, which, according to some estimates, has cost the company between £80 million and £100 million? Does he agree that since the levy was designed to reduce the emission of carbon dioxide, it is complete nonsense to apply it to the nuclear industry, which does not produce it?

Mr. Wilson: I do not intend to go into wider areas of energy policy. The hon. Gentleman has made his point effectively, and I am sure that it will be noted.

Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): Given the leaks last week to the effect that the Government do not plan a new generation of nuclear generators, if British Energy goes into administration and if the Minister subsequently takes it over, will he seek to prolong the life of existing nuclear generators while the renewables programme gains momentum?

Mr. Wilson: The hon. Gentleman has a genuine interest in these matters, but for as long as I have done my present job not a week has gone by in which no one has written nuclear stories saying "yes, no or maybe" about our policy. There is a preoccupation with such stories and I assure the hon. Gentleman that the stories of which he spoke fall into that category.

It is not for me to say whether the life of existing stations would be prolonged; that will be a regulatory matter at the appropriate time, which is some way down the road for all the stations in the British Energy stable. It will be open to the company to seek to prolong those stations' lives, and that will be an economic decision for the company as well as, clearly, a regulatory decision for the nuclear installations inspectorate and the Health and Safety Executive. There is nothing to preclude such an application.

David Hamilton (Midlothian): Surely the Minister is not saying that if we are bailing the company out to the tune of millions of pounds, we will have no say in whether stations should have an extended life. Surely phasing them out would be the natural way forward.

Mr. Wilson: That is not the subject of the Bill. As things stand, the nuclear power stations operated by British Energy have a defined life span. I was responding to the purely hypothetical question of whether it would be open to operators to apply to extend those life spans, as has happened in the past. I merely confirm that that option exists. I know of nothing that could stop it. That does not prejudge the issue in any way, and whatever else that issue may be, it is not a political issue. It has to do, above all, with technical decisions and safety, and it will be judged in those terms at the appropriate time.

I quibble with the reference made by my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (David Hamilton) to millions of pounds being put towards bailing the company out. We are talking today about the precise reasons why what we are doing is being done not in the company's interest, but in the public interest.

Hon. Members are interested in the wider details of the British Energy case, but having given some general background I want to discuss the specific provisions of the Bill.

The Bill will ensure that we are properly prepared for the future in relation to British Energy. It authorises expenditure on the company generally, providing specific statutory authority for the support that we are currently giving and for measures that we may need to take in future. It ensures that we can deliver our part of the solvent restructuring deal, should it succeed. On the other hand, it ensures that we will be prepared if the deal should fail and the company go into administration.

I shall turn to the role of the Bill if the deal succeeds and solvent restructuring is achieved. As part of the deal, the Government have agreed to contribute significantly to British Energy's historic nuclear liabilities. However, British Energy will in turn pay its own way in future. That is an important principle: liabilities that arise from future operations at its stations must be paid for by the company. On top of that, British Energy will make additional contributions to its nuclear liabilities, including £275 million worth of bonds and 65 per cent. of the cash available each year. The more successful the company is, therefore, the more it will contribute.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): The Minister speaks of liabilities, one of the most pressing of which is the disposal of nuclear waste. Has he estimated the difference entailed by any move from reprocessing to dry storage, which I believe British Energy supports?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the Minister answers that question, it might be helpful to the House if I said that the provisions of the Bill are very tightly drawn and that we are not debating energy policy in general.

Mr. Wilson: My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) knows very well that waste is the subject of ongoing research, led by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I do not know where British Energy stands now on dry storage. At one time, not long after I came into the House, it certainly supported dry storage, and a number of us were taken to witness the wonders of dry storage in Colorado. British Energy then got a better deal from BNFL and, suddenly, it forgot about dry storage. I do not know if it has come back to the idea of dry storage or not, but clearly the treatment of waste is an important issue. It is essential that we come up with answers, and my hon. Friend's comments on the advantages of dry storage will be noted.

From the taxpayer's point of view, it is important to emphasise that we have made sure that the more successful the company is, the more it will contribute. For this deal to work, the Government need to make a firm commitment now of the support we are prepared to give BE over future years. In order to enable the Government to give that guarantee, the Bill will remove the existing statutory ceiling on payments for nuclear liabilities under schedule 12 to the Electricity Act 1989, a ceiling that is currently set at £1 billion. Removing the limit recognises that, ultimately, the Government have overriding responsibilities for nuclear safety and environmental protection. If the company could not afford its liabilities and were to fail, the Government therefore would have to step in to ensure that they were dealt with properly.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Does the Minister have any estimate of how far the figure is likely to go over the current ceiling?

Mr. Wilson: There is not a figure because the amount is not predestined to go over any ceiling, but the existence of the current ceiling is not a natural inhibition. Therefore, we have to have room for manoeuvre in all eventualities. However, that certainly does not imply any figure.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster): Has the Minister been in touch with the Treasury to ensure that, if the ceiling is taken off, the amount concerned is put into the public accounts? If it is to be a liability, it should be a liability with regard to the public accounts.

Mr. Wilson: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to hear that we are in constant touch with the Treasury on these matters.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Schedule 12 to the 1989 Act, says that the amount

> "shall not exceed £1,000 million or such greater sum, not exceeding £2,500 million, as the Secretary of State may by order specify."

Is the Minister suggesting that the amount will be more than £2,500 million?

Mr. Wilson: No. I was emphasising that it is not inherent in making these changes that there is an expectation that figures will rise above their present levels. We need the flexibility to respond to eventualities; that, indeed, is the whole purpose of the Bill.

I must emphasise that, under the solvent restructuring plan that the company has presented to its creditors, we are certainly not writing a blank cheque for British Energy's nuclear liabilities. The Government have a duty to the taxpayer to ensure that there is no potential for the commitment that they would be offering to be exploited at the taxpayers' expense, nor should there be any incentive to run the company's stations in a way that might be inefficient for the country as a whole.

We understand very well the nature of the company's liabilities and we will put appropriate controls in place to safeguard taxpayers' interests and ensure that we only provide the aid necessary to ensure the safe and secure discharge of these liabilities. Changes to decommissioning plans or station operation that would materially increase the nuclear liabilities would need to be authorised by the Government in advance, working in close consultation with the regulators. The planning and contracting of the work necessary to tackle the nuclear liabilities will need to be transparent and provide value for money.

The company will be required to continue to maintain a high standard of operation of its sites and will be liable for any consequences if its actions fall short of that. The new arrangements will also ensure that, while recognising that the company must be given the space to run its stations commercially, due account is taken of the costs of decommissioning in view of taxpayers' exposure.

The Bill will also ensure that the commitment to financial support given by the Government for BE's nuclear liabilities would not cause an immediate, massive tax bill for the company; that would undermine the deal, given the company's cash position, and would be an unforeseen revenue windfall. It would be perverse for us to write out an IOU with one hand and then immediately snatch cash back from the company with the other, tipping it into insolvency.

I want to consider the role of the Bill if the restructuring deal fails. If the deal fails, we expect the board of the company to decide to put it into administration. We anticipate funding the administrator so that we are able to ensure that our key objectives of nuclear safety and security of supply are met. We have been undertaking detailed contingency plans for administration, in discussion with all the key responsible regulatory bodies. Furthermore, we have notified the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee of the terms of the proposed indemnity that the Government would give the administrator.

BE's nuclear liabilities and the particular financial risks associated with its nuclear operations put it in a special position, and we are not aware of any credible private sector interest in acquiring BE if it were to end up in administration. The Government must thus plan for the eventuality that a private sector buyer will not be found for all the company's power stations. That is why we are preparing for the possible acquisition of BE's nuclear stations by the Government, either through acquiring the nuclear operating companies directly or through buying the assets and business of those companies.

The Bill ensures that we are prepared for either approach, giving the Government the financial authority to make such an acquisition and to finance the continued safe and secure operation of the business. Any acquisition would of course be a commercial arrangement with the administrator of the same kind that a private buyer might make; the Bill gives the Government no special powers in that regard.

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood): It is conceivable that the Bill will not have received Royal Assent before the company goes into administration. What plans are there to ensure that the company continues to operate smoothly and satisfactorily in those circumstances?

Mr. Wilson: My Department is in constant touch with BE, as indeed are the regulatory bodies, and I can give an absolute assurance that in any eventuality the smooth and safe running of the stations will be maintained; it will be our highest priority. However, my hon. Friend's point emphasises the need to introduce legislation and to progress it as expeditiously as possible—exactly as we are trying to do.

My focus is on what the Bill would enable in the immediate future, but I also flag up that bringing nuclear stations back into the public sector would not necessarily rule out future collaboration with the private sector in the longer term. I am sure that many hon. Members will already have noticed that the measure will

[Mr. Wilson]

repeal some old provisions relating to the original privatisation of the electricity industry. Those provisions effectively prevent the Government from acquiring shares in certain privatised electricity companies, thus preventing us from owning the BE operating companies that we want in the current circumstances.

Those provisions may have made sense at the time—to show that the Government had confidence in the privatisation process and that they did not intend to reverse it immediately afterwards. However, such provisions no longer make sense a decade later when the shape of the industry is unrecognisable compared with the immediate post-privatisation period.

The provisions apply only to the original legal entity formed by the industry restructuring, and not to other companies in the same group. That legal entity may no longer exist; even if it does so, it may no longer own its original assets. The provisions will not apply to any companies that have newly entered the electricity market. If nothing else, they are discriminatory and reflect former conditions and the imperatives of our predecessors in government. They are not an accurate reflection of the industry at present.

It is true that repealing the provisions could, in theory, permit the Government to acquire shares in certain other electricity companies where we cannot currently do so, but I stress that we have no intention of doing so in relation to other companies. So there is nothing sinister about repealing the provisions wholesale; we simply want to tidy up old, outdated provisions. Indeed, the rest of part 2 of the Electricity Act 1989, which deals with the initial restructuring, appears to be spent, so the Bill will take a power to remove it.

Hon. Members should not read anything sinister into that. The reason that we are taking that power is simply a practical matter of timing. As a principle, we want to repeal part 2, but, before we go ahead and do that, we want go through and check every provision thoroughly to see whether any of them needs to be retained in any form. We will do that in due course, but, to avoid holding up the pressing issue of dealing with British Energy, we are taking a power to repeal later on.

I have not tried to address the Government's wider energy policy, since that is not the subject of this debate, as you have pointed out, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I suspect that hon. Members may wish to extend the range of the debate, but I should like to remind them that, as has been said already, there will be a full opportunity to debate the Government's energy policy when the energy White Paper is published in a few weeks' time.

The White Paper will set out our policy on achieving energy reliability, competitive energy prices, our environmental goals and, indeed, our wider social objectives. Of course there will be a statement to the House when the White Paper is published, but I am mindful of the position of British Energy's financial creditors who are considering the restructuring deal that the company has put before them. There has been speculation about how measures to be announced in the White Paper might impact on British Energy, and I thought that it would be helpful to address that.

I should like to make it clear therefore that the energy White Paper will not contain measures that are likely, in the Government's view, to have a material impact on the financial position of British Energy. I should perhaps also emphasise that the restructuring proposals put forward by the company were not in any way predicated on future changes through the White Paper, so the statement I have just made does not affect the viability of those proposals.

British Energy has put forward its restructuring plan, and we wait to see whether it will be able to deliver it. The Government need to be able to play their part in the solvent restructuring if that succeeds, but we need to be equally prepared to act swiftly if it fails and the company goes into administration. The Bill will ensure that we are prepared for either eventuality, and I commend it to the House.

4.52 pm

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The Minister has attempted in a rather deflated way, compared with his usual parliamentary standards, to present this sow's ear of a Bill as a silk purse.

I first want to pick up on one of his final remarks: that the energy White Paper will have no financial impact on British Energy. That indicates that the Government will not produce any proposal that will assist those electricity generators that do not contribute to climate change, which is a rather remarkable admission by the Government, but we will wait to see exactly what their proposals are. If there will be no advantage in relation to climate change, the energy White Paper will certainly be a sadly missed opportunity.

The Minister cannot disguise the fact that the Bill would be rather better named, the Electricity "we do not have a clue" Bill. The Executive have come to Parliament to ask us to write them a blank cheque, so that they can spend and do whatever they like to get them out of the mess that is much of their own creation. I will ask my right hon. and hon. Friends to decline to sign that cheque, and I hope that all other hon. Members who want to defend the interests of the taxpayer and the consumer will join us.

Mr. Tom Watson (West Bromwich, East): Does the hon. Gentleman accept any responsibility for part of the mess that British Energy finds itself in now? Does he agree with the comment that appeared in *The Guardian* that British Energy was one of those

"businesses where the pitfalls of privatisation stood out in neon lights"?

Mr. Blunt: No, I do not accept any responsibility at all. I was elected to the House in 1997, so I find it rather extraordinary that I should be expected to be responsible. Perhaps I should be responsible for things that happened in the 1920s or 1930s. Just how far back does the hon. Gentleman want me to go? Does he want me to hold him responsible for the activities of the Labour party in the 1980s and its relationship with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament? I remind him that the leader of his party was shadow Secretary of State for Energy at about the time that his membership of parliamentary CND somehow lapsed. The hon. Gentleman would do everyone a favour if we made this a contemporary debate rather than an examination of history. I certainly take absolutely no responsibility for the state of affairs that the Government have created.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in large measure, British Energy found itself in difficulties because the pool system was ended? That happened because, when the Conservatives introduced the system, they did not structure it sufficiently well, so the generators were over-charging electricity consumers by vast amounts. The Labour Government sought to change it and introduce the new electricity trading arrangements. The Conservatives got it wrong in the first place, and the Labour Government were protecting consumers, which resulted in part of the difficulties that British Energy faced.

Mr. Blunt: I usually have the utmost respect for the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), who is Chairman of the Select Committee, but that is an extraordinary set of statements. I happily accept that one of the reasons that British Energy and every other generator of electricity find themselves in difficulty is that a liberalised market is delivering lower prices to consumers. That is one of the aids to assist British manufacturers in comparison to all the other difficulties that this regulating and interfering Government have put in their way. If electricity consumers are enjoying lower prices because of a liberalised market pioneered by the Conservative Government before 1997—a Government whom I did not represent but merely advised—I am happy that the Conservative party should take credit for the benefit to the wider economy.

Richard Ottaway: I do not think that the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) can be allowed to get away with his remarks scot free. The new electricity trading arrangements were brought in with a target to reduce wholesale electricity prices by 10 per cent. The way in which they were introduced led to an overshoot, and a lowering of prices by about 40 per cent. has led British Energy to be uneconomical. That is the only reason for the mess that it is in today.

Mr. Blunt: My hon. Friend has engaged the hon. Member for Ochil in his own way.

Even the Minister's rhetoric cannot disguise the scale of the personal disaster that this Bill represents. It is surprising that when the going gets tough for the Government, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has apparently got going. Where has she gone? Why must the Minister present this wretched brief to the House alone? It is a touching feature of the Government that in times of difficulty they conspicuously fail to rally to each others' support, and a sad irony that the identified champion of nuclear power within Labour's ranks has had to come to the House today to propose a measure that will probably sound the death-knell for the future prospects of new nuclear power generation within the private sector.

The future welfare of the Minister's 450 constituents who work at the Hunterston B power station is also at stake. It is ironic that his actions could help to deny the future success of nuclear generation in the private sector. It is also ironic that Labour's former spokesman on citizens' rights and open government is proposing a measure to the House that will obscure completely the true cost of nuclear power. As a result of the Bill, those of us who believe that nuclear power, with its costs and benefits understood, deserves its chance to compete fairly for Britain's future electricity generating capacity will have our position hopelessly undermined. The Minister's rhetoric cannot disguise the fact that the Government's management of energy policy has helped to create this shambles. Nor can he disguise the confusion in his Department that has led to this measure, which will have wretched consequences unless Parliament is prepared to do something about it.

Anyone who has followed the unfolding story of British Energy will be impressed by the consistent reporting of the panic inside the Minister's department. I am not sure whether "headless chickens" or "rabbits in the headlights" is the most appropriate description, but both serve to give a general idea of the atmosphere in which birth was given to this measure.

Let us first examine the policy framework in which the Government have made British Energy operate. I cannot find from the Labour Party a single unequivocal statement on nuclear energy for 25 years. On coming into office they confiscated £2.1 billion of the assets of the electricity industry through the windfall tax. Then in 2000 they passed a statutory instrument that uniquely rated nuclear reactors, ensuring a business rate regime that discriminated against nuclear power stations. Then they introduced that peerless instrument, the climate change levy, a bureaucratic and regulatory nightmare that discriminates against manufacturing and that they also applied to nuclear-generated electricity.

Then there is the Government's role as owners of BNFL. That company is trading technically insolvently to the tune of a billion pounds or three. So the Government's alibi that that company's commercial interests are nothing to do with them would seem somewhat below the expectation that the taxpayer might have of their accepting their responsibilities.

Mr. Hendrick: Can the hon. Gentleman tell me how the climate change levy could be applied to nuclear electricity, when it applies to consumption of electricity in the grid, not production?

Mr. Blunt: I wonder where the hon. Gentleman thinks that that electricity was generated.

Mr. Hendrick *rose—*

Mr. Blunt: I shall not give way to the hon. Gentleman. It is a ludicrous proposition. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will resume his seat rather than insist on continuing with this point to his own embarrassment.

Electricity generated by carbon-free sources, of which nuclear is one, is charged to the climate change levy at the point of consumption in exactly the same way as electricity produced from any other source. If the hon. Gentleman has worked out that that discriminates against carbon-free electricity, I hope that he will give the matter a little more attention.

BNFL, the Government's own company, offered British Energy a deal that first drove it onto the rocks in September and then saw the Secretary of State come to the House on 28 November to explain a wholly new deal

[Mr. Blunt]

from BNFL that was crucial to dragging British Energy off the rocks where BNFL had deposited it two months earlier. That is the Department that comes before us today asking Parliament to give it the authority to do what it likes.

Mr. Wilson: I have not sought to stop the hon. Gentleman's flow, but what he has said is absolute rubbish. The difficulties of British Energy on the scale that we now know them to have been came to our attention as a result of it becoming clear that the deal between BNFL, a commercial entity in its own right, and British Energy would not be enough to solve British Energy's problems. What was on the table afterwards from BNFL was exactly what was on the table before. Therefore, it is an extremely unfair aspersion to cast on BNFL that it acted in any way irresponsibly in driving British Energy into the difficulties that arose.

Mr. Blunt: I am grateful to the Minister for that clarification. What he has said is that the deal that BNFL is offering British Energy today is exactly the same deal as it offered British Energy in the run-up to 9 September. I am grateful that he appears to indicate assent. I think that that is what he has said. If it is not the case—and I have no doubt that the Select Committee of the hon. Member for Ochil will look further into this matter—then, of course, the event that put British Energy into the arms of the Government was the failure of the negotiations with BNFL. I accept that there were a vast number of other issues in play as well, but that was what drove it into the arms of the Government to seek a loan. The Minister is on record as having said that; it is not a point in dispute. It is agreed that the failure of those negotiations with BNFL was the point at which British Energy had to seek assistance from the Government. I hope that the Minister will make it clear whether he is saying that the deal in the rescue package and proposal put forward to British Energy with BNFL is identical to the one that was being negotiated on 9 September. That is the crucial issue.

Mr. Wilson: I want to be clear about what the hon. Gentleman has said. He used a slightly pejorative phase, saying that BNFL drove British Energy into the arms of the Government. Is he saying, on behalf of the Tory party, that BNFL had an obligation to offer British Energy a deal which would have prevented it from going into the arms of the Government, irrespective of the impact that that would have had on BNFL and, indeed, the taxpayer? If so, that is a remarkable proposition.

Mr. Blunt: The Minister said that BNFL is offering British Energy precisely the same deal as before, and I just want him to tell the House that that is correct. If so, the issue does not arise. But if BNFL, as a Government-owned company, has now offered a different deal as part of the rescue package that the Government are presenting to the House in association with the Bill, that is quite a different question.

Mr. O'Neill: This point is not one of party dispute but of knowledge or interpretation of the facts. As I understand it, and it may benefit the House if the hon. Gentleman confirms that this is his understanding, in September we became increasingly aware of the difficulties that British Energy was having. It made several calls on BNFL, and on each occasion it upped the request for a cut in prices. When it came to what most people would have regarded as BNFL's final offer, British Energy said, "We are sorry, but we need even more." At that point BNFL said, "If we offered more, we would be putting ourselves into a difficult financial position and we would be in the arms of the Government." As I understand it—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I understand that this is an important point and obviously the House is anxious to have it cleared up, but the hon. Gentleman will be seeking to catch my eye later.

Mr. Blunt: BNFL is already in the Government's hands, and that is the point. I, like anyone else who is not on the Government Benches, have not been privy to the negotiations between BNFL and British Energy. The issue is whether the proposed contract between them is materially different from the one that drove British Energy on to the rocks—it was the final wave that washed it ashore—because the Government are the owner of BNFL and can influence its decisions, which have wider ramifications for the taxpayer.

Paddy Tipping: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Blunt: Will the hon. Gentleman let me make a little progress before I give way?

The Government's rationale for their actions is accompanied by the constant refrain, which was repeated by the Minister this afternoon, that they are acting to secure the electricity supply of the United Kingdom and to ensure its safety. They have said that so often that it is even possible that they have convinced themselves that it is true—a Goebbels-like quality of self-delusion. Any examination of the issues of safety and of security of supply shows those explanations to be nonsense, but of course we heard them again this afternoon and they sound good. One should never underestimate the attraction of what sounds good for this glib and superficial Government.

British Energy has demolished the Government's explanation. In response to the legal challenge by Greenpeace and Ecotricity that the aid was unlawful, both British Energy and the Government entered a defence, and they contradicted each other. The Government said:

> "The grant of the loan to British Energy was not unlawful given that it had to be granted as a matter of urgent necessity in the face of unacceptable risks to public safety and security of supply."

British Energy said:

> "The claim herein for judicial review is wholly misconceived since it depends on a false hidden premise which the Claim Form does not even seek to substantiate.
>
> The premise is that, if the S of S had not extended the Financial Assistance to BE, then the amount of electricity generated by the nuclear generating stations presently in BE's ownership would have been materially reduced and that, if the relief sought herein were granted, the amount of such electricity would be materially reduced, even perhaps through cessation of generation as a result of permanent closure of the stations. That premise is demonstrably false, irrespective of the person or persons in whose

ownership and under whose control the stations are operated; and this is true not only of BE's eight nuclear generating stations but also of its non-nuclear station at Eggborough, the output from which is used to enable the output from the nuclear stations to be more profitably marketed. While the Claimants' Additional Material for Claim Form is profuse in its citation of abstract legal propositions, the Claimants appear never to have addressed their minds to the practical application of those propositions to the actual and unusual circumstances of the present case concerning, as it does, nuclear electricity generating facilities".

So there we have it: British Energy's attested opinion that the Department of Trade and Industry has never addressed its mind to the practical application of its propositions. Tempted as one might be to accept that, I give credit to DTI officials and, indeed, Ministers that that is not the case. The explanation is that the DTI's spin doctors would like us to believe that there is a danger to security of supply, but it is not true. There never has been any danger to security of supply. In administration, with a loan, in Government ownership or, indeed, in any conceivable circumstances, as the Minister repeated in detail, the stations will continue to generate electricity. Relieved of their liability, it is now accepted by the Government that power stations and their staff will continue to generate power and cash, making it nonsensical for anyone to switch them off, even this Government, with their reckless disregard for the taxpayers' interest.

There is a final nail in the coffin of the security of supply argument. We could switch off all British Energy's contribution to the grid and, on current figures, it could still supply the market on the coldest day of the year. The Minister made it clear that the margin might be a little tight, but there would still be a margin, provided by a combination of power supply through the interconnector to France, demand management and the 10 per cent. margin available by lowering voltage at peak demand. Prices would also rise, but supply would continue. As has been made clear, however, there was never a prospect of Britain being in that dramatic position. The Secretary of State even contributed to rubbishing her own explanation by saying in her statement:

"but whatever happens, nuclear power stations will continue to generate electricity and will continue to employ staff."

So if it is economic madness, as the Minister told us, why has it been the basis of the explanation for the Government's actions?

Let us consider the safety case. Is anyone suggesting that plants would be abandoned by their staff? Is the Minister suggesting that his constituents would walk away from Hunterston or that the on-site arrangements for nuclear installation inspection would suddenly come to an end? No, of course not. The fact that a board of directors in East Kilbride is replaced by an administrator makes no practical difference to the running of any asset. Heysham 2 and Sizewell B are not going to leak or explode because there has been a change of personality in charge of the finances.

Paddy Tipping: Does the hon. Gentleman absolve the board of British Energy from all blame? Did it not spend £500 million on Eggborough? Did it not sell SWALEC when other people were concentrating on the consumer? Did it not pay SWALEC many thousands of pounds in special dividends? Should it not, too, be criticised?

Mr. Blunt: Quite. I could not agree more. The commercial strategy of British Energy has been sadly flawed. The hon. Gentleman mentions SWALEC. British Energy purchased SWALEC for £100 million and sold it for £200 million. On the face of it that might appear a satisfactory arrangement. We need to draw attention to the fact, however, that it bought SWALEC with an obligation to buy power at a highly inflated price from another generator, which appears in its accounts as an onerous contract with a liability of £200 million. The board of British Energy has made numerous mistakes. Indeed, I could go on citing them, but I do not want to make this debate an examination of why British Energy is responsible for its predicament. *[Interruption.]* I have never said that it was not responsible, but the Government are also responsible and it is my job to hold them to account. It is not my job to hold the board of British Energy to account. I am not a shareholder or bondholder in British Energy. The Government are inviting the taxpayer to take on an unlimited liability and the House to give them unlimited freedom of action in the Bill.

Mr. Wilson: May I try to help the hon. Gentleman? Only a few minutes ago, he said that BNFL drove British Energy into the arms of the Government. In light of what he has just said, he may wish to withdraw that comment and accept that it would have been grossly irresponsible of BNFL to have given a blank cheque to British Energy, something that he appeared to endorse a few minutes ago.

Mr. Blunt: That is not the case at all. I was making the point that negotiations with BNFL were the straw that broke the camel's back. That was the final event that drove British Energy to seek a Government loan—that is exactly what the Minister told the Select Committee and is not a matter of dispute.

As for safety, the only issue that the Government have had to cope with was a bureaucratic one—how to transfer the necessary licence to operate nuclear power stations from British Energy to a potential administrator. It is not as if the Government have not had time to think about the matter. The Minister told the Select Committee that

"certainly from June or probably earlier through the summer, we were monitoring what was going on at British Energy because clearly the market was an impact on it which could lead to the difficulties which eventually manifested themselves."

That even had a name in the Department—Project BLUE.

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in light of what you said earlier, do you believe that there is a remote chance that the Tory spokesman may actually touch on the Bill's provisions?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: If the hon. Gentleman were out of order, I should have told him so.

Mr. Blunt: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

In her statement in November, the Secretary of State said:

"We have therefore prepared detailed contingency plans for administration, in discussion with all the key . . . regulatory bodies, to ensure that whatever happens, nuclear safety and security of supply will be maintained."—[*Official Report*, 28 November 2002; Vol. 395, c. 489-90.]

[Mr. Blunt]

The Government's overt explanation for their policy and the Bill is therefore demolished in their own words and those of British Energy.

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): The hon. Gentleman has placed a heavy emphasis on administration and has talked about management being handed over to the administrator. I do not want to get into a debate about the meaning of administration, but can he tell the House which third party in the wide world would be interested in taking over the running of those sites?

Mr. Blunt: The hon. Gentleman is prejudging the next part of my speech—I shall address that issue shortly.

There is a new factor in the British Energy drama—no one seems to have considered from 1996 onwards the fact that British Energy could indeed go bust and what, in the circumstances, would happen to its nuclear liabilities. There is a ring-fenced fund for decommissioning which partly addresses those costs, but as the taxpayer is now painfully finding out, there is the large matter of back-end fuel costs, liability for which dwarfs the scale of decommissioning costs. The Government's answer is to attempt a rescue, thus putting off a decision about renationalisation or administration. We believe that that is the wrong strategy. If the Government are trying to operate in the taxpayer's interests, they are going about it in an odd way, presumably taking on a £2.1 billion liability and none of the assets. As the Minister explained in response to the hon. Member for Ochil, who wanted to know what the taxpayer got for his £2.1 billion:

> "The taxpayer specifically from that will have the peace of mind of the safe management of nuclear liabilities."

As no one was proposing to manage those liabilities dangerously, that peace of mind may not represent the best value for the taxpayer. It is commonly accepted that in the final analysis the Government cannot escape responsibility for dangerous radioactive waste. The most disturbing feature of the saga for those of us who want nuclear power to have an economic future is that British Energy does not seem to be making adequate provision, if indeed any, for back-end fuel costs. The assumption that that will be funded by future operating profits when the company is in fact making a loss is not one that the insurer of final resort—the taxpayer—will find acceptable. I have been unable to identify anyone who has raised that matter until now. The taxpayer's representatives should have identified that threat at an earlier stage. All of us in the House, whether serving on the Select Committee, the Public Accounts Committee or any other body, should accept that perhaps we are responsible.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): The fund for the decommissioning of nuclear power stations was set up at the time of privatisation with an endowment to start it rolling. It was intended to build up over the lifetime of the power stations until, at the end of their life, it was sufficient to cover the costs. If the House were to take the hon. Gentleman's advice and decline to give the Bill a Second Reading, and British Energy were then to go bust, would not the money that the Government are proposing to loan under the Bill become a grant to cover the cost of decommissioning, which would have to start straight away?

Mr. Blunt: I do not know whether it has escaped the hon. Gentleman's attention, but that is precisely what the Government are proposing anyway. They are proposing to give British Energy between £150 million and £200 million a year, and to merge the decommissioning fund with the fund for back-end nuclear liabilities. The decommissioning fund has been ring-fenced to date, and has had a cash stream of about £20 million a year. Sadly, the fund that the Government are proposing to take over has diminished since the company made its reports. It stood at £411 million in April, but I now understand that it is closer to £300 million. I am afraid that that has more to do with the Government's wider mismanagement of the economy, as I understand that the fund is largely invested in equities. The adage "Sell in May and go away" would have been advice well taken on 1 May 1997. Investors could come back on the election of a Conservative Government.

This issue must be dealt with in a clear and transparent way. The interests of the taxpayer must be protected, and future investors in nuclear energy need to know how the liabilities will be costed so that they have confidence to invest following this debacle. Without that clarity, or a proper framework for energy policy, there will be no new investment from the private sector. When the Conservative party publishes its energy proposals, it will propose a scheme to address that.

In the meantime, the Government's cack-handed rescue scheme, which has been cooked up with British Energy, will not deliver such results. Thus, the Bill is not necessary; indeed, it is an obstacle. The Government have so far endorsed British Energy's proposal, but I suspect that they will be somewhat bewildered by the complexity of the financial arrangements proposed.

Mr. Simon Thomas: I am listening to the hon. Gentleman's argument with great interest. He has certainly done much to demolish the security of supply argument. However, he has not yet addressed what should have happened in the light of British Energy's fortunes. Surely there are only two options: one is that proposed by the Government; and the other is full renationalisation—the only way to safeguard taxpayers' interests in the company and ensure security of supply for as long as we decide to have nuclear energy. The hon. Gentleman mentioned administration, but has not yet said what that option would entail.

Mr. Blunt: I am getting there, if the hon. Gentleman will allow me.

The beneficiaries of the Government's rescue scheme are the bondholders and the existing management of the company. Even Robin Jeffrey continues to defend his position, and there are suggestions today that British Energy is being invited to fund the price of his silence in order to prevent him embarrassing the Government. I hope that the Minister will make it clear in his winding-up speech that the Government have nothing to fear from Robin Jeffrey being completely free to speak his mind.

Mr. Wilson: Why delay? I say now that I do not think that anybody should be suppressed in that way. If Robin Jeffrey has anything to say, I would be very pleased to hear it, and I think that the public should hear it.

Mr. Blunt: May I say how welcome that statement is? The Minister has made it clear that the Government would deprecate any gagging clause in the terms on which Robin Jeffrey leaves British Energy.

As for the taxpayer, there is only one factor in favour of the Government's rescue. Had the company gone into administration in September, the Canadian assets—Bruce Power, which was valued at £600 million—would have reverted to the landlord, the Ontario Government. The one significant benefit of the Government's support is that that clause cannot be invoked. Yet, one ludicrous product of the Government's aid to British Energy and the current plan is the deliberate destruction of the value of the north American assets of the company. As a condition of the loan, the Government are forcing British Energy to conduct a fire sale of its north American assets by 14 February as a condition of their support. Assets valued at more than £600 million are to be sold for about £300 million, so the Government have halved the only conceivable value of their actions.

What about the costs? BNFL, a Government-owned company, has accepted a chunk of British Energy's price risk, which it may or may not have been prepared to do in early September. What will that cost the taxpayer? If bondholders and shareholders accept the deal, it will be because it is in their interest to do so, yet surely the value that they derive can be only at the expense of the taxpayer. If the company had gone into administration, the Government would have been left with the liabilities that they have already accepted explicitly. Those liabilities were always with them implicitly, although as I said, no one seems to have established that.

However, the administrator would be able to refloat the company on the basis of the cash-generating assets, which have a significant positive value. The taxpayer would have the first charge over receipts from such a sale, and we would have had a nuclear generator—and we can still have a nuclear generator—fully in the private sector, with an opportunity for a transparent and sustainable method of internalising the costs of its environmental pollution. That would have been the best way forward, and it still is. It would be a market solution, and it would be fair to all concerned.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): Has the hon. Gentleman had a chance to read the Select Committee report of 1996? Did he see the vast size of the liability? The liability at that time for AGRs—advanced gas-cooled reactors—and Sizewell B was £10.5 billion undiscounted, and £7.6 billion discounted at 2 per cent.

Mr. Blunt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I have not read that report. However, the point that he makes is that the size of the liability was understood. It seems that no one made provision for what would happen if British Energy, as a privatised company, went bankrupt, and what would happen to those liabilities. I will go away and read the Select Committee report in order to establish whether the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues on the Committee were prescient enough to identify the issue at that stage, in which case the then Government should have made clear what would happen in those circumstances. I am happy to accept that. We shall have to wait and see whether that warning was given at the time.

My hon. Friend the shadow Attorney-General has raised the possibility of hybridity, and the Deputy Speaker has given his ruling on that. If the Bill is not technically hybrid, it would certainly appear to be unfair to other generators of electricity. A significant number of them have made known their concerns.

We are invited to support a circumscribed and crippled entity that will never have the chance of proving the future worth of nuclear energy. What incentive will there be for effective financial performance if 65 per cent. of its cash has to go to the Government, even after it has paid its taxes, business rate, climate change levy and so on? The beast that the Government are proposing in the Bill will never fly.

What sort of message do the Bill and the attendant rescue send to the rest of the electricity industry and the market? Its effect on the market is documented. The reaction to the Government's announcement that they proposed to extend their loan to British Energy on 23 September was followed by a drop in the forward price of electricity of 40p to 50p a megawatt-hour. Competitors AES, Powergen, NRG, Ecotricity, American Electric Power and Eastern Electricity are all recorded as expressing concern.

Government interventions in the market have a price. Future investors will levy a premium on the risk:reward ratio to cover for political risk. The price will be paid by future consumers. If the Government are not prepared to let the market work, we will all pay the price, both as consumers and as taxpayers. Nationalisation is wholly unnecessary.

We must spare a thought for the employees of British Energy, many of whom have backed their employer by purchasing their own shares in the company. I am very sorry for them. The company's commercial strategy has been at best unlucky and at worst incompetent. It has certainly not been blessed with significant foresight in an increasingly difficult market. What it should also know is that the Government bear a share of responsibility for its plight. There was no framework for nuclear policy, no unequivocal statement about the merits of the industry, a shocking inability to come to timely decisions about policy on future waste disposal, the windfall tax, the climate change levy and disproportionate business rates, all of which combined with a market in considerable surplus.

We want nuclear power to have a fair chance to play a role in the future electricity generation of the United Kingdom. I want that power to be economic, its environmental costs and benefits having been taken into account in the market. The Bill will not achieve that.

[Mr. Blunt]

It is as sorry a day for the Minister as for the industry, the taxpayer and the consumer. We can do them all a favour and throw the Bill out.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next speaker, I should tell the House that Mr. Speaker has placed a 15-minute limit on all Back-Bench speeches. That applies from now on.

5.31 pm

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): I welcome the Bill and believe that it is prudent of the Government to get the powers that they are seeking.

Those of us who know British Energy feel sad that it has come to this pass. In its history as a privatised company, its record was extremely good for many years in respect of its technical responsibilities. Its reduced its costs considerably, operated within the increasingly tight requirements of the nuclear installations inspectorate and had a nuclear safety record as good as any in the world. While British Energy was technically sound, however, it was at best commercially unlucky and at worst downright incompetent. It was unlucky in so far as it was unsuccessful in failing to secure the London Electricity purchase in the teeth of opposition from Electricité de France, because the French Government were prepared to extend their pockets far beyond what the market considered a reasonable price. I do not think that EDF has made a great deal of money out of what happened.

If British Energy had had flexibility and had become a broad-based energy company instead of being almost entirely a generator, we might not have had this debate. Certainly, as has been suggested, the SWALEC deal was probably ill judged initially. The details that have been released, to which the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) referred, show that it was a pig in a poke and that the directors should have been called to account, although it was difficult for that to happen given that they were making plenty of money and passing it on as dividends. Everybody was happy in the best of all possible worlds—or so it seemed. Perhaps because those involved had burned their figures on SWALEC or were frightened off by the London Electricity failure, the company chose not to go anywhere else. It could have taken other opportunities, in the shape of Yorkshire Electricity for one, that would have given it not only a far broader basis as an energy company but the financial support necessary to take on the difficulties that subsequently arose.

Nothing in the work of the Environment Agency or the nuclear installations inspectorate caused the company undue problems. The reason above all else why little concern was given to the possibility of financial failure is that it takes a particular sort of incompetence not only for a company to run a utility at a loss, but for it to fail to recognise that it is working in a rigged market and that it is only a matter of time before the super profits and high share prices that that market offers will change.

That is what the hon. Member for Reigate has been incapable of appreciating in all his previous incarnations. The pool system operated brilliantly for the generators and their shareholders, but not in the interests of British industry or the other players.

The nuclear industry, which was privatised on the back of assets that had just been completed, was in a privileged position. We had one of our most illuminating exchanges in the Select Committee on the valuation of assets when we considered the reasons for the extent to which Sizewell was being written down. A previous permanent secretary at the Treasury, who was then in Barclays de Zoute Wedd and the chairman of the bank responsible for the flotation, used a striking metaphor. He said, "A nuclear power station is a bit like a motor car. Once you've built it and sold it on, like the car leaving the forecourt, it immediately loses a lot of money." The knock-down price of the original sale was suited to the purposes of the privatisation.

On 31 March 2001, barely two years ago, the system changed, and the privileged position that British Energy enjoyed also altered. The bidding system no longer meant that the price that it bid floated up to the market price and everything was taken care of. That is when the problems set in. If British Energy had been as commercially aware as it should have been, it would have acted immediately. Other generators did that and were able to deal with matters.

Nuclear power is difficult and dangerous to produce. It can be produced safely, but only with great difficulty. Sadly, those who had the skills and the capability to do that were not the same sort of people as those who were brought in to look after the commercial side of the company. That was the greatest problem. When Robin Jeffrey returned from America, and there was a clear-out on the board, his ambition was to generate even more nuclear energy. He wanted either replacement or additional build. Frankly, he took his eye off the ball.

Matters were clearly drifting in the summer. That was followed by a crass move whereby Robin Jeffrey said that the company had the ability to call on additional financial support. The humblest mortgage payer knows that one can always get additional financial backing, provided that one can at best service the loan. As we marched through September, servicing the loan became increasingly difficult for the company. When BNFL was asked to reduce some of its prices, it wanted to ascertain whether a deal with some of the Magnox stations was possible.

I appreciated Mr. Speaker's earlier intervention when my question went on too long, for which I apologise. I was trying to make the point that BNFL was asked to go the extra mile, which it travelled. It was subsequently asked to go even further. At that point, it would have prejudiced its position and been in the Government's arms. As far as I understand matters, BNFL's financial circumstances have not changed in the past six or four months to the extent that it could make a much better offer than that on the table when it made its final deal.

The current room for manoeuvre comprises the three options that we have discussed today: administration, limping along or nationalisation.

Mr. Blunt: I want simply to establish the facts. The hon. Gentleman points out that BNFL could go only so far at the beginning of September. Has it now gone further as part of the Government's package? That would have an impact on the taxpayer.

Mr. O'Neill: I am not privy to BNFL's secrets. As a close observer of its fortunes, and those of the nuclear industry, I simply say that if it went further without material improvement in its financial circumstances, that would spell danger for the company. That is as much as I am competent to say.

Mr. Hendrick: I fully agree with my hon. Friend that BNFL should not take any steps that would put it in difficulty. Will he say to the hundreds of BNFL workers in my constituency that he supports them in delivering the goods to British Energy and that he hopes that they will continue to do so in the foreseeable future? Thousands of jobs are at risk. If we were to take the course suggested by the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), those people would be out of work fairly quickly.

Mr. O'Neill: My hon. Friend may be over-egging the pudding a wee bit. BNFL is in a strong position in so far as it is a virtual monopoly as far as the United Kingdom is concerned. The French company will not necessarily step in with a lower bid. BNFL has made step changes and radical improvements. We must recognise, however, that the deals that were struck at the time of privatisation were commercially unrealistic. When Robin Jeffrey returned from the United States, he asked the apparently reasonable question, "Why can't I get my nuclear reprocessing done in Britain for the same sort of prices I pay in north America?" In fact, that is not to compare like with like—different circumstances apply—but it was a question that had to be asked. He got a reply of sorts, but it was not as good as he thought that it could have been.

As with many privatisations, several people in those companies thought that they had died and gone to heaven. They were offered shares at ridiculously cheap prices and bought them through long-term schemes, often to the exclusion of any other form of savings. Those poor souls are now seeing their savings going down the drain. Over the years, when shares in British Gas and other privatisations fell, many hon. Members received letters from constituents asking what the Government could do about it. The fact is that there is nothing that the Government can do about it. That happened when I was an energy spokesman for the Opposition and privatisations took place under the writ of the Tories; it happens whenever such fluctuations occur. In this instance, it is little short of a disaster for many people. For that reason, if for no other, proper provision must be made through legislation such as this Bill. Many of the shareholders and bondholders are small savers, and to dismiss them in the manner of the hon. Member for Reigate is callous. He said that it is in their interests to get a deal. Of course it is—sometimes those savings are all that they have.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) said, a trade sale is not a realistic proposition. What worries me about nationalisation is that nobody in the civil service is qualified to run British Energy. There are better managers out there who could run the business, but I am not sure that we could lure them to Victoria street.

If, in the end, taxpayer's money has to be put up, there must be a means of protecting it. If the company can work its way out of its present difficulties and get itself into a position whereby, as my hon. Friend the Minister suggested, loans can be considered, its fortunes will begin to change. It is important that the business is kept running and that revenues keep coming in. It is much better to keep the power stations going than to have them lying idle while they still have to be cared for and protected. It is not a simple choice. If we discarded just 21 per cent., we would be down to about the lower limit. That is the technical economics of the madhouse. It might work in a wind-driven Wales, in some future independent state that will never arrive, but it will not happen in the United Kingdom, where many people—certainly those in Scotland—depend for half their electricity on the output of two nuclear power stations. I certainly would not want my constituents to go to bed with electricity or power reduced simply to meet the needs of fanatical so-called environmentalists or supposedly hard-nosed business people.

The fact is that nuclear energy in this country will be required for some considerable time and it would be wrong even to discount the possibility of life extensions for existing stations, because the life of a nuclear power station is a guesstimate at the best of times. It could be cut down the way—I admit that if it were technically wrong to run stations they should be closed—but if they are technically capable of being run and their costs have largely been met, that is perhaps one of the better ways to ensure that the public get some return on the loans and assistance. My hon. Friend the Minister seeks to acquire powers for that, but the proviso, of course, is that the European Union can act.

There is a matter that we have not discussed, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister makes this point when he replies to the debate: we still have to get the underwriting for the deal from the Commission. I believe that there is still some way to go there. We are discussing a minor milestone in the long journey ahead before we clear up British Energy's problems, but I welcome tonight's debate as a meaningful first step along that road.

I take the point that the Government acted wisely, prudently and in a measured fashion. There was no panic in the Department at that time, and it is wrong and demeaning to officials and Ministers to suggest that. The problem is difficult and it will not be solved overnight, but the Bill is a useful first step on the way to a solution and I welcome it.

5.46 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): Listening to the Minister's sober and restrained introduction called to mind a quotation from one of his predecessors, Mr. Fred Lee, who stood up in the House in 1965 and said that

> "we have hit the jackpot . . . we have the greatest break-through of all time."—[*Official Report*, 25 May 1965; Vol. 713, c. 237-8.]

With those words, he introduced the advanced gas-cooled reactor programme, which is the basis of British Energy's portfolio. What Fred Lee did not anticipate,

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and what we know with hindsight, is that the first of those would take 17 years to build, be 500 per cent. over budget and 20 per cent. below specification. Unfortunately, a lot has flowed from that.

I was brought up in a stern, non-conformist tradition, so I am not sure what the gambling term is for the opposite of a jackpot, but the Government and their predecessors have hit it. That issue is worth pursuing before getting into the substance of the arguments, because, as the hon. Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) hinted, the package, which is incorporated in the Bill and will lead to the lifting of the ceiling on the Government's commitments to £2.5 billion, comes on top of a lot of other liabilities that the taxpayer is being required to assume.

A couple of years ago, the late Mike Sadnicki put to the Environment Sub-Committee a paper in which he bravely attempted to calculate that sum. He came up with a figure of about £55 billion—that was £20 billion at current prices, after discounting—which was a conservative estimate of the liabilities that would fall to the taxpayer. Those are liabilities to which we propose to add.

Returning to the jackpot analogy, when a gambler is losing money, there is always an instinct to stay at the table. I sense that, in a way, that is what the Government are trying to do. The recurrent theme that comes through their arguments on the financial case—we shall come to the wider arguments later—is that it is cheaper to stay at the table and keep British Energy in solvent restructuring than for it to go into administration, and cheaper to keep production going than to close it down.

This is a technically complex area and I do not in any sense claim to be an expert on it, but all the figures on the financing aspect that I have seen suggest that both propositions are wrong in fact. The Minister shakes his head, and he may be right. None of us has a definitive answer. However, before the Bill proceeds through Parliament under the Government's hurried programme, can we have an independent financial assessment? I do not know who could make that assessment in the space of a few weeks, but perhaps the National Audit Office or the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), could do it. Is administration really more expensive than solvent restructuring? Is keeping production going cheaper than stopping it? We might at least agree on issues of fact before we debate issues of principle.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need an independent assessment of one of the Minister's arguments? He said that it is better to give British Energy a loan so that it can continue to pay money into the public nuclear liability contingency fund. Should that argument not be open to scrutiny? An independent assessment would be useful.

Dr. Cable: That is part of what I propose. I shall return to the details of the financial arrangements.

I have spoken on trade and industry and energy for two and a half years, in which time there has been a long succession of Conservative spokesmen. Although I have rather lost track of who they all are, until today I could almost rely on the fact that they would put up a robust defence of private nuclear power and of putting more money into it. I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), and something has changed. I do not know whether there has been a rebranding exercise or whether the hon. Gentleman has been allowed to use his initiative and has come up with a sensible statement on many key issues. Much to my surprise, I found myself agreeing with much of what he said.

On the other hand, I profoundly disagreed with the Minister and the Government's case, and my colleagues and I will vote against the Bill. Temperamentally, my instinct is to find common ground and to try to identify areas in which we start from the same point. On nuclear safety, the Minister was absolutely right to say that safety must be guaranteed. That is obvious: nuclear power stations cannot have small accidents—any accident is a potential catastrophe. We entirely share that starting point.

The problem with the Minister's argument is that the only risk that he identified is that of a sudden—his word—shutdown of all capacity in the industry. No one has ever suggested that. No one is promoting it or thinks it remotely feasible. If the matter went into administration, the administrator would almost certainly keep the power stations running. So long as they cover their interest charges, that would be in the economic interest. We certainly do not advocate a sudden shutdown.

We know from experience in the United Kingdom, quite apart from that overseas, that nuclear power stations can be shut down. Torness, on the east coast of Scotland, is shut down at present.

Anne Picking (East Lothian): No.

Dr. Cable: It has had a prolonged period of disruption and interruption of production, as the hon. Lady knows. Stations can also be shut down permanently and decommissioned. That process is beginning in the UK with Windscale, Dounreay and so on. Safety can be guaranteed in that environment. Provided that any contraction is orderly and managed, there is no reason why there should be a safety problem.

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman appears to suggest that he has moved on to making the safety case from making the financial case. The two are in fact indissolubly linked. Does he accept that if we moved toward closure of a plant, we would bring forward substantial decommissioning costs for which no contribution has been made during the life of the plant? One reason why British Energy's average cost of production went up was that Torness was shut. Even temporarily shutting down a plant results in a dramatic rise in the industry's overall costs.

Dr. Cable: The hon. Gentleman is logically right, but the sums involved in the argument are often not true. The Government, and, I suspect, the hon. Gentleman, use the magic figure of £5 billion for the decommissioning costs that would be brought forward. When one actually looks into decommissioning costs—

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman knows this because he is very knowledgeable about the industry—only a small part of the costs, in the order of £600 million, must be incurred in the near future to stabilise the core of the reactor. The remaining present value of the decommissioning process is £300 million. The cost that would have to be brought forward is therefore less than £1 billion, not the £5 billion suggested by the Government and hinted at by the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) in his intervention. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) is right to say that there is a link between safety and costs, but the figures often put before us as the estimated cost to the taxpayer of a reduction in, or phasing out of, production are wildly exaggerated.

Safety is the first issue; the second is security of supply. The Minister is right to say that no one wants an environment in which substantial numbers of people risk being disconnected from the electricity supply. That is common ground, and we do not argue that people should be put at that risk. The Government's problem is not with us—I am no expert at calculating spare capacity—but with their own regulator, who consistently points out that there is a very large margin of spare capacity. According to the statement that he sent us a couple of days ago, it is 22 per cent. at the very least. That is considerably in excess of the capacity of British Energy, even on a crude aggregate basis.

The regulator also pointed out that a large amount of capacity has been agreed commercially—consensus has been reached—but cannot be brought forward because of low prices in the industry. There is a basic paradox at the heart of the Government's argument. If there were less capacity in the nuclear industry—if some of it were withdrawn—the price would rise. That would enable nuclear power to operate more profitably; it would also enable other investment to come into the industry. The regulator has never suggested—indeed, he has gone out of his way to suggest the opposite—that security of supply would be threatened as a result of British Energy's going into administration or of capacity being withdrawn.

The third issue has to do with competitors. It is partly a legal issue, and it would be neither useful nor appropriate for us to comment on the legal ruling that will come from the Greenpeace case or on judgments from the European Commission. There is, however, a serious problem in that the Government are favouring one company over others through the Bill and through bailing out that company. It is important to have some sense of the damage being done to British Energy's competitors.

One small part of the market is combined heat and power, which has lost about 75 per cent. of capacity. Powergen has had to write down about 90 per cent. of its investment in the industry. CHP is receiving no compensation or help from the Government—nor are renewable energy and other producers. The Government will have to explain to the European Commission why British Energy is being helped while other operators are not. Moreover, it is not just being helped temporarily, but being given permanent, ongoing help. As I understand the European competition rules, the Government will have great difficulty in getting that through.

Mr. O'Neill: The hon. Gentleman chooses to forget that renewable energy is receiving a lot of financial support. Like combined heat and power, it has been exempted from the climate change levy. CHP is also a dual fuel, so that if gas rises in price, as it has done, people stop using it and go for coal or other forms of generation. All that results from the working of the market, which the hon. Gentleman vaunts, and has precious little to do with the Government's policy of favouring or not favouring British Energy. The Government have favoured other forms of energy in other ways.

Dr. Cable: The hon. Gentleman's specific points are right, but he knows that renewables and combined heat and power have been disproportionately hit at a time when we are talking about helping a particular sector to continue to operate as before.

Let me turn to the core of the Bill; the argument about financing on which there is some common ground. A lot of the problems have arisen from the way in which the privatised company operated. It is said that the privatised company was just unlucky because of the new electricity trading arrangements and the way in which the auction system works. However, as I recall, British Energy never objected to NETA. I was involved in the Utilities Bill 2000 and the associated legislation. A variety of lobbies petitioned us about the problems that NETA might cause. British Energy never said a word and was entirely optimistic that it could compete in the market.

In the meantime, the company made some severe commercial misjudgments. Quite apart from passing up the opportunity for diversification that the other power companies took, it bought a power station for £50 million that is now worth £6 million. There was a succession of such judgments, including a special dividend of £48 million when the company was losing money. The whole ethos of the company is summarised by the manner in which Mr. Jeffrey is leaving it. The company is virtually bankrupt, but he is being paid off with £300,000 compensation, plus a £150,000 a year pension. He now says that that is not enough. Almost single-handedly, that gentleman is making the case for the Company Directors' Performance and Compensation Bill that the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) will be proposing on Friday. It also speaks volumes about the way in which British Energy has been run. There is some common ground on that.

I accept also that, since September when the crisis emerged, the Government have accepted that there must be burden-sharing. The private investors will take a big hit, even as a result of the Bill. As I understand it, the creditors will lose roughly two thirds of their assets. There is a hard-headed question—if the Government are acting on behalf of the taxpayer—as to why any wealth should be left in the company.

I welcome the acceptance that we are now debating—in a way that we could not three months ago—the pros and cons of administration. I raised it when the crisis broke and was accused by one or two Labour Members of being wildly irresponsible: "How could the hon. Gentleman possibly talk about administration? It is sheer lunacy." It is now in the Bill and accepted as a practical and, I would say, probable option.

Simply arguing about administration versus solvent restructuring is only the tip of the iceberg. There are a lot of subsidiary issues that, somehow or other—in a day's

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debate in Committee and in the House of Lords—need to be addressed. If the company went into administration, there would be a variety of options. The administrator could keep running British Energy for a long time, provided that it covers its basic costs. The company could be nationalised—one of the options that has been raised. It could be sold, though that seems improbable. It could be taken into a public interest company, with a view to an orderly and gradual closure. Those are all enormously important options that we have not even begun to consider. If we are to consider the Bill properly, we must look at all of them.

On financing, I accept that there is some common ground, although there are some fundamental differences. I hope that, through an examination of the accounts or in other ways, we shall get some answers to these problems—about the relative costs of keeping British Energy in solvent restructuring or putting it into administration, or the partial closure of plants. First, what is the cost of the Government's proposals? There is the Government assistance per se: the £650 million loan, the ceiling of which was increased, under EU proposals, to about £1.15 billion. The Bill mentions £2.5 billion, of which only £350 million has been drawn so far. Potentially a very large sum of money that has not been disbursed will be disbursed if the Bill is passed, in the form of aid to the company.

In addition, we have the new contracts of BNFL—a public sector company—amounting to an additional £150 million to £200 million a year. We have the back-end liabilities commitment of £150 million to £250 million a year. We are talking about a total taxpayer commitment of about £4.8 billion over the next 10 years; it could be £6 billion. It would be useful to know, at the very least, the order of magnitude about which we are talking. Very large sums are being committed under the Bill.

If the option of administration were to be chosen, the taxpayer would lose the private company's contribution to decommissioning. Although it is technically complex, we should reflect on that subject. It is agreed that the private company will pay 65 per cent. of net cash flow, after interest payments, into the decommissioning fund. On the assumptions that are being made in the plan, £100 million a year would go from the private company into decommissioning. That is why the Government want to retain the company as a private operation.

However, the assumptions that lie behind that are wildly optimistic. It is assumed, for example, that the company can make a £1.50 margin per megawatt-hour on its operations, while operating at much higher levels of efficiency than before. It is assumed that the plants will be able to operate at maximum efficiency, without the kind of disruption that we have had in at least two reactors recently. It is assumed that there will be income from the American subsidiaries, which are being sold off. The assumptions are wildly optimistic and have no basis in reality. If the money is not forthcoming, there is no reason to continue to expose the taxpayer to the continued liabilities through the subsidy.

The more radical option that we should look at is not just administration, but the possibility that at least some, if not all, of the reactors should be taken out of production before the end of their natural lives. There are various time horizons for that, but let us at least look at the options. The Government have always argued that that would be financially disastrous because of the £5 billion of liabilities. I hope that, in my answer to the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, I answered that point. But the figures that would confront the Government, were they to go for premature closure, are far lower than have been bandied about in the past. Given that there is doubt about them, let us at least have an open, honest and independent inspection by the National Audit Office, or somebody else, to validate the figures.

Mr. Lansley: I have detected no reference from the hon. Gentleman to British Energy's intention in the solvent restructuring deal to issue £700 million of new debt, £275 million of which would go into the liabilities fund. By extension, that is capitalisation for the operation and a contribution to meeting liabilities that would not be available in the event of either administration or nationalisation.

Dr. Cable: I thought that I acknowledged that when I said that the creditors would lose two thirds of their investment, which would happen if they took shares in return for bonds in those circumstances. I am happy to argue these points with the hon. Gentleman at greater length. There may be an element in the calculation that I have missed; but I do not think so.

David Hamilton: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the investors. As someone who does not gamble very often, I take the view that people who buy shares are gamblers; a loss as well as a profit can be made. I do not have much sympathy for anyone who buys shares—even an elderly person—and then cries about not making a profit. When we talk about discussing energy requirements, we should be talking about the cost to Britain and to the taxpayer.

Dr. Cable: I think that the hon. Gentleman makes two points. As regards the interests of investors, many of the shareholders are sophisticated investors and have no reason to complain about the loss that they will suffer. However, I do not gloat over that. After all, there are nuclear energy shares in our pension funds, so everybody loses. We have to accept that there is no shareholder value left, but I take no pride or joy in saying that.

The hon. Gentleman's second point leads me to the conclusion that I was about to draw: we need to consider the wider energy picture. There is obviously a link between this debate and the larger debate that we shall hold on the White Paper.

I was about to make a concession. Although many of the Government's arguments are weak, we need to think seriously about the carbon dioxide issue. I wholly accept that my approach would mean higher CO_2 emissions, at least in the short term. I accept that that is part of the price we have to pay for a sensible and honest restructuring of the nuclear power industry. However, in taking that approach, I am in fairly good company: organisations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth take the same view. Like me, they would argue that, whatever happens in the next two to four years, it is much more important that we are on the right trajectory for the development of renewables, energy conservation and energy efficiency. It is important that all those elements are in place.

If that overall approach were adopted, it would be possible to see a future in which we had less reliance on carbon emissions and nuclear power. However, the process will be difficult. I look forward to debating these matters again in the context of the White Paper.

6.12 pm

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): I am not entirely sure what I have heard from the Opposition spokesmen. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), who spoke for the Liberal Democrats, was at least honest when he said that no shareholder value remained in British Energy, but the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) was less honest. The implication of his solution was that British Energy could be closed without tackling the problem of shareholder value.

If we adopted the hon. Gentleman's solution—thereby eradicating shareholder value—the Conservatives would be the first to say that as the Government had engineered a situation in which shareholders had lost all their money they should step in with compensation. Have we all forgotten the Conservatives' comments about Railtrack and the problems in the rail industry? If the hon. Gentleman really believes that British Energy can be put into the hands of administrators and continue to be run while maintaining shareholder value, he is setting out a bizarre contradiction.

Mr. Blunt *rose—*

Dr. Ladyman: As the hon. Gentleman is anxious to intervene, I am happy to allow him to explain himself.

Mr. Blunt: It is the hon. Gentleman's statements that are bizarre. I ask only that the market should operate. Of course shareholders will be bottom of the administrator's list. If any value remains, there will be a distribution to existing shareholders, but the taxpayer will have a prior charge—as indeed will the bond holders, the trade and other creditors, and possibly even Robin Jeffery with his settlement terms. If the Government intervene in the market, however, there will be a price to be paid.

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Gentleman says that the market should operate, but the consequence of its operating as he suggests will be that no shareholder value will be left, and the Conservatives would shout the loudest that the Government had brought that about. Another consequence of his suggestion is that, ultimately, the operation of nuclear power would be run down—in that he finds common cause with the Liberal Democrats. There might be a debate about how quickly that rundown would take place. The hon. Member for Twickenham said that he knew of no one who had suggested that it should be shut down immediately, although that is exactly what Greenpeace proposes. However, at least he was honest enough to admit that the consequence of shutting down the nuclear power industry, if we do not agree to the Bill, would be an increase in carbon emissions. That would have a significant impact on our ability to meet our Kyoto obligations and would certainly mean that we would contribute to greenhouse gas emissions for a long time to come.

The hon. Member for Twickenham did not point out that the Government's figures show that between 12,000 and 24,000 people die prematurely each year as a result of carbon burning. If we do the maths, we realise that nuclear power, which currently generates a quarter of our electricity without burning carbon, saves between 2,000 and 4,000 lives in the United Kingdom each year. If we decide willy-nilly to adopt a proposal that would run down nuclear power and increase carbon emissions, we shall not only contribute to greenhouse gases but we shall also add to the number of people who die every year.

Mr. Hendrick: I agree with my hon. Friend's accurate comments about CO_2 and about share prices. Does he agree that if the proposals of the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) were adopted and no financial assistance were given, not only would British Energy collapse but thousands of jobs would be lost, including 2,000 at Springfields near Preston in my constituency?

Dr. Ladyman: My hon. Friend is right. To the best of my recollection, neither of the Opposition spokesmen mentioned jobs. Tens of thousands of people would lose their jobs if their solutions were followed, which seems utterly bizarre.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): The hon. Gentleman appears to have missed the central part of the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable): if nuclear capacity is taken out of the system, it will provide a platform on which other technologies can flourish. They will provide employment, but there will be a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions. The hon. Gentleman is doing some very special pleading on behalf of a dying industry.

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Gentleman should be careful about what he says. The technologies whose cause he usually espouses in this place are based on renewable energy and are several times more expensive than nuclear power. Unless we distort the market there will be no future for those technologies. I challenge Members to provide the House with the name of any serious engineer or other expert who believes that the target of 20 per cent. production of renewable energy by 2020 is a practical possibility. Most of the experts do not even believe that the Government's target of 10 per cent. by 2010 is possible.

Even if we put all the resources of Government behind renewables, and even assuming that we maintain the renewables obligation that is part of the existing marketplace distortion, which we all seem perfectly happy to accept, no expert believes that 20 per cent. of our energy will be produced from renewables by 2020. To use wind power, for example, would require us to build 40 windmills every month between now and 2020. As my hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Construction pointed out so eloquently in a previous debate on energy, that will not happen, especially in

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areas of the country where the councils are under Liberal Democrat control. Every proposal for windmills is opposed on planning grounds in those areas.

Mr. O'Neill: A further point is that the wind does not blow all the time. We should thus require base load generation of some form—probably using gas or coal, the other two options for mass-produced energy.

Dr. Ladyman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Professor Laughton of the university of London has done the figures for us—if anyone cares to get hold of them and read them. He has shown that the prevailing winds are such that, in this country, the wind does not correspond with the demands for peak electricity consumption. We would have to spend £30 billion to £40 billion to build windmills all around the country to generate 20 per cent. of our electricity, and we would still have to match those windmills with onshore alternative energy supplies—almost certainly burning carbon—to guarantee continuity of supply. That would make an absolutely nonsensical energy policy. I put it to the House that the only energy policy that will make any sense for this country is one in which we have a balanced supply portfolio. That will require some carbon burning in the form of gas and clean coal.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. May I bring the hon. Gentleman back to the content of the Bill, which is the restructuring of British Energy?

Dr. Ladyman: I certainly take your advice on board, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I simply point out in my defence that we are seriously debating whether to accept the Bill and, if we say no to the Bill tonight, we are saying no to British Energy and no to nuclear power, so the context in which we make that decision must be clearly understood.

I do not see a future for nuclear power unless we accept the Bill, and we must therefore ask ourselves whether we should make a one-off loan and provide new arrangements for the industry and whether that solves our problem, or whether we are simply going to find ourselves in the same position six months, 12 months or a few years down the line.

My concern is that although my hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Construction addressed very well the need to support British Energy in the short term, what he did not do so well—presumably because he expects to have such a debate when the White Paper is published—is talk about the industry's long-term framework, in which nuclear power can flourish as one of the components of a balanced portfolio.

Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): Does my hon. Friend accept that there is a role for renewable sources and sustainable energy in the wider context?

Dr. Ladyman: I absolutely agree that there is such a role, but we can make a reality of that role only by distorting the marketplace in exactly the way—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Once again, may I bring the hon. Gentleman back to the purpose of the Bill—the financing of British Energy?

Dr. Ladyman: I shall certainly do that, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Bill will give British Energy a future. It minimises the expense that we can expect the Government to incur in guaranteeing that future. We must ensure that a way forward is built into the White Paper that will guarantee us a safe and consistent energy supply in the future and that will involve the least hardship for British Energy.

Points have been made about how British Energy got into this mess, and we have to accept that there have been considerable management failures, some of which my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) mentioned earlier. I agree with him that management caused some very serious problems, but, equally, the Government must accept that NETA has had an impact on British Energy. Decisions about the rateable values of the company's sites have had an impact on its economic viability. Both those things need to be addressed if the Bill is to succeed in its aim of maintaining British Energy as a viable, going concern.

We must accept that the current wholesale price of energy generation—about £16 per megawatt hour—is lower than the economic price of generation for all electricity suppliers, not just the nuclear power industry. Indeed, British Energy's current price is very close to the wholesale price at about £17 per megawatt hour. However, it is not sustainable to have all forms of generation generating below the wholesale price, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will address that in his winding-up speech.

My hon. Friend the Minister should accept that, although NETA has forced down the wholesale price, the retail price has not reduced so dramatically. If we take away the discounts that people in the domestic sector receive for changing their supply company and the short-term offers that some companies make, the retail price of electricity is about £66 per megawatt hour—four times the wholesale price. That seems a rather strange margin to allow the industry, and we need to consider how NETA operates, not only because of its impact on British Energy but because the whole energy industry is unsustainable at that price.

Apart from the rateable value of sites, which various hon. Members have already mentioned, we should recognise the fact that the nuclear power industry is the only form of generation that has to internalise the costs of waste and all the environmental costs. If we were to force the carbon-burning industry—whether clean coal, gas, or even including burning petrol in cars—to take account of its environmental costs, it would be by far the most expensive form of energy on the market today, and we have to judge the Bill's merits in that context.

The Bill is very much a short-term solution to British Energy's problems, but it will not stand alone. It must go hand in hand with other measures included in the White Paper to promote a balanced portfolio and ensure that this country's nuclear power industry has a future, so that we can continue to produce clean energy from nuclear sources, as well as developing the other forms of energy that are required.

We need a package of measures on top of the Bill to create a sustainable energy policy for this country, but at least the Bill is a good start. Opposition Members would be very unwise to vote against it because they will be judged in the long term by the impact that their action would have on British Energy's share value and on the environmental damage that, by implication, they would force on our country.

6.27 pm

Mr. John Horam (Orpington): I was very interested in the remarks made by the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) because he hit on one of the crucial points that none of the Front-Bench spokesmen have emphasised so far, which is that the whole energy industry cannot sustain the present prices. He quoted the figure of £16 per megawatt-hour, whereas £22 per megawatt-hour is needed for anyone to be profitable, but he must ask why prices are so low. Of course the answer is—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Once again, may I remind all hon. Members that the Bill is about financial assistance to British Energy?

Mr. Horam: With due respect, Madam Deputy Speaker, the reason that British Energy is in this position is that it is not profitable because it has had to operate in a market where the prices are simply unsustainable. That is the reason why we are discussing the Bill today, and I am concerned about the operation of NETA, which the Government imposed about 18 months or so ago, and the prices are unsustainable as a result. Of course there are other reasons why we are in this position. I fully accept the Minister's point that British Energy's problems are not simply to do with prices.

Mr. Clapham: The hon. Gentleman makes a point about NETA, but does he accept that the way in which nuclear energy was favoured under the marginal pricing system of the pool is the reason why it was able to appear to be economic and that, when it had to face competition under NETA, it could not hack it?

Mr. Horam: That is a substantial point. The problem has been that we have gone from the pool situation, on which the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) commented favourably, to the reverse situation in which no one can make any money at the current price. That is because we have too much capacity—I think that the Minister mentioned 22 per cent.—and because of the way that the NETA system operates. It is a brutal market system.

Richard Ottaway: Yet another reason is that the market has not been allowed to operate freely. The most uneconomic generators—the Magnox nuclear stations—are hopelessly unprofitable and are forcing prices down, and the market cannot therefore operate in a genuine way.

Mr. Horam: Whatever may be the case, the fact is that the Government brought in a system that is wholly predicated on a straightforward, simple, unaffected market system, leading to prices that are unsustainable, which, among other factors, has led to the present pass of British Energy. Nothing will change until something is done about the NETA system—that is the point that I want to get across.

The arrangements that the Government are currently introducing, as the Minister has argued, may be necessary, short-term palliatives to deal with a crisis situation. What he cannot escape, however, is the Government's responsibility for introducing a pricing system that has led to this pass. That is the argument with which the Government must contend.

In response to the arguments of the hon. Member for South Thanet, I agree that we need a balanced system with regard to the various types of energy supply. Not only do we need a balanced system but we need to take into account the social consequences, in terms of jobs, and the environmental consequences of our energy policy. That is extremely complicated, and not all of those factors can be taken into account in dealing with a short-term situation such as British Energy and its continuing performance.

That is why my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) was right when he teased out from the Minister his casual approach to the question of the White Paper. Waiting for that White Paper is like waiting for Godot—we have been waiting for months and months. The Committee that I chair, the Environmental Audit Committee, published a report on renewable energy last July in the expectation that some sort of White Paper would appear in the autumn. Autumn passed, December and Christmas came, we began to expect it in January or February, and we are now told that it may appear in February or March. While I respect the Minister's point that he would rather get it right than produce it too early, the way in which this debate is taking place is like "Hamlet" without the prince. We need to consider energy policy in the round, which the Government should also do before they make crucial decisions involving millions and potentially billions of taxpayer's money without any of us knowing where we are proceeding in terms of wholesale energy policy.

Mr. O'Neill: Does the hon. Gentleman concede that in relation to the specifics of the company whose financial plight we are trying to address this evening, something like 20 to 25 per cent. of its generating capacity is not affected by NETA in so far as it is under a private agreement with Scottish Power and Scottish and Southern Energy? There will be an opportunity before too long, when the new British electricity trading arrangements are introduced, to recast the whole equation and to see it if it can be done better. That does not need a White Paper, as we will be dealing with market situations that will prevail for perhaps seven to 10 years. A White Paper will deal with new build that will probably barely have started within that time scale.

Mr. Horam: I take the hon. Gentleman's point, but, none the less, the operation of the NETA system has been a contributory factor to the current plight, and we are having to spend millions and billions of pounds to get out of it. It would have been better if, from the start, the Government had instituted a market system that was within a logical framework of a clear energy policy. As was pointed out, although the details of the situation can vary, that would at least ensure the right trajectory. In that respect, the measure is flawed, as, first, the NETA arrangements take no account of the need to encourage renewables. A renewables obligation exists, as the hon. Member for Ochil mentioned, but it is a very weak instrument. The hon. Member for South Thanet said that he knew of no engineer who would say that the Government could achieve 20 per cent. of our energy

[Mr. Horam]

from renewables by 2020. In Denmark, however, 25 to 28 per cent. of the energy supply is from renewables, and that has been achieved in less than 17 years—the period between now and 2020. I confess that I cannot name an engineer who would support my case, but, if it has been done in Denmark, I cannot see why it cannot be done here.

I agree with the hon. Member for South Thanet, however, that we must have a balanced approach, and I concede that nuclear has a role to play as well as renewables. I am not one of those people who believe that we should have renewables at all costs and that we can do without nuclear altogether. Clearly, that is not sustainable in the current situation.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman could start to address some of his remarks to the specifics of the Bill.

Mr. Horam: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for that sensible reminder.

Nuclear energy has a role to play, but we cannot say currently what will happen: whether administration or the solvent restructuring about which the Government are talking will be pursued. We do not know how much money the taxpayer will have to fork out. The Government must consider the NETA arrangements fairly soon. I agree that we must not talk too much about the White Paper, which we hope that we will debate in the next couple of months, but one thing that the Government can do is talk to the regulator about how he is operating. I notice that the Minister is laughing rather extensively about that. He may regard talking to the regulator as impossible. Certainly, when we interviewed him while discussing these matters in the Select Committee, we found him resistant to suggestions that even the Government could talk to him. The fact is that as a result of the way in which he has operated the arrangements, nuclear energy has faced the problems that the Minister is trying to address today.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the problems with the regulator, which we examined in the Select Committee, was that the environmental and social guidance promised in the Utilities Bill had not been delivered to the regulator at exactly the time when the debates about NETA and British Energy were taking place? In fact, the House only approved them a few weeks ago. That has also been a failure in the NETA arrangements.

Mr. Horam: That is why I am afraid that the Government, although they have a crisis agenda with regard to British Energy—they must handle it one way or another, and they have come forward with a solution this evening—have gone about their policy in the wrong way. The cart is being put before the horse, as we do not know where we are going, and we do not know the priorities of the Government in relation to the various alternatives. We are discussing today a Bill that puts billions of pounds in the hands of a particular organisation whose future role we cannot yet envisage.

Sir Robert Smith: Does not the hon. Gentleman think that the last remarks of the Minister in relation to the White Paper having no effect on the financial situation of British Energy tend to suggest that its proposals will not be exciting or radical?

Mr. Horam: Again, that point has been made repeatedly. The fact is that the Government have addressed these issues often. A performance and innovation unit report has been published, we are expecting a White Paper, and papers have been published previously. All of them, however, are expressed in bland generalities that do not grasp the nettles that must be grasped. That is why the Minister must now grasp in the short-term a particular nettle, as a consequence of not facing up to the difficult choices that a sensible Government would have made years ago. This Government have been in power for five and a half years.

We have reached a stage at which we have no sensible energy policy. Such a policy has a major contribution to make, not only to manufacturing industrial strength—which it has done, because prices have been very low; I fully concede that that has been of great benefit—but also to environmental policy, to Kyoto and to social questions. None of that has been forthcoming. So the Government have put the cart before the horse, which is one reason why I shall vote against the Bill.

6.40 pm

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): I first apologise to the House and my hon. Friend the Minister for not being here at the beginning of the debate. I wrote to Mr. Speaker and said that I had problems getting here.

I want to address a number of issues in relation to the Bill. I found it amusing to listen to the end of my hon. Friend's speech and to the speech of the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman. I have been in the House for nearly 20 years. I came here from an energy industry and had energy interests for many of those years, to the extent that I served on the Opposition Front Bench considering the Bill that became the Electricity Act 1989. I remember very well sitting through many months of consideration, with my right hon. Friend who is now the Prime Minister, who was then leading for the Opposition in the shadow Cabinet.

If anything could have been predicted, it was the state that British Energy finds itself in today. During that Committee stage we had a plethora of leaks of letters, draft letters, speeches and draft speeches from people who were then members of the Central Electricity Generating Board but who were about to be senior participants in the new privatised companies that were to come into being when the industry was put into the private sector.

The nuclear industry was to be with a company, National Power, which would take over 70 per cent. of electricity generation. That did not happen. The arrangement was withdrawn in 1990 because it did not stack up. Nobody could answer the question that the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) attempted to ask today, when he said that we should have an independent assessment of the costs of the nuclear industry. Twenty years ago nobody knew the costs of the full nuclear fuel cycle, and I suspect that nobody knows them now. The back-end nuclear liabilities can to some extent be predicted, and in the Electricity Act there was an attempt to do that. I shall address a couple of comments to that a little later.

At that time the Government were convinced that the nuclear industry could stand up in the private sector and that it would be profitable. The hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Sir Michael Spicer) was Under-Secretary when we considered the Act in Committee. He was adamant that

"The Government believe that the non-fossil fuel obligation"—

it was actually a tax on fossil fuels to assist the nuclear industry—

"will result in four PWRs being built. PWRs are an efficient way of producing nuclear electricity."

He later said that my now right hon. Friend the Prime Minister had raised two points:

"His second question was whether I accept that nuclear electricity will necessarily be more expensive. I do not accept that, for at least two reasons." —[*Official Report, Standing Committee E*, 19 January 1989; c. 262-263.]

One was the environment and the other was that he was adamant that PWRs were the future of nuclear generation in this country, and that it had a future. That was not true. It did not work. Sizewell B was completed, but we saw nothing of the other PWRs, and we have not seen them since.

Mr. Hendrick: Does not my right hon. Friend accept that at the time he is speaking about, in the 1980s, there was not the same degree of liberalised market, under pressure from the European Commission, as there is now? The single market was not around, and there was not the same pressure from the environmental lobby, with the knowledge of the greenhouse effect.

Mr. Barron: We shall not have a debate on the greenhouse effect now, but it is right to say that those other two points did not apply at that time. But the Opposition argued in Committee about the horizontal privatisation of the electricity industry, which meant that generators could not own supply companies. I and many others went to America to see the privatised electricity industry. Ministers also went to America, where many of the companies concerned owned the energy source, the generation plant and the supply companies. They were supplying into homes. It was that type of vertical privatisation that we should have had in this country. But we do not have it, so I want to move on.

There were the seeds of the problems before us today. The Government are right to act by introducing this Bill to ensure the safety and security of supply and to deal with nuclear liabilities. British Energy is currently attempting to restructure. If it fails, it is highly likely that no private company will want it. What we are doing in the Bill is to make sure that the Government could be a purchaser of last resort. That is something that we should vote for.

It is the height of irresponsibility for the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) to say that the market should operate, that if the company cannot be reconfigured and goes into administration, and if there are no takers, it is as well that it should go out of business. That shows a complete misunderstanding of the nuclear industry and the life cycle of nuclear plants.

I should like to ask my hon. Friend the Minister about the likely effect of repealing sections 72 and 74 of the original Act, which restricted the Government's powers to acquire shares in companies that were formed before privatisation. The relevant clause will give the Government power to acquire shares. How does my hon. Friend see this operating?

In'a debate in Westminster Hall on 3 December 2002, my hon. Friend gave the reasons why the Government are taking this action, stating that there were two main reasons and three subsidiary ones. The first of the subsidiary reasons was

"to maintain an indigenous energy source".

Another was to meet our environmental obligations, which everybody would say we have to do. Both Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen should reflect upon that if they are going to vote against the Bill. The third was that

"it would cost more to shut nuclear power stations than it does to keep them open."—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 3 December 2002; Vol. 385, c. 198WH.]

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) is shaking his head. Nobody knows the cost of the full lifetime of the nuclear cycle. I remember the debates 10 years ago when people asked "What do we do when a nuclear power station closes? Do we leave it alone for 10 years, 50 years or 100 years, before starting to dismantle it, because it will be more inert then?" Nobody knows the cost. I said that at the beginning of the debate, and I firmly believe it. Nobody has yet convinced me that we could switch off the current nuclear power stations and be able to maintain them as they are for a period. The suggestion is the height of irresponsibility.

Mr. Simon Thomas: British Energy has to put into its accounts some account of this "height of irresponsibility", because it has to say what the liability costs are. Its accounts say that for the first five years the liability costs about £600 million, which is the very minimum of what we are giving British Energy in the Bill, and that the vast majority of costs are after 35 years. Therefore, the right hon. Gentleman should accept that it is unproven that the open-ended cheque that we are writing for the nuclear industry in the Bill is any better than the real decommissioning costs of nuclear energy.

Mr. Barron: I think that the hon. Gentleman is second-guessing on that. I shall have something to say about what the Bill does, especially to schedule 12 of the Act. I well remember the debates in Committee about this issue. Nobody can say that we could turn the nuclear stations off tomorrow, whether we have excess generating capacity or not—and we have. We have to recognise also that for most of their lives these generators have been base-load generators, and there is a lot of other generation that would be put in place. That may have severe implications for electricity generation in this country.

Mr. Stunell: Surely the right hon. Gentleman appreciates that for years nuclear plants throughout the country have been turned off, when necessary, for maintenance, or left idle for periods, and then brought back on stream when the market would bear it or the repairs were completed. He is painting a wholly unrealistic picture of the way in which nuclear plants are brought on and off stream.

Mr. Barron: On liabilities, if nuclear plants are turned off, any revenue stream will end, and that has major

[Mr. Barron]

implications for the taxpayer. We cannot wish these things away. The issue of whether we ought to have used nuclear plants in the past or of whether there should be new ones in future does not matter; we will wait and see what the White Paper says. However, it would be irresponsible to turn off plants, and the taxpayer may end up having to spend more money.

Dr. Ladyman: I agree with much of what my right hon. Friend says. Does he agree that, in real terms, the cost of decommissioning these plants is the same whether one does so early or at the end of their lifetime, but if we decommission them early, we will receive no profit from the electricity that they could have been producing in the meantime?

Mr. Barron: That is exactly the point. They are earning revenue for British Energy, and they will continue to do so if the company is saved.

Mr. Stunell *rose—*

Mr. Barron: I shall not give way because I have only about four minutes left, and I want to finish my speech.

In the Westminster Hall debate, the Minister used the word "indigenous" to describe nuclear energy. I have strong thoughts about other indigenous fuels which I would like to express, but not in this debate. I know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I cannot do that. I just hope that the last colliery in my constituency, which is under threat, will still be around when we are able to debate the energy White Paper in a few months. Some people tell me that that is doubtful; I hope that they are wrong.

I turn briefly to clause 3, which amends schedule 12 of the Electricity Act 1989. That provided for financial assistance from the Government for nuclear liabilities, up to a ceiling of £2.5 billion. The Bill will remove that ceiling. I have a couple of questions for the Minister. One concerns a report in *The Mail on Sunday* yesterday. I gladly admit to my hon. Friends that I am guilty of buying and reading that newspaper. [HON. MEMBERS: "Shame."] I know that it is a shame, and most of its contents are a shame. The article says:

> "As part of the restructuring deal, the Government has agreed to pay £2.1 billion towards the generator's decommissioning liabilities . . . There is also growing confidence within the company that the White Paper on energy will not spell the end of nuclear power in Britain".

I do not necessarily want to see the end of nuclear power, and clearly nothing in the White Paper will have that effect; nuclear power will be around for a long time. However, I wonder whether £2.1 billion has been earmarked for that purpose.

My other question concerns the protection that taxpayers will have in relation to the operation of the amended schedule. How can we safeguard taxpayers' money and prevent it from being given to a private company that has mismanaged its affairs and consequently has to go into administration? Will taxpayers' money used to manage nuclear liabilities be ring-fenced within such a company so that, even if it goes out of business, there is still money to pay for the clean-up of the end of the nuclear fuel cycle? The hon. Member for Reigate suggested that that may be the case.

This debate will go on long after the passage of the Bill. However, we ought to secure the protection of taxpayers' money. We ought to ensure that if that money is being paid to a private company, it will be used for exactly the purpose for which it was intended. In this case, that is to meet the liabilities of the nuclear fuel cycle, and the money should not go into shareholders' pockets or be used for any other purpose.

6.55 pm

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster): It is a great pleasure to speak after the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron), who gave a spirited defence of his long-standing interest in the energy industry, and the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman), who suggested that, by voting against Second Reading, we would be voting to write off the whole nuclear industry.

It seems that there is no problem so big that a good dose of Government intervention cannot make it worse. Although I accept that, from the Minister's point of view, it is prudent to plan for all eventualities, and that the Bill is obviously the result of such planning over recent months, no one should be deceived. This is wholesale renationalisation of the business, or at least the first and most important step towards that.

Mr. Simon Thomas: It is an expensive way of doing it.

Mr. Field: It is indeed. There is a great fear among Opposition Members that this may become Railtrack mark II and that the taxpayer will effectively be asked to sign a blank cheque. The Minister will remember that, on that long ago day in October 2001 when Railtrack was reorganised, to put it at its most euphemistic, it was said that no taxpayer's money would be spent, and of course we have seen the results of that in the intervening 15 or 16 months.

I shall canter through a quick history of the UK energy sector. I accept, as I am sure that the right hon. Member for Rother Valley does, that there has been rapid change in the past 50 years. In 1950, we relied on coal for about nine tenths of our energy, and roughly one tenth came from crude oil. Gas, high-grade oil and nuclear power were not even a gleam in anyone's eye. Now, 43 per cent. of energy comes from gas, 32 per cent. from oil and only 15 per cent. from coal. We may not be sure about the route that we will take in the next half-century, but one thing that we can all be sure of is that there will be rapid change in the energy sector. I suspect that, whether or not Liberal Democrat councillors get in the way, the hon. Member for South Thanet is right to suggest that wind power will not be the answer to all the UK's problems.

More recently, the energy review has tried to envisage what energy policy we will have in 50 years. There is a fallacy of over-prescriptive planning, and one has to consider the law of unintended consequences, which all too often rears its ugly head in any planning that promotes one sector over another. I greatly fear that, in giving this Bill a Second Reading and giving a thumbs-up for the long-term future of nuclear energy, which intrinsically I support, we will distort the whole energy market. It will be interesting to see how the energy White Paper, when it is eventually published in late February, early March or even a week or two later, is integrated with the Bill.

There is widespread acceptance of certain beneficial impacts, both economically and environmentally, of the changes that have taken place in the past 10 or 11 years. The hon. Member for Preston (Mr. Hendrick) hit the nail on the head when he said that there had been a sea change in thought about environmental issues in the past 12 or 13 years, particularly in relation to greenhouse gases and global warming.

The changes in the 1990s, both under Conservative Governments and more recently since Labour was elected in May 1997, have reduced the cost of production as a result of the liberalisation of the market. Wholesale reductions in the cost of raw materials have fed through to the consumer. That has led to a reduction in UK fuel poverty, which was a large-scale problem discussed by many only 10 years ago, but it has not been in the headlines in more recent years. We have also seen a switch from coal to gas, which has allowed us to achieve many international environment targets.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman to return to the Bill's content.

Mr. Field: I shall indeed. I apologise.

There is little doubt that one problem in the electricity sector is the precipitate fall in wholesale prices, down 40 per cent. since 1998 as a result of misguided pricing policies and over-building. That created a generation capacity 22 per cent. higher than required, to which hon. Members referred. The role of NETA, the new market clearing system, accelerated the worsening position since 2002. The fallout in the increasingly international energy market has also been a problem. We fear that that is not over and that British Energy is at the forefront of the financially embarrassed market.

What is the right way forward? We all agree that there are problems. We need a concerted strategy, not just as an Elastoplast for the stage that we are considering, but as something that plans for the years and decades ahead. British Energy provides about 20 per cent. of the UK's electricity, with more than 5,000 staff and 15 of the 31 nuclear reactors. The precipitate problem that began only last August, with the shutdown of new plant owing to the probe over a fault, led to a run on the British Energy share price, which lost a third of its value almost overnight. That resulted in the financial position turning down from the already precarious to the somewhat ugly. At the end of 2002, creditors were owed £1.26 billion.

Even the Department appreciates that the introduction of NETA opened up competition between operators and helped to drive down prices of wholesale electricity. That would not be such a problem but for the fact that British Energy has no retail business on which it can rely. After the warnings of insolvency, which Conservative Members espoused as recently as September, the Secretary of State assured us:

> "There's no question at all of taxpayers writing a blank cheque to British Energy and its shareholders".

That assurance seems hollow in the light of the Bill, which will probably go through tonight, and any action consequent on it.

Last autumn was characterised by the extension and increase of British Energy's financial support package. The blank cheque rose in value from £410 million to £650 million to provide working capital because of its shot-through balance sheet. Even the Bill can only take effect to the extent permitted by the European Union state aid rules. We may not have heard the last of that. My hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) tried to address the problem in a point of order before the debate. I suspect that we will return to it on Report next week and later. It is of great concern that the papers will not be given to the Commission until March, by which time there is a risk of the package falling apart. The Minister will know that the Commission has reportedly launched a new investigation into British Energy after its request to local councils to defer business rates. There is the suggestion that that falls foul of state aid provisions.

We are gravely concerned that the Bill amounts to unnecessary Government intervention. It is anti-competitive and, by exposing the taxpayer to an unlimited and uncosted liability, there is a risk that it will not be in the public interest. Specifically, it is clear that British Energy will not enjoy fair trading until proper account is taken of the true effect of the climate change levy. Given the absence of carbon dioxide emissions, the proper account should be nil. Although I am instinctively supportive of measures that will improve the global environment, the Government have all too often allowed the environmental tail, in the form of the climate change levy, to wag the energy dog. Their policies, as highlighted by the Bill, make neither economic nor environmental sense.

7.4 pm

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood): The Bill is both a response to, and a reflection of, an energy sector that is changing massively and quickly. It gives the Department the tools to respond flexibly if we need to restructure British Energy or if it goes into administration. Conceptually, I support the approach, but it is important to view British Energy's problems against the wider energy difficulties, as the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) said. It is not just British Energy that faces problems. Enron, AES, TXU and even the coal producers, UK Coal, face problems in a rapidly changing energy market.

As a reflection of how quickly the energy market is changing, let me take the Minister back to the performance and innovation unit energy review published last February, less than 12 months ago, in which it said:

> "Because nuclear is a mature technology within a well established global industry, there is no current case for further government support."

Things have changed fairly radically in the space of a few months and I predict that they will change radically again.

To enable us to discuss the Bill, we need to consider the problems arising from British Energy. Hon. Members have referred to the climate change levy, the nature of the contract with BNFL and the effect of NETA on British Energy. It is important to acknowledge that the management of British Energy should shoulder a good deal of the blame.

British Energy has not responded to a changing energy market. It attempted to widen its generating base by buying Eggborough at the cost of about £500 million, which was perhaps not the best of investments.

[Paddy Tipping]

It acquired and sold SWALEC. When other energy companies were trying to integrate vertically, British Energy was going in a different direction. Over the years, for the majority of its life, British Energy has consistently paid out special dividends. It has been a good earner for shareholders until now. It is important to focus some of our attention on the failure of the management at British Energy. In technical engineering terms, the management have been good, but they have been pretty poor in responding to market signals.

Sir Robert Smith: Surely the great danger is that, if the market is not allowed to take its course with British Energy, people will wonder when the Government will intervene in other sectors.

Paddy Tipping: That is a problem. Hon. Members have different views on British Energy and legitimate arguments to make. The point is that we have an asset with an income stream. It is important to consider how we make best use of that. Some hon. Members argued that it is important to close and decommission the plant as quickly as possible. Others offered a counter-voice and argued that perhaps we could extend the plant safely beyond 2020. The intervention in the market will have consequences that I want to spell out.

The cost to the taxpayer looks immense, with a £650 million loan. I acknowledge that it is only a loan, but whether we will see a return on it is a different matter. The key issue is the commitment in the proposal announced on 28 November of £150 million to £200 million a year for perhaps 10 years for liabilities. Some people will ask whether that immense cost is fair in market terms, and I am not entirely sanguine that the Commission will nod the agreement through. There is a case for it going through, but serious doubts and reservations remain. The Minister will know about some of them, and will have heard voices in the coal industry acknowledging that, while it has received £130 million under the coal operating aid scheme that ended at the end of the year and will receive further help from a new investment aid scheme, those sums are not on the same scale as those received by the nuclear industry. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) talked about the problems at his colliery in Maltby—there are expectations that the Government should intervene in a big way.

We are about to experience a step change or a conceptual shift in energy policy: we are about to move from a free-market approach to one where we need to set a framework for energy policy. Our discussion of the Bill and British Energy's policy must therefore be set in the context of the White Paper, which draws on the PIU report. That report is good on questions, but not very good on answers. One problem caused by the delayed publication of the White Paper is that we are not sure what the answers will be. However, the introduction of a set of energy proposals is inconceivable without nuclear having a role to play. I guess that our energy proposals will focus on affordability, diversity of supply and environmental aspects. Nuclear clearly has a role in those three propositions, and will continue to play a role.

On security of supply, there has been a just discussion about the amount of generating capacity. There is too much, but it would not be sensible to take nuclear out in one go. It is more sensible to allow it to decline over a period and introduce a series of measures to build renewables.

Mr. Clapham: My hon. Friend suggested letting nuclear energy decline over time. Will he clarify whether "decline" is a euphemism for phasing out?

Paddy Tipping: As things stand, there is no future for nuclear energy. The private sector has never replaced nuclear with nuclear and will not do so until the distant future when we have resolved the issues about decommissioning, disposal and liabilities. There is a strong argument for building a renewables base while nuclear declines. There are great challenges for renewables, as we must achieve a 10 per cent. target by 2010 and one of 20 per cent. by 2020. At the moment, 3 per cent. of our energy comes from renewables, much of it from traditional hydro. Many planning applications for wind farms have been withdrawn. In fact, two thirds do not see the light of day.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Will the hon. Gentleman not stray too far into general energy policy?

Paddy Tipping: I shall ensure that I do not, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am making the point that the Bill is necessary because we need a rescue package for British Energy if nuclear is to develop in future. Our balanced and diverse energy supply should not be dependent on renewables and gas. The PIU report said that 80 per cent. of our energy could come from gas by 2020, and 90 per cent. of that would be imported. If we want a balanced energy policy, it is important that British nuclear energy has a role and that other sources of supply are maintained. Many environmentalists dismiss nuclear as a dirty fuel. There are genuine environmental problems with disposal but, on the plus side, nuclear gives rise to minimal emissions.

My final point relates directly to the Bill and the money that the Government have made available to British Energy. That involves an immense cost, and one of the step changes that we are contemplating may be about moving away from the notion of cheap energy. Wholesale prices have fallen by 40 per cent. but the knock-on benefit for the consumer has not been nearly as great. With the promise of extra money from the Government and taxpayers, should we not reflect on whether the days of the cheapest energy supply are over? The Bill deals with that problem, and I very much hope that we will develop the issue and discuss it again when the White Paper is published.

7.16 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I am glad of the opportunity to contribute to our debate and follow the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping), who made a useful contribution. Interestingly—I hope that this is still the case when I finish my speech—everyone who has spoken has added to our debate, not least in the form of information and ideas. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) was generous about me—I suspect that my knowledge of the subject is not as great as it ought to be—and I shall try to follow that precedent. The hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) and members of the Select Committee have wrestled with aspects of the subject and related matters during the course of our inquiries, including the security of energy supply, so we have something to offer.

I shall treat one or two things as read, even if they are the subject of further debate in the House. First, as the hon. Member for Sherwood explained, British Energy contributed to its own downfall, because it did not adjust to market circumstances sufficiently, nor did it secure vertical integration to capture the remaining benefits of consumers' willingness to pay for electricity. It bought and sold SWALEC, and bought Eggborough on a basis that was not as commercially advantageous as it might have hoped. As the Minister said when he appeared before the Select Committee, it did not enter early advantageous long-term contracts, given that it is a base-load supplier of the national grid. It therefore contributed to its own downfall, and I am not seeking to excuse it or bail it out.

I may sometimes go a little further than the Minister, but we may share common ground as I do not blame the new electricity trading arrangements for the problem. If we were to turn the problem round and say, "Fine, let's not have NETA", what would be the consequences? If they were higher prices for consumers, they would have no intrinsic merit. If, in the long term, consumers have to pay higher prices because environmental objectives must be met through the extension of renewables, carbon-free emissions and so on, that would be a rational basis for proceeding. If consumers have to pay higher prices because the way in which the market operates means that the highest-cost producers disappear and the margin between overcapacity and supply is better balanced, that would be acceptable. However, the worst possible reason for changing NETA would be the lack of commercial success of operators who are uneconomic or who have failed to adapt to a market-led system. Intrinsically, we should move towards a liberalised system. The shareholders in British Energy should to that extent have no complaint. The company was privatised into what was intended to become progressively a more liberal marketplace.

The Minister made it clear in reply to me that we will not see the energy White Paper before the Bill passes through this place at least—I do not know about the other place. That is regrettable. It would have been better to have seen it at the same time in order to set it in context. At least the Minister told us that nothing in the White Paper would fundamentally change the economics of nuclear generation, because if there were such a thing it would change the economics of British Energy's generation.

Had the Minister not done so, I would have gone on about the climate change levy and its impact on the economics of British Energy's electricity generation. The Minister knows that the levy could make a difference of 0.4p per kWh—£4 per megawatt-hour. Irritatingly, everybody is talking in pounds per megawatt-hour, but I think in pence per kilowatt-hour. However, I think that we can manage. It is curious that the Minister said that it was illogical that the Government should give financial assistance with one hand and take it away in the form of tax with the other, given that the Government propose financial assistance on one hand and impose the climate change levy on the other. I do not see what is so logical about applying the climate change levy to nuclear generation, and so illogical about applying tax. They seem almost the same.

Mr. Simon Thomas: I followed the hon. Gentleman's persuasive argument in favour of the market. He now seems to be suggesting some double distortion in favour of nuclear, and that the industry should benefit from not only the grant, loan or whatever is in the Bill, but the removal of the climate change obligation, which all other electricity producers apart from those of renewables must meet. Surely that would also be distortion of the market. We must be careful not to replicate the old pool arrangements, under which the base load rewarded nuclear and the shareholders benefited from it.

Mr. Lansley: I shall come on to discuss the financial assistance. I did not mean to go on about the climate change levy, but it depends what the levy is for. The Minister would say that it is to stimulate energy efficiency, but if that were the principal purpose, surely one would apply it primarily to the domestic rather than the industrial sector. As he told the Select Committee, the industrial sector has seen a 62 per cent. increase in energy intensity, compared with only about 6 per cent. in the domestic sector. The climate change levy is in truth a tax, the ostensible purpose of which is to reduce carbon emissions. If so, it does not make sense to apply it to nuclear. That is not a distortion; it simply means not applying it to those who should not pay it.

The question that I want to reach before time elapses is, what does one do? The Government were clearly right to make finance available in order to forestall what would otherwise have resulted in administration and damaging financial consequences—in relation not least to the north American assets—as set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt). Having done that, the Government need to think about the longer term.

Although the hon. Member for Twickenham tried manfully to work through the numbers, he was still somewhat confused. We are dealing on one hand with the liabilities associated with past generation, which the Government, effectively, intend to remove from British Energy, except to the extent that it will be able to generate cash resources to help meet them. On the other hand, the costs associated with managing the waste from current and future generation and the resultant decommissioning must also be met at some point. The hon. Gentleman more or less said "Why don't we just meet them in the next few years? At present net value, that would cost us only £1 billion." That is £1 billion that we do not have to spend. The figure could be £1 billion or £5 billion; I do not know where it is between the two.

One cannot compare that £1 billion with the £2.1 billion that the Government have talked about as the net present value of historic waste liabilities, because they are different liabilities. The hon. Gentleman seemed to suggest that the Government pay the £2.1 billion and the £1 billion, and also that we do not have the electricity generated by nuclear power stations—which is a substantial part of our security of supply and greatly reduces our carbon emissions. What is the logic in that? It is environmental and financial nonsense.

[Mr. Lansley]

What is in the Bill, and is it sensible? Up to now, the Minister and I might not have parted company, but at this point we do. Clauses 1 and 2 include an option for the Government to acquire shares in British Energy and, if necessary, to renationalise it. By doing so, the Government are opening up shareholders and future bondholders to the opportunity, from their point of view, of everything being handed back to the state if it all goes wrong.

The Minister may say that everything will be handed back anyway, but we should not make it that easy. The plant would not be shut down. The assets, not the company, should be handed over to the Government. In the event of the failure of British Energy, the result would not be renationalisation but simple failure. If the Government are to accept responsibility for the long-term liabilities, they must be prepared—just as the Liabilities Management Authority will have both responsibility for liabilities and control over the assets—to accept the transfer of the assets, but not the company.

Does that mean that there should be no legislation? I shall vote against the Bill because, owing to the risk of nationalisation, there is no cost incentive for British Energy to achieve what should be achieved in the private sector: driving down costs and responding to markets and market opportunities. There should be a Bill—perhaps alongside the forthcoming Bill on the Liabilities Management Authority, as it takes a similar approach—comprising of part of clause 1, not clause 2, and certainly clauses 3 and 4, as it might be necessary to extend financial assistance. The presence of the nationalisation provisions make this Bill fundamentally flawed.

Even if the Government go down this path, I am far from convinced that they have chosen the most advantageous mechanism for the taxpayer concerning British Energy's contribution to the costs of waste management and decommissioning. The House will remember, not least from what the hon. Member for Twickenham said, that some of the bond issue is to be transferred into a fund, and that in future 65 per cent. of available cash is to help meet the liabilities. That is 65 per cent. of available cash after meeting British Energy's cash reserve position and the running costs of plant and so on. That is not the right solution. We must leave British Energy with incentives to drive down costs.

British Energy is not the cheapest producer of energy, but it is not the most expensive by a long stretch. The hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) might have more up-to-date figures, but last year British Energy representatives made it clear, when talking to the Select Committee, that their public target was 1.6p per kWh. If they can meet that, the company will not be far off—certainly if it does not have to meet historic liabilities—the current market price. That would make the company if not profitable at least not a substantial loss-making activity.

Dr. Ladyman: I think that I can help the hon. Gentleman. British Energy is achieving £16.70 per megawatt-hour.

Mr. Lansley: When British Energy came to see us, the figure was £18 per megawatt-hour. Even after the problems associated with Torness and other things, it is moving towards that target. I do not know what the market price is, but let us say that it is about £17 or £18 per megawatt-hour. The company is not really losing money on that basis. It cannot meet the historic liabilities, so the business is not necessarily solvent, but after the financial restructuring it might be.

Where is the incentive to control costs? In effect, the Government are offering the opportunity for costs simply to be passed through. They will be allowed for in the mechanism. It would be much better, as in the BNFL arrangement with British Energy, for the Government to have an arrangement with British Energy shareholders to share that incentive. For example—one would have to work through the numbers—in so far as the market price went above 1.8p per kWh, the revenue beyond that point would be shared in some proportion, possibly two thirds and a third, between the Government, as a contribution to the fund, and British Energy shareholders, rather than allowing the costs to be passed through.

That may be regarded as a nit-picking point of detail that we in the Select Committee will have to pick up and work on, but in the long run it might be important. If, as may well be the case, the price shifts to 2.2p per kWh or even higher, and if the plant continues to work efficiently, we should make sure that British Energy cannot allow its costs to escalate beyond its publicly-stated target of 1.6p per kWh. The benefit of that and the cash resources that flow from it should not subsidise inefficient quasi-public ownership of British Energy, least of all if it were nationalised. The company should have an incentive to drive down costs and deliver a substantial part of the benefit that flows from that to the Government.

Nationalisation would be the worst of all scenarios, as there would be no incentive to control costs or to respond to market pressures. The costs would begin to move in the opposite direction to that in which they have moved in the past. The net result of my argument is not to let the company go to the wall, but to support it in a way that maintains incentive. Nationalisation has never been the way to provide an incentive.

7.32 pm

Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): From listening to the debate so far, one would think that British Energy was the only company that had ever undergone restructuring. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) said, a number of energy companies have been in trouble recently, and many companies have been through a restructuring exercise. We should bear that in mind and learn the lessons from those restructurings.

One of the benefits of the Bill is that it gives us time to do that, and buys time for British Energy to restructure in a way that will allow it to continue to trade. The key objective is not just to keep the company going but to protect its work force and ensure that they have a role in the future of the industry. Two further objectives have been mentioned: security of supply and safety. Enough has been said about those, but it is important to reflect on the lessons of other restructurings.

We need to consider the Bill in the light of the rundown of Magnox stations. I disagree totally with the remark of the hon. Member for Croydon, South

(Richard Ottaway) that Magnox distorts the market. The crux of the matter is British Energy's business case. Does its business case stack up? I agree with the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley)—that is becoming a habit on the Communications Bill, on which we have had a number of debates. He makes a valid point when he says that British Energy's costs should not be allowed to get out of control. It is important that we make sure that its business case is robust. It should not be based on hidden figures, as it was under the previous management. It should be transparent. We must not repeat the strategic mistakes that were made previously.

My hon. Friend the Minister will no doubt take that on board. The business plan must set out the proper direction. The change in the chair is welcome. The business case must be monitored and we must have assurances of its viability. The costs to the taxpayer and to the company must be controlled. The Bill gets us over the short-term hurdle and gives the business case a chance to work, but it must not be implemented in the context of the White Paper and the long-term energy market. That brings me to the role of the regulator.

We have considerable experience of privatisation in this country. Some privatisations have been quite good and have stood the test of time. Others have shown themselves to be viable when the market is buoyant, but not through the full cycle of the market. British Energy fits into that category. We need to learn that not all privatisations have been in the best interest of the company, the country or the work force.

We have seen what happened abroad—in California, for example, where the lack of investment and delay in strategic decision making have led to power cuts. In Scandinavia, the debate on the future of the nuclear industry has led Sweden and Finland to take different decisions about the way forward. The Bill will allow us to debate the type of activity in which British Energy should be involved as it moves forward. Others have raised the issue. It is not a case of business as usual or closure. There are choices that British Energy can make about the way in which it carries out its business and runs the power stations. That may affect the cost to the taxpayer. Once the Bill is enacted, it is important that the Government, through the regulator, engage with British Energy in a discussion about the strategic options for the operation of the power stations. My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) is right to draw attention to the economics of that, but the way in which British Energy deals with BNFL must be challenged.

As a refugee from the Utilities Bill in 2000, I remember the debates about the new electricity trading arrangements. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) is right. Many of us expressed fears about NETA at the time, but I do not recall British Energy approaching members of the Committee and saying that it had a problem. We said that the role of the regulator would be crucial to the operation of the company.

With regard to the present Bill, I am concerned that the decisions of the independent regulator should be consistent with Government policy. I fear that the independent regulator could undermine Government policy and take decisions that cause problems for British Energy. I look to the Government to make sure that the independent regulator's decisions are consistent with the terms of the Bill.

The negotiations about the conditions under which British Energy will supply could be badly hit if the wrong assumptions are made about market conditions or the regulator's intentions. I do not want us to be back in the same situation in a few months' time because the new management at British Energy has made the same strategic mistakes.

As has been said, we cannot shut nuclear power stations overnight. We need to get the balance between different suppliers right. I expect, Madam Deputy Speaker, that you will tell me that that is a matter for the White Paper, and I will not stray into it, except to mention that my private Member's Bill on sustainable energy will come before the House shortly. It will deal with issues connected with NETA, but that is a debate for another day, and I will not stray into it.

It is important that we look at how the money that we are giving to British Energy is being spent. The House needs assurances that the money is being spent properly, that it represents value for the taxpayer, that the environmental, social and energy gains are right for the country, and that if intervention in British Energy is necessary, it is done quickly, and the matter is not left to drift. One of the problems that British Energy has had in the past is that it let strategic decisions drift.

To conclude—I appreciate that many other speakers want to contribute—the Bill will allow restructuring to occur. It will not make a difference to whether British Energy succeeds or not—rightly or wrongly, that will be down to the market and the independent regulator. In those circumstances, the Bill will give British Energy the greatest chance of success.

7.39 pm

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): In the light some of your earlier strictures, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have dismissed my meticulously prepared notes, which are next to me in piles on the Bench, and am left with a couple of sheets of paper. I wanted to contribute because since I came to the House I have followed with interest the debate about the future of energy policy. I throw up my hands in horror at the fact that, three years later, we still do not have an energy policy and are debating the issues out of context, which is why we are facing some difficulty in finding our way ahead.

One of the most startling statements in the debate was made by the Minister. It related not to the money that we are putting into British Energy in grants, loans or whatever, but to the White Paper, so I hope that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, will allow me to respond to his comments. He said that he could give an assurance that the White Paper would contain nothing to affect British Energy. That is an astonishing statement, although it may be necessary in the context of the Bill, shareholders and so on. However, it shows not only that the nuclear industry as it is currently constructed will not be affected by the White Paper, as hon. Members have pointed out, but that, because there is a liberalised energy market, the other players in it will not significantly be affected.

That means that we are still asking the same questions that were being asked a year ago in the performance and innovation unit report and that we are unlikely to get

[Mr. Simon Thomas]

any clear answers from the Government in their White Paper, apart from some fudging around the sides. There may be a little bit extra for renewables, combined heat and power or whatever else, but the basic construct of where energy in this country is going remains unchanged by the Bill and, in all likelihood, will remain unchanged by the White Paper. That shows that the Government have learned nothing from the fiasco that has occurred and the way in which the new electricity trading arrangements have worked in respect not only of British Energy, but renewables and CHP, even though they have not had the benefit of such a debate in the House or the introduction of their own measure.

I do not approach the Bill from the perspective of believing in overnight shutdown of nuclear energy. I do not see on safety and economic grounds the case for any new build for nuclear energy, but I certainly agree that we cannot go for an overnight closure. We need a natural progression in the nuclear industry. As the reactors come to the end of their natural life, they should be decommissioned and we should face the costs. As we move along that path in the next 14 to 15 years, we must decide how to pay for that—an issue that the Bill partly addresses—and how we should put in place the security of supply that the Minister has adduced as one of the main reasons for introducing the Bill.

The hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Environmental Audit, of which I am a member, led the Committee to Germany last year, when we looked into the future of energy needs in this country. We saw a Government who had already decided to give up a nuclear programme. They have decided not to support new nuclear Bills and have said that, as nuclear power stations reach the end of their natural life, they will be replaced not by more nuclear stations, but by a mix of other energy sources. Security of supply is therefore a serious issue for the German Government, but they are prepared to bite that bullet and address the issue thoroughly and properly.

Mr. Hendrick: Does the hon. Gentleman not also remember that many hundreds of millions of pounds' worth of contracts to BNFL had to be honoured anyway? Effectively, the German Government chucked that money down the drain, as they still had to honour those contracts.

Mr. Thomas: I accept that, but it was a decision for the German Government. I do not know what the contracts were worth, but I do not think that it was much more than the £3 billion that the Bill gives to British Energy.

Brian White: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there was a strong debate last year in Finland about whether nuclear power was right or wrong. It has now decided in favour of new nuclear build.

Mr. Thomas: I accept that. It is for sovereign states to take the decision. We are not discussing a European directive; such matters are part of how a liberalised energy market is run. My submission is that the failure of British Energy is significant in terms of what we should be regarding as the long-term interests of nuclear energy in this country. We can deal with the short term in the Bill, but how should we deal with the long term? How should we deal with the fact that BNFL is also in a very dodgy financial position? That is a question that must be debated for the future.

We have already debated how we reached the current position, so I shall not reiterate the details. The Minister said in his evidence to the Select Committee that what happened was as much a failure of British Energy's management as anything else, and I shall not disagree. Nor do I think that we can put the blame at the door of NETA, although I have some problems in that regard. There are some questions about how NETA has worked in a moral vacuum with no pressure of social or environmental responsibility from Ofgem, the regulator. The shareholders in British Energy benefited wonderfully when there was a pool arrangement and the base load of British Energy was rewarded in that context, so they should not complain when they find it difficult to cope with the liberalised energy market that they knew would be introduced. That is not a matter that we should address at a legislative level, which is one of the reasons why I am disappointed with the Bill.

The hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) adequately demolished any significant arguments made on the grounds of security of supply. He made it clear that, if we did not take the Bill forward, we would not see the turning off of lights, as the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) put it, in Scotland or anywhere else. There are processes in respect of companies such as British Energy that will ensure a continuation of supply and employment, so there is a way of addressing that issue.

The other argument that the Minister prayed in aid—it was mentioned by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley)—was that the Bill kept British Energy going and maintained an income flow into the liability fund, which would be cheaper for the taxpayer. There are two questions about that. First, we have seen no independent report about the real value of the settlement to the taxpayer. Secondly, my feeling is that we will not see much money coming from British Energy into the public liabilities fund. When the Minister winds up the debate, as I think he will do—

Mr. Wilson: With the leave of the House.

Mr. Thomas: I shall not object to his doing so, and I hope that he will take the opportunity to tell us what sum he expects British Energy to contribute annually to the liabilities fund, bearing in mind that the Bill allows him to put £150 million to £200 million into the historic liabilities fund. I accept that those are different funds, but they come from the same pockets.

Decommissioning costs have also been mentioned. As I said in an intervention on the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron), who is not currently in his place, we need a proper assessment of the real costs. We may face up-front costs now. That does not mean overnight decommissioning, but if we see that some nuclear closures are needed to allow British Energy to work in a competitive marketplace, we must ask how those costs can be met from the public purse. Ultimately, as the backstop is the public liability, the taxpayer will have to pay. I am not convinced that that is a more expensive option than the up-front payments of about £1.15 billion for which the Government sought the European Commission's authorisation in the Bill and the ongoing £200 million a year that can be provided for at least 10 years, which amounts to at least £2 billion. It is with regard to that £3 billion package for British Energy that we must consider decommissioning costs. That is important not in the context of year one or even year five, as this is a 10-year Bill that provides the ability to give £3 billion to British Energy.

I agree with some of the comments of Opposition Members about the idea that the Bill introduces a type of nationalisation. It is an attempt to establish the framework for potential renationalisation. I would not necessarily philosophically object to such a policy. I did not do so in respect of Railtrack and I am not sure that I would in respect of the nuclear industry, which would possibly be safer in public hands than it has been in private hands. However, the Bill is an expensive way of pursuing such an approach. Setting up a framework involving a private company but always thinking "We'll come in and renationalise" is not good value for the taxpayer.

In the long term, we could argue about whether nationalisation is good value for the taxpayer. My central argument about nuclear power is that it cannot be valued on the basis only of price per megawatt or kilowatt; it has to be valued on the basis of security supply and safety in particular. I am not completely comfortable with an industry that says "Let's drive down costs at all costs." We saw what happened with Sellafield and BNFL in that regard. I am more comfortable with an industry that involves a great deal of public interest, but the Bill is a missed opportunity in that regard.

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Gentleman mentioned safety several times. In more than 50 years, the total number of deaths as a result of the nuclear power industry is fewer than one a year. In the same period, the figure for the conventional power industry is 11,300. Will he therefore stop claiming that there is a safety issue? Nuclear is the safest form of electricity.

Mr. Thomas: I am tempted to take the hon. Gentleman to a wind farm site. I appreciate that I am straying, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I shall be careful. The only community-owned wind farm site in Wales is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) and is on land that is still contaminated by the Chernobyl disaster. That is the price of the nuclear industry. The wind farms that have been built on the land will not contaminate it; Chernobyl still contaminates it.

Dr. Ladyman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Thomas: I shall not give way again on that, and I will move on.

If the Bill is genuinely to protect taxpayers' interests, we must consider all the options. Hon. Members have outlined them, and I shall not reiterate all the questions. The Bill as currently drafted distorts the market enormously. It is open to challenge, and I would be amazed if another energy generating company did not challenge it. The European Commission has agreed to the £1.15 billion, but the Bill is different. I should be surprised if it were not challenged in some court.

In the context of the continuing debate on the White Paper, the Bill puts paid once and for all to the idea that we can have energy that is too cheap to meter. We should be grateful for that. The Bill acknowledges the true price of cheap energy. It is noticeable that several Labour Members have claimed that energy is too cheap. A liberalised market delivers the cheapest energy; that means the dash for gas and everything else that we have had to tolerate. I hope that hon. Members realise that cheap fuel alone cannot fulfil the need for security of supply and long-term energy. It cannot solve fuel poverty, which relates to energy efficiency and providing the best resources to the poorest people. It is not simply a matter of the price per kilowatt hour of electricity. I hope that that realisation is dawning on Labour Members. That is not apparent in the Bill.

The Bill does not deal with the genuine, long-term costs of the nuclear industry. It does not tackle the costs that the PIU report outlines or our position in five or 10 years. The measure is a sticking-plaster solution. Sticking plasters are not safe for nuclear reactors.

7.52 pm

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas). I agree with much of his contribution. He said that he was disappointed with the Bill, but appeared to suggest that if it were more specific about public ownership, he would be attracted to voting for it. Similarly, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) considered whether the cost of public ownership would be too dear. At the same time, he appeared to claim that the liabilities were so great that if the Government took them on, the industry could be privatised again. I do not accept that.

The only way forward is public ownership. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) suggested that to some extent. He rightly pointed out that the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) did not robustly oppose renationalisation in the way that Conservative Front Benchers normally do. Perhaps he accepts that public ownership of a company that has such vast liabilities is the only way forward.

Mr. Blunt: I want to ensure that I have not given hon. Members the wrong impression. Conservative Members would oppose renationalisation. Administration is a perfectly good route. The company's assets—the working power stations that generate cash and power—can be sold out of administration. The taxpayer will have the first charge on any receipts from that to meet the liabilities that the Government have taken on.

Mr. Clapham: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for clarifying that point. Doubtless my hon. Friend the Minister has noted it.

I appreciate the Minister's need for the Bill. I understand that the Government require such a Bill to restructure. However, rather than restructuring British Energy and having to come back to the House to discuss public ownership, I urge the Minister to consider public

[Mr. Clapham]

ownership as the first option. I hold that view because of the enormity of the liabilities, to which I shall revert shortly.

The economic case for nuclear energy is not strong. If we consider the competition in the market before the new electricity trading arrangements, it is apparent that nuclear energy could hack it only because the pool favoured it. When I was member of the Trade and Industry Committee, we considered the proposal to privatise in 1996. It was discernible that the Tory party had decided to privatise British Energy despite removing it from the privatisation package in 1990 because the economic climate had changed. It had introduced the non-fossil fuel levy, which obliged specific suppliers to buy energy from a nuclear source, and the nuclear levy. The latter paid for the nuclear industry. The Tory Government therefore decided to privatise British Energy because the commercial position had changed.

The position has subsequently changed dramatically. The Minister referred to security of supply and safety. We should take up those points and I hope that Opposition Members are prepared to support the Government on them. Safety has been mentioned, and my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) pointed out that only one person a year had died in a given period in the nuclear industry. However, he omitted to mention the way in which privatisation changes the safety culture. For example, contracting out and outsourcing in British Rail resulted in the employment of people who were less skilled than the previous in-house workers. That led to some of the problems that British Rail experienced and to Network Rail as a solution. Network Rail has now decided to use in-house workers for many of the maintenance jobs.

When British Energy was privatised, there was a move to outsourcing. Only a few months ago, the nuclear installations inspectorate raised the problem of safety. Questions were asked in the House about its report. British Energy may have adjusted to that. I am not sure whether it did so by retaining payroll workers in maintenance and cutting its outsourcing, but the nuclear installations inspectorate drew our attention to it.

Mr. Hendrick: Is my hon. Friend, like John Edmonds, the general secretary of my union, advocating a Railtrack-style solution?

Mr. Clapham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for prompting my memory. When the Minister considers the total picture, if he does not feel that outright public ownership should be the model, he may favour a Railtrack-type solution for British Energy. Whichever model he opts for—whether it is the public model or the Railtrack-type solution—the general public will have a greater commitment to the industry. They will feel safer if the industry is operating on a non-profit basis, so that commercial pressures tend not to subvert the safety culture. If it was in the public sector, we would see the return of that safety culture.

Another point that I want to raise with regard to the nuclear industry has not yet been mentioned—the threat from terrorism. We know that the industry is vulnerable to such threats. Indeed, only two weeks ago the *Daily Mirror* probed the defences of the nuclear industry and found that it was allowed to enter sites quite easily. Will the Minister tell us whether the *Daily Mirror* provided him with a report of that incursion by one of its journalists on to a nuclear cartilage, and, if so, whether he will act on it to ensure that security is tightened up?

My next point concerns liabilities. Opposition Members have suggested a number of options as to how liabilities should be dealt with. Some believe that the phasing out of nuclear energy would reduce the future liability and therefore be a saving to the overall energy economy, leaving more money available to be invested in its future. Others feel that the industry should be phased out over time, as in, for example, Holland, Germany, Spain and Sweden. I tend to favour that approach, because it would allow the industry to work to a timetable of phasing out and would enable the Government to address the issue of jobs. However, that would be better done within the context of public ownership. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire said that he was ideologically opposed to renationalisation. He did not use that phrase, but I think that is what he meant. If he had looked at some of the huge operators in the energy industry, especially British Gas before it was privatised, he would have seen that British Gas was described as a monopoly that operated in the public interest. If the Minister were prepared in clauses 1 and 2 to bring British Energy into the public sector, it would operate for the public interest.

The liabilities are vast indeed. I refer the hon. Member for Reigate to the Select Committee report of 1995–96, in which we were able to see the undiscounted and discounted liabilities. The undiscounted liabilities for the PWR and for the eight advanced gas-cooled reactors, which are part of British Energy, were £10.5 billion. Discounted at the rate of 2 per cent., that liability came down to £7.6 billion. That is another matter that I should like to be clarified. A segregated fund was set up when British Energy was privatised whereby contributions were made by the company towards dealing with the clean-up costs. How much was in the segregated fund when this crisis arose, and does the Minister think that the amounts that were put into it were sufficient? Can he say whether it is the board of the company that decides on the amount of moneys that will be put into the segregated fund? Who decides the rate of discount? That is an important issue. That rate depends on the size of the fund that is to be accumulated to deal with the clean up.

Although I am sceptical about nuclear energy, the Bill is necessary and I shall vote for it.

8.6 pm

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I am pleased to be able to take part in this debate. I want to start by picking up on a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), who said that gambling analogies apply to the Bill. It allows the Minister to do anything that he likes in relation to anything that has British Energy in its title without let or hindrance and with no cash limits whatsoever. That is the plain reading of the words in the Bill. Although discussion of specific sums of money has been useful and instructive, it is somewhat beside the point. All that can be put in the wastepaper basket on the day after the Bill is passed, all the numbers can be doubled, and the Minister has the authority of the House to do that. If nothing else, that is a good reason to oppose the Bill. As my hon. Friend said, it is like the young man at the tables in Monte Carlo who sends home a message saying, "System working well—send more money." The Government are professing that all is well, but they just need a bit more money to finish it off.

Several interesting points have been made in the debate, which has been of good quality and has shown that many hon. Members are seriously engaged in the issue. One of the issues that has been discussed is how the full decommissioning costs fall and who is to take responsibility for them. The right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) argued that by the Government taking the firm over, the decommissioning costs could be paid for over a longer period from the profits made from the company. He went on to point out that the firm is running at a loss. The hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) commented that the costs of production for the firm are £16.70 and the market price is lower than that. In other words, every day that it runs increases the loss—it does not allow it to contribute a profit to the fund. We therefore need to move to one of the other mechanisms that the Minister has suggested.

Brian White: The hon. Gentleman mentions the price of NETA. Is not one issue whether the regulator is taking sufficient cognisance of the whole ecology of the industry, or simply believing in a market-oriented approach?

Mr. Stunell: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham. What we need is a proper external objective assessment of the costs, how they accumulate and how they can be paid for. The hon. Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) made a similar point when he referred to the discount rate. A small change in the discount rate completely upsets all the arithmetic that has been discussed so far. We have heard about the £72 million per year contribution to the nuclear liabilities fund, which is very susceptible to assumptions about rates of accrual and so on, and about the £275 million contribution by way of a bond by the company.

I draw the House's attention to the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir Robert Smith) specifically inquired into that issue in the Trade and Industry Committee. At paragraph 37 of its report, he asked:

> "What is the credit rating of the £275 million bonds?"

He pressed his point a couple of times and was finally told, at paragraph 39:

> "If British Energy were now to go into insolvency, the government has taken security so the taxpayer will get first call on any value."

However, not discussed in the Select Committee was which of two civil servants would be at the front of the queue—the one wanting repayment of the £275 million bond or the one wanting repayment of the £650 million loan. The House will get to the same answer in the end—that is, those civil servants would simply be in a long list of creditors of a company essentially without value. I hope that the Minister concedes that we need that external, objective assessment with the figures agreed and in front of us.

The hon. Member for South Thanet complained bitterly that going for a renewables generation solution could easily cost £30 billion. I do not know where he got his sums from, but I remind him that the assessment before the House of the costs of Government support for the nuclear industry so far is £55 billion. The investments would be massive in either case, but I have a clear view as to which would give the House, the country and the environment best value.

If I may, I shall deal with a question that has been mentioned a number of times: whether the company going into administration would mean that the plants had to close immediately, causing some catastrophic loss of capacity or even safety issues to arise. A number of Members on both sides of the House have done well in rebutting that point. In particular, I draw the House's attention to what the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) said about it. There will be working plants capable of generating electricity, and any administrator with a mind to maximise the return for creditors will clearly see them in operation, provided that they continue to contribute to the company's cash flow.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside): Is the hon. Gentleman saying that there will be no difference whether the plants carry on as they are or go into administration? That is what he seems to be suggesting.

Mr. Stunell: There will clearly be an important financial difference, which I am just coming to: the Government will be £650 million better off if the plants go into administration than if they take the route set out by the Bill. There are good reasons why the Bill should fail. The key one, which the House should have regard to, is that £650 million will be available for something else in the energy industry, or perhaps beyond it.

Members should imagine that we have before us not the Bill, but the White Paper, and that Treasury is saying to the Minister, "You have £650 million you can spend. What would you like to spend it on?" It would be inconceivable, in the context of the White Paper, for the Minister to say, "There is a drain. Let's tip the money down there, please, and forget everything else in the White Paper." For instance, £650 million would go a long way towards the planned restructuring of and compensation for those bits of the electricity generating industry that are the least efficient and which produce the greatest amount of carbon dioxide. Clearly, when one looks five or 10 years ahead, one sees large, elderly coal-fired plant, which is environmentally and financially not worthwhile.

Mr. Clapham: Presumably, the hon. Gentleman is impressing on the Secretary of State the real need for investment in clean coal technology.

Mr. Stunell: I certainly accept that point, and the hon. Gentleman and I make common cause on it. This country should indeed pay attention to that technology, as well as others. My central point is that the Bill is not the priority investment in the energy industry for the

[Mr. Stunell]

Government in the context of developing an energy policy and the likely outcome of almost any conceivable White Paper that they might produce. However, it will artificially preserve a huge overcapacity in the industry and lead to low wholesale prices, although, as a number of people have pointed out, not to particularly low retail prices.

Another reason for refusing to pass the Bill is that we are seeing a distortion of the competition in the industry. There is competition for investment in the national economy as a whole, but particularly in the energy industry, and the competition for private investment is intense. An energy generator might say to a banker, "Please lend me the odd £600 million. I want to make some money." The banker would say, "What is your business plan?" The energy generator could show the banker any conceivable business plan, but he would be unable to make any money and the banker would not provide such an investment. Such distortion is making such investment more difficult to make.

I am impressed by the argument made by the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping), who thinks that the day of the liberalised market is coming to an end. I think he rather fancies returning to a somewhat Stalinist command economy. We on these Benches do not believe in that. We believe that the market has to be an important component in the development of the energy industry, and it has to be the job of the House and of any Government to set the regulatory framework in which that can take place.

Mr. Watson: Is the hon. Gentleman demanding that market forces should dictate the Liberal Democrats' renewable energy strategy and saying that they will not look for any Government intervention?

Mr. Stunell: I am sorry that I was not speaking loud enough for my voice to reach the Labour Back Bench. I said that it is for the Government and the House to provide the regulatory and fiscal framework. I have talked in the House several times about the need to extend the renewables obligation, for example. However, I shall move on, as I am conscious of the time, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Our discussion has been somewhat handicapped by the need to set it in a wider context relating to the White Paper and the forthcoming Bill on the Liabilities Management Authority. I do not want to transgress your rulings, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so I shall say that the Bill will open the way to a failed rescue bid of the kind used throughout the 1970s and 1980s for failed industries. Such a rescue will distort the market, deter investment and delay the restructuring that is essential if we are to have a viable energy industry for the future.

British Energy has shown itself to be a failed company in a failed industry. It paid monopoly money for Eggborough, for SWALEC and for project after project. Now, unfortunately, it seems that the Government are ready to pay monopoly money to rescue managers and investors who ought to take the rap for their misjudgments.

8.18 pm

Anne Picking (East Lothian): It will come as no surprise to the House to hear that I support the Bill. It is a bit rich that the Government are being left to sort out another Tory privatisation disaster. Yet again, a major utility is under threat because the Tories allowed political dogma to drive an energy privatisation agenda rather than doing what was in the national interest. It is time to sort out that sorry saga.

A secure, stable and safe electricity supply is fundamental to our country's future. That can be achieved only through a diverse and balanced energy sector. My constituency has a diversity of energy supply to be proud of, including wind farms, coal and nuclear power. We should all avoid promoting our favourite causes and think of the big picture—a long-term, sustainable energy policy.

This is no time for woolly thinking. The Government have set realistic, ambitious targets to work towards renewable and reliable sources of electricity, but renewable energy, combined with hydro, meets only 2.8 per cent. of our energy needs. Nuclear power produces 50 per cent. of those needs in Scotland, and 21 per cent. of national need.

Mr. Clapham: My hon. Friend seems to be saying that there is a need for nuclear energy to complement and support renewable energy. However, nuclear energy provides the dearest electricity on the wires. The one industry in which we should invest in order to support renewables is the coal industry. Does she agree that we need investment in clean coal technology?

Anne Picking: I thank my hon. Friend for that, and I entirely agree. I do not know whether he knows my background, but I am a relative of Abe Moffat, well known in the mining industry, so I come from what we call "guid stock".

We should not forget that nuclear energy produces vital supplies of electricity and helps us to meet environmental obligations by being carbon-free. When I hear ludicrous statements from hon. Members calling on the Government simply to shut nuclear power stations, I find them quite irresponsible. Apart from anything else, it would cost us much more to shut them than it would to keep them open.

Mr. Russell Brown: My hon. Friend knows, if anyone does, the difficulties that British Energy has had at Torness power station in her own constituency. Has she had any indication of what the cost would be of early closure?

Anne Picking: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, but I cannot pluck a figure from the sky. We are talking megabucks. I shall get back to my hon. Friend when I find out.

We have to do away with any pie-in-the-sky notion that wind and sea power are ready to replace nuclear power. It simply is not so. That notion simply does not bear scrutiny.

There must, then, be a future for nuclear. The debate has been very good on many levels, but I am a little disappointed that not enough hon. Members have paid tribute to the staff who work in the nuclear industry.

Those staff have been the backbone of British Energy. I take this opportunity to commend those highly trained and motivated workers, who fully deserve our support. They—not the shareholders or bondholders who thought that they had a well to drink dry—have invested most in the industry. The workers, such as the 450 at Torness, have sacrificed the most in trying to save the company.

Brian White: Does my hon. Friend agree that if the management of British Energy had consulted the work force, it might not have made all the mistakes that it did in its strategic decisions?

Anne Picking: I agree.

As well as the workers, I commend the trade union representatives who tried hard to consult with British Energy's management and to represent effectively the interests of their members. It is the workers who are reorganising and retraining. They have been doing all that they can—including shedding jobs—to make British Energy pay. Meanwhile, dividends have been paid to shareholders. We should ignore any morality calls from them about being paid compensation.

Security of supply is not a luxury but a matter of life and death for many of our citizens. Electricity is also the life-blood of our future prosperity, affecting every one of our constituents. We quite rightly expect that when we flick a switch, the light comes on. At North Berwick high school's end-of-term Christmas dance for the older pupils, the boys put on their kilts and the girls their fancy frocks only to have the dance abandoned because of a power failure. In the scheme of things, that is not a big deal, but it was a major disappointment to those pupils.

In essence, I support any action necessary to secure the future of the nuclear industry, including outright nationalisation if it proves necessary.

8.24 pm

Mr. Tom Watson (West Bromwich, East): This has been an insightful debate and, for much of the afternoon, the Chamber has looked like the Standing Committee of the Communications Bill in exile. Many members of that Committee have displayed their customary depth of analysis today, as they do day in, day out in that rather laborious Committee on that clause-ridden Bill.

Most speakers have congratulated the Government on making the necessary provisions to guarantee that the country's energy supply is in good hands in the unfortunate event of British Energy failing to secure agreement on its restructuring. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) was a bit harsh on my hon. Friend the Minister when he said that security of supply had been blown out of the water as a motive for the Bill. It is important that management failures are not allowed to undermine the ability of households and businesses up and down the country to know with certainty that the lights will stay on and workers to know that they have a secure future.

This is a pragmatic Bill that takes a pragmatic approach, a stark contrast to the dogmatic approach that led the last Conservative Government into a rash, ill-informed and, as we can see now, unsuccessful privatisation; one that most City commentators at the time, and nearly all City commentators now, agree was perhaps an ideological step too far.

The Bill is not about turning back the clock; it is about being prepared for any eventuality. If British Energy can secure agreement for the restructuring proposal from its bondholders and creditors—I hope that it can—the Bill will be unnecessary. British Energy will be able to continue as an ongoing concern, generating electricity rather than column inches and debates in the Chamber.

I understand that real progress is being made in bringing bondholders and creditors together to reach an agreement on the restructuring. The detailed information that bondholders have required from the company has only been available since just before Christmas. It is understandable that those involved have been racing to reach an agreement and we must pay credit to them, as they are genuinely trying to reach agreement by the deadline of 14 February. I am not opposed to that but, in that eventuality, I hope that Adrian Montague, the company's new chairman, and the major investors will look to reorder and strengthen the clearly tainted British Energy management.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Anne Picking) mentioned the hard work of the 5,000 workers in British Energy, and there is no doubt that their morale has been sapped over the last 12 months by the uncertainty that they all face. It is essential that we put pressure on the company to bolster its management, because the previous management was, at best, incomplete in its dealings with stakeholders and, at worst, simply misleading.

If British Energy cannot secure the agreement, it is absolutely right that the Bill will allow the Government to incur expenditure through a range of measures to ensure a "smoother path through administration." Let us not forget that the company does not have to nestle in the public sector for long. The provision of loans or grants may allow for the possibility of a new ownership structure to evolve. In that event, I hope that stakeholders look to recent successful not-for-profit models, as it need not be a wholly public sector solution.

When I talk about not-for-profit models, I am talking about Welsh Water, Britain's fourth-biggest water company. It is a good model to look at; it provides an essential public service, delivered in the private sector by a company without shareholders. Instead, bondholders fund the company. It makes a profit, but that profit is reinvested in the business, in training staff and in lowering bills for customers. I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that if things go wrong for British Energy, that would not be a bad model for the Government to look at.

Mr. Russell Brown: I am intrigued by what my hon. Friend is saying, but I am slightly confused. Could he elaborate on the point that he is making?

Mr. Watson: Indeed. Having dealt with failed Tory privatisations, the Government have learned that we do not have to have wholly public or wholly private organisations. The Network Rail model is one we can look to.

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that if it were down to the work force—those 5,000 employees we have mentioned—and their normally moderate unions,

[Mr. Watson]

they would demand that the Government take control of the company today because they have faced such uncertainty for the past six months.

For too many years, the work force also faced uncertainty on safety. After the damning report on operating safety at British Energy issued by the World Association of Nuclear Operators two years ago, I understand that the management briefing notes that accompany presentations to safety representatives at BE are considered too embarrassing to share with the trade unions. Can my hon. Friend the Minister urge the new chairman of the company to release that important safety information to union representatives?

The question to which employees and consumers most want an answer from my hon. Friend the Minister is: how did we get into this situation? The answer is easy: first, Tory dogma and, secondly, constant mismanagement at the highest levels of British Energy. Hon. Members have laboured that point but it is worth remembering, as Parliament, once again, debates a failed privatisation, which is, like Railtrack, a privatisation that Labour Members warned against at its inception.

We are looking for new models. As has been said elsewhere, it is no coincidence that these problems surfaced in the two companies that were the last to be taken to the market during the final, frantic, befuddled death throes of the previous Conservative Government. In effect, the British Energy privatisation amounted to a massive gift from the taxpayer to the private sector—

Mr. Robathan: Oh, really.

Mr. Watson: Yes, really. British Energy was floated for £1.5 billion.

Mr. David Watts (St. Helens, North): Does my hon. Friend agree that if the previous Conservative Government had been local councillors they would have been surcharged? Many of the Tories who now sit on the Opposition Benches would have been paying the taxpayer compensation for a long time.

Mr. Watson: Indeed. I have some figures for Opposition Members. British Energy was floated for £1.5 billion—a sale package consisting of seven advanced gas-cooled reactors and Sizewell B, which itself cost £3 billion to construct. The market capitalisation of BE is now below £100 million, making it one of the biggest write-offs in Tory privatisation history. At the time, concerns were brushed aside.

Mr. Blunt: The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. Either the shareholders have taken an enormous bath and should never have bought the thing in the first place, so encouraging shareholders to buy the company was a thoroughly good deal for taxpayers, or the company is subject to the vagaries of the market. He cannot say that simply because the company is now worth only £100 million privatisation was a disaster for the taxpayer—plainly it was not.

Mr. Watson: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is perhaps unique that the Conservatives managed to hit the taxpayer hard when they privatised the company and then undermined the shareholders by nearly bankrupting the institutions that invested in it.

At the time, concerns were expressed to the then Conservative Government in powerful contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Cunninghame, North, now the Minister for Energy and Construction, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby, South, now the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. During those debates, one of the most prominent cheerleaders for privatisation was the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink)—although he has been noticeably quieter on the subject of late. He made the perceptive prediction that

> "the key benefit is that privatisation would impart to the nuclear industry the ability to make decisions to benefit the industry".—[*Official Report*, 26 March 1996; Vol. 274, c. 859.]

With the benefit of hindsight, I have been trying to work out what the industry gained from that privatisation, but I cannot find many benefits at all.

Much has been made of the impact of NETA on the company and there has been some discussion as to whether that was a major factor in BE's problems. Many Members have pointed out that BE did not complain about NETA; in fact, the company welcomed NETA and said that the new arrangements were good, yet it failed to adapt to the new market conditions.

The company failed to take a natural hedge in the market to offset the sharp fall in prices. When everyone else was moving into retail distribution, BE was moving out of the retail electricity sector—just as others in the industry began to understand the benefits of vertical integration. Furthermore, the Eggborough plant, purchased for more than £600 million, is now reckoned to be worth only about £75 million or £100 million.

Those are all problems of senior management in British Energy, but the continued payment of handsome dividends, even as the storm clouds gathered and the company was dusting down its begging bowl, was a scandal. Last year, just months before the company turned up cap in hand at the DTI's door, it handed almost £50 million back to shareholders. The £500 million special dividend payment that it made in 1999 was an act of breathtaking complacency, and the excuse was that the money was not needed, as there were no immediate acquisitions to be made. That money would have been better used preparing for the company's many rainy days.

Mr. Blunt *rose*—

Mr. Hendrick: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Watson: I had better take the intervention from the shadow Minister first.

Mr. Blunt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but he suggests that he will go into the Lobby tonight to support a Bill that will enable the Government to come to an arrangement whereby the taxpayer will help out the existing company's shareholders and bondholders. That is a rather surprising argument.

Mr. Watson: No, I will go into the Lobby to allow the Government to take on board any eventuality that the company faces. I apologise for the fact that we need to have this debate. As I tried to suggest earlier, even Mrs. Thatcher perhaps noted that this was a privatisation too far, but, as the hon. Gentleman has said, he was not a Member at the time, so he took no responsibility for the previous Government's decisions—a "not me, guv" attitude. So the Government are taking measures to deal with any liability.

However, as has been mentioned, the liabilities that we need to take on board are those of radioactive waste. The nuclear equation must not be forgotten as we discuss the industry's restructuring and, more widely, the United Kingdom's future energy mix, which we are not allowed to talk about now. So I will not talk about the energy White Paper, but perhaps the Government can learn a lesson from this privatisation about the other sectors of the industry that are considering restructuring—principally, Nirex.

I have pressed the Minister before on the fact that perhaps Nirex should be an independent foundation, divorced from ownership of British Energy and BNFL. I know that he will not tell us tonight about his future plans for Nirex, but I hope that he can rule out the ugly rumour, which is going around the nuclear industry, that Nirex will be privatised. The lesson of this debate is that, if we go down that route, we will find ourselves in a greater mess in years to come.

This is a good, pragmatic and flexible Bill. It is a Bill that we do not want to use if we can get away with it, but I hope that hon. Members will support it in the Lobby tonight.

8.38 pm

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston): Whatever is said about British Energy, there can be no doubt that it is an extremely important industry. As many hon. Members have said, it provides about 22 per cent. of the United Kingdom's electricity capacity. Given that it provides such a huge amount, even with 20 per cent. overcapacity, it is essential that that capacity remain available for two reasons. First, demand for electricity may increase. Secondly, it is important that capacity is spread over as wide a range of different sources as possible. It is clearly important that we reduce carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere and that, if a certain part of the industry hits problems, there is still the capacity for other parts to make up the gap. The industry's importance to the whole economy is phenomenal, and I would be very sad to see such an important industry go to the wall.

The risks of letting the industry go under must not be underestimated, and I commend the Government for bringing the Bill forward, first, to take account of the current financial difficulties, and, secondly, to make available provisions that might not be necessary but that will provide a safety net should the worst come to the worst. Let us not forget why we are here in the first place: a botched privatisation was rushed through in 1996 by a Government who were trying to get as many measures as possible on to the statute book before a general election that they knew that they were going to lose. The industry was privatised and raised £1.3 billion.

Mr. Russell Brown: Does my hon. Friend suggest that that was akin to a scorched earth policy?

Mr. Hendrick: Perhaps I would not use that description, but I can see its merits.

As I said, £1.3 billion was raised. What was the market capitalisation in March 2000? It was £1.2 billion. In 2001, the market capitalisation rose to £1.8 million. [Hon. Members: "£1.8 billion."] I stand corrected. It was £1.8 billion. In 2002, it went down to £1.114 billion. On 11 January this year, its capitalisation was £39.9 million. Those figures speak for themselves in terms of the management of that company since privatisation.

It is essential that the company receive financial assistance. We cannot afford to switch off that essential capacity. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Watson) mentioned, something like eight nuclear power stations are currently involved, and the implications of even switching off the core of those reactors, as the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) suggested, are phenomenal. He said that the cost would be something to the tune of £600 million. Given the scale of the figures that we are talking about, that might not seem a great deal of money. However, decommissioning nuclear power stations is not just a question of stopping the core reactor generating electricity; it also involves the disposal and dismantling of the reactor facilities as a whole.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn): Does my hon. Friend agree that one factor that has been overlooked in relation to the shutting down of British Energy power stations is that many of them have contracts with other industries, which may have a knock-on effect not just on price but on jobs in those industries?

Mr. Hendrick: Yes. I have not dealt with the jobs issue yet, but what my hon. Friend says is correct. What the hon. Member for Twickenham failed to take into account, apart from the jobs issue, was that those problems were never going to go away. Just because we spend £600 million today does not mean that the rest of the costs associated with decommissioning will not be around for future Governments. It is important to factor in those issues.

Dr. Cable: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, of the £5 billion decommissioning costs, about £2 billion would be incurred after 135 years, and another £2 billion after 50 years? Clearly, those long-term commitments have to be factored in, but they hardly make any difference as to whether the plants are closed down in five years or in another 15 years at the end of their natural life.

Mr. Hendrick: Again, I beg to differ with the hon. Gentleman. Apart from the loss of jobs, there would be a loss of revenue and of electricity generated as a result of the plant ceasing to operate. From that point of view, it was interesting that one of the Welsh nationalist Members who spoke earlier referred to Germany. Germany took the worst option of all, which was to pay the cost of the contracts and close the industries, too.

Dr. Ladyman: Before my hon. Friend gets too bogged down with the Liberal Democrats, does he recollect that

[Dr. Ladyman]

the last time that we debated energy, they said that we should not build any nuclear power stations because we did not know how to decommission them? Today they tell us that we should not build any more because the ones we have should be decommissioned. The truth is that, as on so many issues, they do not know whether they are on foot or on horseback.

Mr. Hendrick: My hon. Friend makes a very good contribution.

Clause 1 provides for financial assistance in the short term and gives the option of acquiring the company or its assets if the solvent restructuring fails. The Government have stressed that this is an enabling Bill and that there is no agenda other than to try to restructure the company and get it up and running. I mentioned in an intervention a possible Railtrack-style solution, as John Edmonds, general secretary of the GMB, put it. I give the Government the benefit of the doubt with regard to this approach. There is still the possibility that more restructuring of the industry would not make it more profitable or self-sustaining than it is now.

There are two conflicting approaches to the provision of electricity in this or any other country. With a totally market-led approach, it stands to reason, because of the very different ways in which the energy is derived and then distributed, that not every method would potentially result in the same costs.

Similarly, if one believes in an energy policy that is diverse and draws from a number of sources, it is clear that some sources may be more profitable than others, and that therefore certain types of industry, as we have already seen from renewable industries, would need extra support in the form of derogations from the climate change levy or taxes to rebalance the market. The Government should enter into discussions with the European Commission to see how that matter can be examined, because a totally market-driven approach does not necessarily mean a fair market. It can be a distorted market, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) put it. In fossil fuel generation of electricity, there are associated costs that are not immediately paid for. In fact, the environmental costs of those industries probably compare with the environmental costs of the nuclear industry, if everything is taken into consideration.

Mark Tami: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. If matters are left totally to the open market, we shall not have a balance: we will not have nuclear or renewables but a short-term system based on gas turbines that will probably burn imported gas from unstable countries.

Mr. Hendrick: I absolutely agree. When the decision was made to allow gas to be used in generating stations I was one of those who thought that it was somewhat of a disaster, because gas is very precious. There should have been a continued emphasis on coal, with new technologies to work with it alongside the generating capacity that was there—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman is again straying from the main subject of today's debate.

Mr. Hendrick: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is just that, in determining the true costs of nuclear power, to determine whether a nuclear power industry is viable, to some extent we need to look at the alternatives, because obviously there are implications. But I will not stray any further in that direction.

Britain's nuclear power industry has developed from a programme that originally had military imperatives into one with political imperatives, leaving us with what is, by its very nature, an expensive means of producing electrical energy. During the debate in the 1980s, cost per kilowatt-hour in comparisons between coal and nuclear power was based purely on the operating costs of each means of generating electricity. I put it to the Minister that £16 per megawatt-hour, which is the lowest cost of production nowadays, is probably not the real cost, for the reasons that I mentioned earlier. Research and development costs for nuclear facilities and waste management and disposal were never factored into the equation for operating costs because the industry was Government-owned and not subject to market scrutiny.

As other Members have said, the privatisation in 1996 was a give-away, and it should never have taken place because the industry was never going to meet, and beat, the competition from gas. British Energy, like Railtrack, has put shareholders before consumers. Last May, it had a profit of £42 million in its British and north American operations, but an overall loss to its UK operations of £41 million. None the less, the company chose to maintain its dividend, paying out nearly £50 million to its shareholders. Last year, when the company had already recorded large losses of over £500 million, the chief executive was awarded a performance bonus, and is now being offered a fortune. Given the dividend, which was clearly a bribe to keep the chief executive in his job, and his bonus, it seems that the company is paying itself for under-performance.

Despite that, it is essential that BE continue to produce electricity and that this country develop a viable nuclear power programme to meet our international obligations on climate change. The switch-off of all eight stations would cost more than letting them continue to run. They need upgrading, and, in time, the Government will need to consider new build. Safe nuclear power is the future, and it must be part of an overall balanced energy policy with a mix of sources.

While the single European market in energy continues to develop, it is plain that a purely market-driven energy policy will not respect the environment, just as the coal-generating industry failed to respect it before scrubbing technologies were introduced. The Government should work with the European Commission to consider how nuclear generation industries throughout Europe can be assisted in coming years. Wind and waves are okay, but they will never produce 20 per cent. of this country's electricity, and they would do well to reach 10 per cent.

The nuclear industry has the capacity, and it is an essential part of this country's electricity generation programme.

8.53 pm

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): I am pleased to be able to contribute to the Second Reading of this enabling Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Watson) said that he thought the Chamber was full of exiles from the Standing Committee on the Communications Bill, so I take it that there are difficulties in that Committee. I suggest that tomorrow he pop along to Room 14, where the Hunting Bill will be discussed, and then he will see real difficulties.

The Bill focuses on the current problems for British Energy. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have made a variety of observations, but a common thread that runs through the debate is that the decisions of the company's management have greatly contributed to its downfall. We have heard about the spent field contracts with BNFL. Signing contracts has done nothing to assist with the difficulties; in fact it has contributed significantly to the problems.

The Bill will ensure that the Government are prepared for the successful restructuring of the company or its administration. I would sincerely like to think that it will be the former. Administration is not my preference. It would be a major mistake. However, we need to make contingency plans for it, otherwise people will highlight it at each and every opportunity.

Some colleagues I spoke to recently think that the Bill is a form of renationalisation, which in some people's minds is a good idea. However, even those on the extreme left wing of the Labour party would shy away from renationalising the nuclear industry, because the two do not tie together. I do not want to stray beyond the terms of the Bill. The energy debate has been touched on in a variety of forms, but it is for another day.

The energy White Paper will be important in determining how the Government deal with the country's future needs. Some 11 days ago, I received a written response from the Minister to an oral question in which I asked about the energy White Paper. He gave the succinct answer that it would be published shortly. Today, he said that that might be published in February or March. Let me give my hon. Friend some advice. Some hon. Members greatly admire and love nuclear energy, so perhaps Valentine's day would be a good time to publish the White Paper. Others are not so keen, however. He has heard the arguments before, and perhaps he should beware the Ides of March. Whatever he decides, many of us look forward to the White Paper being published soon.

The priorities of nuclear safety and security of supply must be met. The Bill will enable those to be determined in Committee and beyond. Security of supply has always been a feature of the energy debate. There is a wide variety of views on how it can best be achieved. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) said that the 22 per cent. overcapacity could be dealt with by the closure of nuclear power stations, but that would create in the sector a fine balance that I would not be prepared to risk. He said that nuclear contributes to some 20 to 25 per cent. of power generation in the UK. I would not argue with that. My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Anne Picking) rightly said that it is double in Scotland, at about 50 per cent.

Mark Tami: The margin of 20 to 25 per cent. has to exist. Another consideration is the position of the stations on the grid. Just switching them off would create many problems with balancing the electricity supply around the country.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right. The strategic placing of sites is important for access to lines and interconnectors. It is strange that he should raise that matter, because I was about to mention a constituency case that relates to the position on the grid. Losing eight British energy sites would have an impact. Like some in the industry, I believe that it is a nightmare scenario. To return to the point made by my hon. Friend, there is a Magnox reactor run by BNFL in Chapelcross in my constituency. I was interested to learn that not many months ago, my predecessor, a long-serving Member of Parliament who supported that site for many years, had suggested to a colleague of mine that a replacement reactor on the site may not be a good idea because it was not close enough to the marketplace. My hon. Friend therefore made an interesting and important point.

Many Members have driven home the point about people returning home in the evening and wanting power so that they can sit in a warm home and switch on the television. That is something that we all expect, and families without those luxuries desperately want them. There is therefore an even greater demand for power generation in this country. On security of supply, this time last year we had a detailed discussion with Ofgem about the Magnox station in my constituency, which centred on access to the interconnector. The power station exports everything to the interconnector and south of the border, so the regulator asked Scottish Power whether it could guarantee security of supply if it were not in operation. Eventually, after much browbeating, Scottish Power said that it could not. The site has four reactors generating 196 MW, so security of supply is clearly important.

The potential for power reductions and what are known as "brown-outs" had been identified by others, which is why that information was fed to the regulator. However, it is not just household supply and domestic use that would be affected, but industry as well. We must consider how the industrial sector would be damaged if, as colleagues in the House have suggested, there was an early run-down and we did not support British Energy in the Bill. If restructuring of the company proves successful, the Government must ensure that they deliver their part of the deal, as financial assistance will be needed for nuclear liabilities. If restructuring goes wrong and British Energy goes into administration, the Government must be sure that they can acquire the power station business by acquiring the company or its assets directly, assuming that no third party wants to do so.

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): Will the hon. Gentleman clarify that point? The Bill obviously gives the Government the ability to acquire British Energy in those circumstances, but what would happen if it did not

[Mr. Michael Weir]

complete its passage through Parliament and British Energy was unable to continue? Would the company automatically revert to the Government in any event?

Mr. Brown: I am pleased that a member of the Scottish National party has turned up, but I expected the SNP to be here earlier. The hon. Gentleman assumes that the Bill will not go through.

Mr. Weir: That is another question.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman made that assumption. I am not about to assume that the Bill will not go through, because it clearly will.

I asked the Opposition spokesman about a third party, but I am not convinced that a creature of that ilk exists. So we have a difficulty, which the Government and the Department of Trade and Industry have identified.

We are duty bound—my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian raised this point, too—to consider those who work in the sector. We must not write off people; we are talking about highly skilled work forces. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) mentioned the figure of £5 billion and gave a breakdown of possible costs—£2 million 150 years from now, £2 million in 50 years' time and perhaps £1 billion now.

A moral duty lies behind all that. This is not a game of figures and what we must do in 50 or 150 years from now. I know that only too well because we are already preparing for the closure of the Magnox site in my constituency that will take us into the next 15 or 20 years. BNFL has identified the liabilities and how the matter must be dealt with in the communities affected. My hon. Friend the Minister said in his opening remarks that we cannot simply switch off reactors and make moves toward de-fuelling—there is a cost attached to that. The economics show clearly that it makes sense to run the businesses and to utilise precious assets.

Clauses 3 and 4 of this narrow, enabling Bill amend schedule 12 of the Electricity Act 1989. The proposed removal of the financial ceiling has allowed restructuring to go ahead. If the current ceiling is strictly interpreted, it could block the Government's delivery of their part of the deal, because we must guarantee British Energy's liabilities. The ceiling also makes no provision for inflation and does not reflect the industry's standard practice of discounting large sums in the distant future.

The changing of the tax status of grants under schedule 12 is important: it will ensure that the Government can deliver their part of the restructuring plan without incurring a massive tax liability. That is why the Minister referred to giving with one hand but not taking away with the other.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) said, this is a small Bill. It is pragmatic, but it will go a long way to assisting in the future.

9.7 pm

David Hamilton (Midlothian): It was not my intention to speak in this debate, but there have been several speeches on which I should like to reflect. My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) talked about people on the left queueing up to participate in this debate. Obviously, I am not on the left, although I remember demonstrating against the opening of Torness power station in the constituency next to mine. I must always remember that Tony Benn signed the paper allowing nuclear power to start.

One important issue is the security of Britain's long-term interests. Two or three colleagues have commented on the work force and it is important that I start with that point. We should remember that the work force will be very concerned at the moment. As someone who came from the coalmining industry, I understand that concern. We have all been listening to this debate intently. The work force will be looking to their future security.

I am concerned that the ex-chairman of the company has walked away with a golden handshake and with a pension that many pensioners would be extremely pleased to enjoy. That matter needs to be investigated. We need to look at some of today's chairmen and the deals that they get when they go.

It has been said that some 22 per cent. of fuel is generated by nuclear power. In Scotland, the figure is 50 per cent. I understand that the White Paper will be published in February or March and I look forward to the debate on it because the diversity of Britain's requirements is key. Whether we like it or not, we all have to play the game, but I am not a supporter of nuclear power. I have opposed it and nuclear weapons all my life. However, that is not the issue. We have many nuclear reactors throughout the country, and there is no question of closing them down. They should be allowed to come to the end of their natural life. In the long term, as the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) said, we should look at reinvesting in other renewables and in clean coal. What concerns me is that the money that has to be spent to bail out nuclear power could have been used in other ways, and can be in future.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) said that the accident rate in the nuclear power industry was very small—one per year. I think he said—but all it would take is one major disaster at a nuclear power station to make that figure seem infinitesimal. Let me give an example. When I served on a council, we looked at the question of energy requirements and what would happen if a disaster occurred in the neighbouring county. Edinburgh would be taken out, Midlothian would be taken out, East Lothian would be taken out and Fife would be taken out. There would not be a firth of Forth; there would be a sea. That is what you have to think about as you listen to the debate.

Dr. Ladyman: The 11,300 people killed in the conventional power industry whom I mentioned earlier did not include the 8 million people whom the United Nations believes will die as a result of burning carbon over the next 10 years.

David Hamilton: That is why we need green coal—*[Laughter.]*—and long-term investment in other options. Conservative Members talk about privatisation of the industry, and then cry over spilled milk because the shareholdings have gone pear-shaped, and reject the criticisms that we make. Investment in health and safety is for the long term. You talk in terms of historical significance. I am too young to remember, but you may remember the smog in London and the 4,000 people who died. We moved away from that by introducing clean air Acts. Europe is moving towards that, which I welcome. With new technology, we can consider renewables and other options. Wind and wave power may sound ludicrous, but such energy sources must be developed.

When we speak about security, let us think about what is happening in Iraq. Is it not all about oil? That is security, and in Britain we have to act.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is starting to stray slightly outside the Bill. Also, may I remind him not to use the word "you" when referring to hon. Members in the Chamber? He must use the correct parliamentary language.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Nigel Griffiths): Youse!

David Hamilton: I said youse. That is a Scottish word, which is collective, but I take the point, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and thank you for your guidance. I did digress slightly on Iraq. I dare say that we will return to that in another debate.

On the issues raised by the Minister and the billions of pounds involved, I see no alternative to what is proposed in the Bill. I will support it, because it contains the possibility that British Energy may come back into public ownership, if necessary. We do not have the luxury of voting against the Bill, when everyone knows full well that no other option is available to us. There is no third party that would be interested in picking up a dead duck.

When I came to the House a year and a half ago, I was reminded many times of my responsibility to my constituents and the people who put me here. That is partly what the Bill is about. Some of the matters that we have to deal with in Parliament are unpalatable. If the public purse must be used to secure the long-term interests of energy, that is what we must do, rather than arguing about it when there is no alternative.

Some important points have been made in the debate. I agree with the unions at the TUC conference when they decided unanimously—unusual nowadays—that the industry should be taken back into public ownership. I look forward to that day.

9.14 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn): It is difficult to speak at the end of a debate without repeating the points that have been made, but I have been here for most of it, while the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan), who will speak from the Conservative Front Bench, has not, or at least his hon. Friends have not. That is not the point, however: it is difficult to make new contributions, but I shall try to do so.

As has been pointed out, the Bill is an enabling Bill. While it is a technical Bill that enables the Government to deal with financial problems relating to British Energy, it is difficult to limit our comments and observations to this unique situation and not to discuss the wider ramifications for the electricity industry and nuclear energy in particular. Indeed, some clauses have a general application. The financial problems of British Energy have attracted wide interest, as has the impact on any future energy policies. I realise that you will call me to order if I stray on to the White Paper on energy policy, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I point out that it is very significant, for reasons that I shall explain later.

As the only Welsh Member with a nuclear power station in their constituency, I bring to the debate a Welsh dimension that I believe is current and relevant, even if it is not universally accepted by Plaid Cymru Members. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Watson) referred to Welsh Water—he called it south Wales water—but I must correct him, as Dwr Cymru, Welsh Water, covers the whole of Wales. The Welsh model has some relevance in discussing a future model that is a halfway house located between full renationalisation and the private sector—a point that he made most forcefully.

When the British Government announced the first loan to British Energy in September, I was approached by interested parties in my constituency—BNFL, managers, unions representing the workers in the local power station at Wylfa, environmental groups and individuals. They were concerned about the impact that such a decision would have on the electricity industry. Some blamed the managers of British Energy, while others blamed the Government or botched privatisation by the previous Government. A number of concerns were also expressed about the future of nuclear power. I believe that what is needed and will be provided in the White Paper is a mature debate about the right energy mix for this country and for the future.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Does the hon. Gentleman see in that mature mix, as he describes it, the need for new nuclear energy plants in Wales? Does he accept that his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales has ruled that out?

Albert Owen: I shall not stray into that debate—I know that you would not allow me to do so, Mr. Deputy Speaker—for which there will be ample opportunity. However, I should like to correct the hon. Gentleman, as I said that we needed a mature debate to get the right mix. All hon. Members will agree that we need to have that mature debate without being sidetracked by individuals' comments.

When the loan was further extended and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry told the House about the plans to introduce the measures before us today, the focus of attention shifted from the blame culture, whereby people tried to decide whose fault it was, to exactly how—not whether—we were going to introduce legislation enabling the Government to provide a safety net. The blame game was over. After all, British Energy is a major generator in crisis. Like every crisis, this one requires crisis management. The Government could not sit idly by and do nothing. That is why I support the Bill and the measures that it is introducing for the reasons that my hon. Friend the Minister set out.

The Bill may not be good, old-fashioned nationalisation—a measure that a number of my colleagues, as well the groups and individuals that have

[Albert Owen]

contacted me, have mentioned—but, while I do not advocate renationalisation of British Energy, it is not such an absurd proposition, especially with plans to set up an authority to deal with public sector nuclear liabilities. While it would be wrong to engage in political point scoring, let us not forget that the privatisation of British Energy was a privatisation too far, as was privatisation of the railways. We now have to revisit the Railtrack fiasco and the privatisation of British Energy.

The Government are right to implement plans to provide the necessary mechanisms in the event of administration or solvent restructuring. We cannot simply shut down nuclear power stations. I appreciate that some hon. Members on both sides tackled that, but it is important to emphasise it. We should reject simply shutting down nuclear power stations because of the job factor. It would also cost more to shut them down than to keep them open.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) said earlier, many British Energy power stations are located in areas of high unemployment. They have links with other manufacturing industries in the area that would be severed if the power stations were simply closed, resulting in job losses downstream. I should like my hon. Friend the Minister to deal with that and assure us that jobs and contracts will be safeguarded if the Bill is enacted. I appreciate that it is a difficult matter for the Minister to tackle, but people in the nuclear industry who are worried about the knock-on effects have raised it with me time and again.

Let us consider the interdependency of major employers. British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. owns the station at Wylfa in my constituency. As I said earlier, it is the only operator in Wales and it has some 500 employees and 100 permanent contractors. More than 75 per cent. of the work force is local, and it is well trained. Jobs there are the highest quality jobs in my constituency. Wylfa contributes £20 million per annum to the local economy. That is a quarter of my area's gross domestic product. Nuclear power stations therefore have a significant impact on the GDP of the areas where they are situated.

My hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (David Hamilton) mentioned the union stance. He rightly said that there was unanimity at the TUC conference, and I accept that that is rare. However, individual unions and leaders have approached me about the subject. They look to the Government to get matters right and ensure job security in future. Some advocate Railtrack-style solutions and others go as far as good old-fashioned renationalisation. However, safeguarding the quality jobs should top the agenda. Again, I press my hon. Friend the Minister for that assurance in his winding-up speech.

The reasons for the Government's intervention are security of supply and guarantee of safe operations. They are important matters and, again, I call for a mature debate to get the right mix of energy needs for the United Kingdom. I believe that we all support that.

Brian White: My hon. Friend makes a strong case for British Energy to continue processing. However, does he accept that British Energy could operate in different ways rather than simply continuing with the current contracts?

Albert Owen: Yes, but insecurity exists. Some contracts could be jeopardised and we must therefore get the Bill right now.

The Californian experience shows that if we do not provide the right incentives for new investment—in any sort of energy—we could end up with a worst case scenario. Fulfilling the demands of low carbon needs requires planning—proper planning, not knee-jerk reactions. The Bill will provide stability, albeit in the short term. It provides opportunities to re-examine the matter in future and perhaps accept good old-fashioned renationalisation or the Welsh model that some people advocate. However, we need the prospect of sustainable energy. We also need to deal properly with British Energy so that we can approach the White Paper on a level playing field. The Bill may be narrow but it has wide ramifications for nuclear power, the electricity industry and the review to which I look forward in a few weeks.

9.24 pm

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I must tell the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) that if the Whip asks him to speak for 15 minutes, he should not simply speak for 10 minutes. I could see the Whip saying that.

Madam Deputy Speaker—[HON. MEMBERS: "Madam?"] I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps I shall sit down; that would put the Minister in a difficult position.

We are debating a Bill that will cost the British taxpayer perhaps £3 billion. I am glad to see the Secretary of State here now, because it is important that she registers by her presence the significance of the Bill. We regret that she was not here at the beginning of the debate, but I am sure that she was very busy.

Nigel Griffiths: Where is the shadow Secretary of State?

Mr. Robathan: I am sure that he will walk through the door as I speak. He was here for the first couple of hours.

The Bill is very short, comprising two-and-a-half pages and five brief clauses. That has made the debate difficult in that many hon. Members—looking around, I see several of them—wanted to contribute at greater length to the more general aspects of energy policy, but were prevented by Madam Deputy Speaker from doing so. That is a pity, because some of those contributions would have been interesting.

The Bill faces opposition from inside and outside the House. It comes on the one hand from free marketeers and on the other from what one might call the green lobby. I find myself in a rather schizophrenic, or hybrid, position, because I am both a free marketeer and—I do not want any hon. Members to tell my Conservative colleagues—I have been a member of Friends of the Earth for longer than I have been a member of the Conservative party. Moreover, I have a photovoltaic roof, which is kindly supported by the Department of Trade and Industry—it has not generated much electricity yet, but we long for sunshine—and I am looking to have a wind generator installed on some land in my constituency. I should say, however, that I do not support Friends of the Earth's position on nuclear energy, and I am not anti-nuclear. I detach myself from its arguments in that respect.

The key question is whether the Bill is the right way forward for British energy and for our energy policy. I want to consider some of the contributions to the debate. The Minister made one of the funniest speeches that I have heard in the Chamber about Liberal Democrat energy policy. It is one to cut out and keep, and I intend to do so. He seemed very unhappy when he was speaking—indeed, the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) thought that he looked sombre. I suggest that that is because, through the Bill, he is presiding over a failure of policy and over chaos, to which we shall return later.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) made a powerful and well-researched speech in which he highlighted the said chaos and failure of policy. He spoke about the blank cheque that hon. Members are being asked to sign today— we shall not do so—and the unlimited liability that the Government may face. He made an extremely well-argued alternative case and demolished the Government's policy on nuclear energy. Whatever the way forward may be, the Bill certainly is not it.

The hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), who chairs the Select Committee, brought to the debate his knowledge and long experience of the DTI and pointed out the shortcomings of management. Up to a point, he made a sensible analysis with which I would not disagree, but his conclusions were somewhat unusual. He criticised the high dividends that British Energy had paid to its shareholders, then said that we could not let down the investors who had bought shares at ludicrously low prices. That involves a dichotomy or clash of logic that he may like to consider. In my view, it is not the business of the British taxpayer to bail out those who have made bad investment decisions.

Mr. O'Neill: Perhaps I can help the hon. Gentleman through his problem. There are a great number of very small shareholders in privatised utilities, some of whom worked in them and some of whom bought their shares. It is the one investment that they have made in their lives. They do not have the sophisticated background of wealth and privilege that Conservative Members have. In several instances, they were mesmerised by the easy money period of the 1980s and early 1990s. Sometimes foolishly, they devoted undue amounts of resources to a single bet on the stock exchange. Those people need some degree of protection and assistance.

Mr. Robathan: I have every sympathy with those people who will lose money through poor investments, but I quote the hon. Gentleman again. He referred to ludicrously low prices for the shares and, in particular, criticised the high dividends that they paid to those same investors. He will recall that the taxpayers who are bailing those investors out are also elderly and they, too, have to struggle by on pensions. There is no dichotomy in my argument.

The hon. Member for Twickenham, who spoke for the Liberal Democrats, described the Government as a gambler manically stuck at the table and thinking that the luck will turn, but when I looked at the Minister he did not strike me as a Michael Owen look-alike and he did not look much like a refugee from Las Vegas either. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) returned to the manic gambling analogy, and there is a certain truth in it.

Although it may have been faint, the hon. Member for Twickenham gave some praise to the arguments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate, which is always a bit worrying. The hon. Gentleman also pointed out that safety is not threatened, contrary to what people have been saying, nor is security of supply. A real issue of competition is involved, and he said that administration is the logical way ahead, because there is no shareholder value in the shares.

The hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) accused my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate of being dishonest.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Of what?

Mr. Robathan: Of being dishonest. Contrary to what the hon. Member for South Thanet said, the Bill is not a good start, and he will rue the day that he said it was. He also said that it would be judged by its impact on shareholder value. I disagree, and he will rue those words as well.

Dr. Ladyman: I think I said that the hon. Gentleman's policy, not Government policy, would be judged on shareholder value. He is a friend of the earth, but does he not realise that the change in carbon dioxide concentrations since the second world war is equivalent to that associated with our coming out of the last ice age? Therefore, if we want to address climate change, we must do something about carbon dioxide reductions. That means that the policy of closing down the nuclear power industry suggested from the Front Bench by the hon. Member for Reigate is not the way forward.

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Gentleman has completely misunderstood the policy that my hon. Friend put forward, because it is not about closing down power stations. It is about letting the market run its course. The power stations will continue to operate, as was pointed out very ably by the hon. Member for Twickenham, with whom I do not always align myself.

My hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam), the Chairman of the Environmental Audit Committee, rightly pointed out the calamitous impact of the new electricity trading arrangements on the energy market from the point of view of the producer. Whatever the rights and wrongs of NETA, the Minister knows that we shared an Adjournment debate some 18 months ago on the bad impact that it also had on combined heat and power. My hon. Friend spoke with authority.

The right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) gave us a history lesson on the past 19 years of nuclear energy. I was not aware of the Prime Minister's hand in nuclear energy, so that point was of interest. I hope that the colliery in his constituency, which he was not allowed to mention, benefits from his support. I wish that he had been able to mention it. He agreed with us that taxpayers should not just compensate shareholders.

[Mr. Robathan]

My hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) made a sensible and knowledgeable speech pointing out that the Government are anti-competitive. The hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) wanted to talk about wind farms, and I was looking forward to that. He pointed out British Energy's failure of management, and there is broad agreement across the Chamber on the tremendous mistakes that have been made. Whether they could have been avoided is, as always, a matter for dispute. He also pointed out the immense cost involved and made a sensible long-term point about the desirability or otherwise of cheap energy.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), who is a member of the Trade and Industry Committee, spoke without a note and made logical arguments. He criticised British Energy's failures, made a spirited defence of the free market and of NETA's contribution, and opposed renationalisation. We might not agree on every word he said, but his speech was excellent.

I missed most of the speech of the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Brian White), as I went out for dinner. However, I know that he has a sustainable energy Bill coming up, which sounds helpful.

Mr. Ivor Caplin (Hove): Steak and kidney?

Mr. Robathan: No, it was not steak and kidney pudding actually.

We agree with much of what was said by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas), although I was not here for his speech. He agreed with the arguments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate about security of supply and how the Bill was distorting the market. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is unlikely to vote with us—

Mr. Simon Thomas: I am voting with you.

Mr. Robathan: I am delighted to hear that. I thought that he had supported renationalisation.

The hon. Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) said that safety was better in the public sector. I think that there is no justification for that.

Mr. Clapham: If the hon. Gentleman remembers privatisation of the railways and the history of Railtrack and if he reads the report that the nuclear installations inspectorate published about 18 months ago, he will realise that industries are safer in the public sector.

Mr. Robathan: I am sorry that I cannot agree. With his name, the hon. Gentleman should remember the Clapham rail disaster, which happened long before privatisation. He should remember King's Cross and the underground. He should perhaps remember that a crash happened only this weekend on the underground, which has not, I think, yet been privatised, unless the Government have done so without telling us.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove repeated the gambling analogy, saying that we needed objective external assessment of liability costs. We agree with that entirely. We also agree that the market must play an important part and that the regulatory framework should be set by the House.

I am afraid that I came in to the Chamber as the hon. Member for East Lothian (Anne Picking) was making her speech. I know that she spoke on behalf of her constituents at Torness, but the idea that wind and wave power will immediately take the place of other forms of energy is misguided. I understand, however, why she spoke on behalf of her constituents.

The hon. Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Watson) spoke of Tory dogma, something of which I know nothing. He suggested that the matter is a safety issue. The hon. Member for South Thanet had already pointed out that British Energy has an exceptionally good safety record, and that there is one death a year in the worldwide nuclear industry. We may dismiss the argument about the safety issue. The hon. Member for West Bromwich, East theatrically gave us some great analogies, telling us that storm clouds were gathering and that there had been breathtaking complacency, but he must learn to keep a straight face on these occasions.

The hon. Member for Preston (Mr. Hendrick) also referred to botched privatisation, then spent his entire speech blaming management. He made the profound point that some forms of generation are more expensive than others. The hon. Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) is of course a cheerleader for renationalisation. The hon. Member for Midlothian (David Hamilton)—possibly a pressed man—said that he was anti-nuclear power and a member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. I was glad he spoke about his responsibilities to his constituents, however, because we all share those.

Many good points and informative speeches have been made on both sides. The collapse of British Energy is due to several factors. Poor management—management mistakes for those who prefer that phrase—is one. The climate change levy—the carbon tax—has certainly contributed. The higher level of business rates at nuclear power stations is another factor. The nuclear legacy is, of course, another issue. NETA, whether or not it is good for consumers, has created low prices, which has reduced revenue.

The company is failing—indeed, it has failed. We say that that is the working of the market and that the company should go into administration. The Bill is a renationalisation measure. The Trades Union Congress was unanimous, we have been told, in wanting British Energy to be renationalised. Is that the spectre of old Labour coming out from under the skies of new Labour? *[Interruption.]* I can hear hon. Members saying yes.

We must ask whether the Bill is good for the nuclear energy industry, taxpayers or the country. It is certainly not good for taxpayers. Taxpayers will bail out the company, perhaps paying £3 billion or more. The Bill is a blank cheque. Why, for instance, should taxpayers pay a £336,000 pay-off and £150,000 pension for the chairman and chief executive? If, under his leadership, the company failed and went into administration, he would not get that. My hon. Friend the Member for

Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) is promoting a Bill on Friday that would prevent failed directors from getting such pay-offs if they were not justified.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Robathan: I will not because I am about to sit down.

We say, "Let the company go into administration." The true value of the power stations and their generating ability will ensure their continued existence, with better management. This is purely a short-term palliative, at enormous cost to the taxpayer. What will happen if, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) said, the Bill is hybrid and is thrown out? What will happen if the EU countermands the state aid subsidy? What will happen if the Minister does not get his Bill, as he may not? We think that this is a bad Bill, at huge cost, and we oppose it.

9.41 pm

Mr. Wilson: With leave of the House, Mr. Speaker. Through most of that speech I wondered whether it was a winding-up speech or an amateur dramatics adjudication. I am pleased to hear that the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) got the award for the best performance from his Front-Bench colleague.

I am sorry that I did not amuse the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) earlier, but one would need to work pretty hard to make the Electricity (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill into a comedy turn. If the charge is that I was sombre, my reply is that I would rather be sombre than sanguine. What we heard from all Opposition parties tonight seemed to be remarkably sanguine on a number of scores. The best description of the Bill and its limited objectives came from my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Watson), who said that it was a good and pragmatic Bill. That is all it is meant to be and it reacts to a particular set of circumstances.

Opposition Members were remarkably sanguine about security of supply. There were some extraordinary comments, as if it would be all right on the night and that we could wish away the contribution of the power stations that we are discussing; we could take 22 away from 22 and still have security of supply. That is absolutely nonsense, and we heard that from members of all the Opposition parties who spoke, and particularly from—

Mr. Stunell *rose—*

Mr. Wilson: I was just going to mention the Liberal Democrats. On the basis of their casual approach to security of supply, I would not put them in charge of the street lighting, never mind the nation's energy policy. Simply to say that there is not a security of supply issue in terms of the problems of British Energy seems downright bizarre.

Mr. Stunell: Is the Minister's opinion shared by the regulator, Ofgem? I got the impression that it did not support the Minister.

Mr. Wilson: This has been sprung on me—[*Interruption.*] If the hon. Gentleman wishes to nitpick with Ofgem, he is welcome to do so. Since Ofgem's prime responsibility is to maintain security of supply—that is also my prime responsibility—we are at one on this question. I have certainly heard nothing from Ofgem in that regard; of course it recognises the importance of the contribution from British Energy. That, largely, has motivated us throughout this affair.

We heard speeches from Tories, Liberal Democrats and from Welsh nationalists. The Scottish nationalists thought it was an 8.30 kick-off. After all, only 50 per cent. of Scottish electricity comes from nuclear power. We could not possibly expect any of the six Scottish National party MPs to turn up for a debate of this significance. It is, after all, still the Burns season.

Opposition spokesmen who did participate were remarkably sanguine about the interests of the work force. The Tory spokesman, the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), gave them a mention towards the end of his contribution, but only after he had devoted his entire speech to making the strange point that the company should go into administration. I do not know whether he, the Liberal Democrats, the Welsh national party Members or Members of any other party have taken the trouble to talk to the British Energy work force or to the trade unions who represent them, but I can assure them that the one thing that people representing the work force do not want is for the company to be put deliberately into administration.

We have always been honest with the unions—as with everyone else—that administration remains a possibility. However, to pursue that course of action, as the Opposition parties recommend, is certainly against the interests of the work force, in their perception. It is noteworthy that the only contributors to the debate to raise the interests of the work force were Labour Members: my hon. Friends the Members for East Lothian (Anne Picking) and for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) and others.

Mr. Blunt: The Minister acknowledged that I referred to the interests of the work force during my remarks, but he cannot maintain that the interests of everyone else must come second to the interests of the work force. Clearly, the work force are in a wretched position, but their interests are not paramount over those of the rest of the country or of the taxpayer.

Mr. Wilson: Nobody made that suggestion. I am pointing out that the hon. Gentleman was inconsistent. He advocated administration in 95 per cent. of his speech—an odd position in any case—and then, only at the end, expressed concern about the work force, who do not see administration as their preferred option.

Many of the Opposition speeches were remarkably sanguine about the environment. The whole performance of the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), was supposed to be about carbon saving, yet he wants to close down the nuclear industry without the remotest regard for the economic consequences. He is prepared to forgo the revenues from nuclear power stations for the rest of their natural life in order to pursue the objective of turning the key on them at the earliest possible moment.

How does the hon. Gentleman reconcile that approach with his supposed commitment to the imperative of carbon reduction? When it comes to the

[Mr. Wilson]

point, he and the organisations which he prayed in aid are much more anti-nuclear than pro-low-carbon. They refuse to face up to that dichotomy, but the public can see through it. They cannot have it both ways; they cannot preach a low-carbon message while walking away from a source of electricity that gives the United Kingdom 22 per cent. of our non-carbon generation at present.

Opposition spokesmen were remarkably sanguine about safety, which is the other reason that we believe that what we are doing is essential for the future of British Energy and the only way for a responsible Government to act. The principal Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Reigate, put forward his plan for administration, but there was no clue as to who, apart from the Government, would take the company out administration. Rather belatedly, the hon. Gentleman sprang up to say that he was against the Government taking the company out of administration.

The hon. Gentleman blithely said that if someone turned up to take the company out of administration or if it continued in administration there should be no bureaucratic impediments to the transfer of licence. Does he understand for a moment what is involved in transferring the licence to operate a nuclear site? Has he spoken to the nuclear installations inspectorate or to the Health and Safety Executive? I am delighted to say that they have made plain to me that there would be no automatic transfer of licence. Anybody who wants to operate a nuclear site, whether an administrator, a company or the state in some form, has to demonstrate that they are capable of doing so. We cannot simply brush aside concerns about security of supply, the impact on the work force, the environmental effects and the safety implications of licence transfer.

Opposition parties vaguely think that they should be against the Government's proposals, but they do not have a clue as to what they would put in their place. At the end of the debate, I am reinforced in my view that what we are doing is the only plausible, practical and pragmatic way to approach the problems of British Energy.

Mr. Drew: Does my hon. Friend accept that there is another important factor—the international aspect of the nuclear industry—and that one of the problems with losing one of the major firms in this country is that it would have a dramatic impact on our ability to work internationally in dealing with all manner of nuclear issues?

Mr. Wilson: Of course I agree with my hon. Friend, but that is not one of the specific purposes motivating us to take action. Some people casually denigrate the nuclear industry, but thank heavens we have that degree of expertise in the United Kingdom, and we can send it out to other parts of the world, particularly parts of the former Soviet Union, where it is valued and where, as a result of the skills that have been developed in the United Kingdom, we can make plants less vulnerable to incidents. We can contribute to the international effort to make those plants safer.

Of course we wish that we did not have the problems that we are addressing tonight. I have personally known about the circumstances at British Energy for a long time and those at Scottish Nuclear even longer, but those problems are not of our making and the choice that we face is how to respond to them in the most responsible way possible. The actions that we have taken since September have passed those tests. The official Opposition have changed their attitude since then because they recognise that we took the only responsible course of action in the immediate aftermath of those events. We could not walk away from the industry.

Mr. O'Neill: My hon. Friend has rightly identified the expertise—we disagree about the pronunciation of that word—of the British nuclear industry and its personnel, but does he agree that one way in which we could sustain the industry and make it an attractive occupation and a lifetime career would be to give some more positive indications that it will be sustained beyond the next five to 10 years, which is the furthest horizon that most of us can see at the moment, without any positive statements and other positive documents that might be produced in the near future?

Mr. Wilson: In the current circumstances, no one expects any document to say, "Go out and build nuclear power stations", even if it were in the power of a document to say such a thing. That is not to give away anything at all. However, there is a recognition that the industry will be with us for some time to come and that the worst of all worlds would be to lose the skills base on which it will continue to depend, so the future lies in that territory.

I want to return to the point that the Bill is relatively narrow; it is an enabling Bill. It will provide parliamentary authority for the Government to incur expenditure on British Energy, which is necessary in case the company goes into administration. It will amend the Electricity Act 1989 to remove the ceiling on the financial system in relation to nuclear energy, and it will ensure that the Government can acquire British Energy's operating companies if it goes into administration. Those are the narrow purposes of the Bill.

Dr. Ladyman: An issue that has not been touched upon at all in the debate is how we move forward to a hydrogen economy, so that we can really start to make an impact on carbon emissions. How would we achieve a hydrogen economy without a continuing and successful British Energy and a continuing and successful nuclear power industry?

Mr. Wilson: I do not want to second-guess what you might say, Mr. Speaker, but I suspect that one of the reasons why that issue has not been touched on is that it is not the subject of the debate, but, as always, my hon. Friend makes a valuable and constructive point.

I want to try to answer some of the specific points that have been made. The hon. Member for Reigate seemed to blame BNFL for British Energy's difficulties. We had a little bit of an exchange about that, and I utterly refute what he says. I stress that the agreement that BNFL and British Energy eventually reach will be similar to that which the companies discussed last year. It ultimately became clear last year that BNFL could have done nothing on its own that would have been sufficient to help British Energy, given the company's position at the time.

As I said, I find the Tories' support for administration strange, but that is their business. For our part, we responded to the company's plan for solvent restructuring. We assessed its implications with our financial advisers, and decided that we would play our part and support it. Administration has always remained an option for the company if its plan did not succeed. Whatever route we go down, British Energy's historic costs will be borne by the Government, and we know that there is not exactly a queue of buyers waiting to acquire the company. As the Opposition story unfolded, I waited for the final chapter, in which, with one leap, they would be free by telling us who are the mysterious people who are going to take the company out of administration—I am still waiting to hear. That reaffirms the point that it would have been irresponsible of this Government to push or to seek to push the company into administration.

We have already pointed out that stations generate more revenue than their operating costs, and I am surprised that anyone even questions that—it is a pretty straightforward calculation. Because of the high capital costs of nuclear power stations, the operating costs are relatively marginal, and the revenue generated by every station outweighs them. As I said at the outset, it would be economic madness to shut the stations down and lose the revenue. I extrapolated from that that because it is economic madness—although it has a certain populous ring to it—it defines the economic policy of the Liberal Democrats.

I also want to take issue with the hon. Member for Reigate about the Bruce station in Canada. He was the first to point out the risks involved in the leaseholder of the Bruce station repossessing the plant in the event of administration. I stress, however, that the decision to dispose of Bruce Power was not imposed as a condition of Government support and was taken by British Energy in October to preserve value against the risk that I have just highlighted.

While it seemed at one point that we would have rather long winding-up speeches, we are now having fairly short ones. I will undertake to write to other hon. Members who have raised substantive points tonight.

Mr. Barron: The major issue in this small Bill is that of lifting the ceiling or cap that is set in schedule 12 of the original 1989 Act from £2.5 billion to whatever figure is decided. Is my hon. Friend secure in the knowledge that, whatever money the industry receives, given that it is in the private sector, it will be used solely for the liabilities left by the industry and not for other things?

Mr. Wilson: The sums to which my right hon. Friend refers are for historic liabilities. That point was well made by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, who made a good contribution to the debate. A distinction is made between historic costs and future operating costs, which must be borne by the industry and the company.

Earlier, someone said that waiting for the White Paper was like waiting for Godot. After this debate, we can rework that cliché, and say that it is like waiting for the shadow Secretary of State to come through the door. Sadly, he has still not arrived. This is an essential, pragmatic, good Bill to deal with a situation that is not of our making. I commend it to the House.

Question put, That the Bill be now read the Second time:—

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Speaker: I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 314, Noes 167.

Division No. 66] **[9:59 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Barron, rh Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, rh Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Burnside, David
Byers, rh Stephen
Caborn, rh Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, rh Dr. Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, rh Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Godsiff, Roger
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*

Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hermon, Lady
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Hutton, rh John
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S.
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, rh Michael
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, rh Estelle
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Prescott, rh John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vaz, Keith *(Leicester E)*
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James *(Glasgow Baillieston)*
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jim Fitzpatrick and Dan Norris

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baker, Norman
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Barrett, John
Beith, rh A. J.
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, rh Virginia *(SW Surrey)*
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chidgey, David
Clappison, James
Clarke, rh Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James *(Beverley)*
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dorrell, rh Stephen
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Greenway, John
Gummer, rh John
Hammond, Philip
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Heald, O[illegible]
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hendry, Charles
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*

Howard, rh Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Loughton, Tim
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
Maples, John
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Portillo, rh Michael
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Hugh Robertson and
Mr. Desmond Swayne

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That at this day's sitting the Motion relating to Select Committees in the name of Mr Robin Cook may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

Question put and agreed to.

ELECTRICITY (MISCELLANOUS PROVISIONS) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Orders [28 June 2001 and 29 October 2002],

That the following provisions shall apply to the Electricity (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill:

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee, on Report and on Third Reading

2.—(1) Proceedings in Committee, any proceedings on consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be completed at one day's sitting.

(2) Proceedings in Committee, and any proceedings on consideration, shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

Other proceedings

3. Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments or any further messages from the Lords) may be programmed.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

The House divided: Ayes 311, Noes 167.

Division No. 67] **[10:17 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Barron, rh Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, rh Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, rh Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Byers, rh Stephen
Caborn, rh Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, rh Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, rh Dr. Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, rh Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings & Rye)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel

Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Godsiff, Roger
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Hutton, rh John
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Kaufman, rh Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S.
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, rh Michael
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, rh Estelle
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Prescott, rh John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vaz, Keith *(Leicester E)*
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James *(Glasgow Baillieston)*
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jim Fitzpatrick and
Dan Norris

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bacon, Richard
Baker, Norman
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John *(Billericay)*
Barrett, John
Beggs, Roy *(E Antrim)*
Beith, rh A. J.
Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, rh Virginia *(SW Surrey)*
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burt, Alistair
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chidgey, David
Clappison, James
Clarke, rh Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Cotter, Brian
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dorrell, rh Stephen
Doughty, Sue
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick *(Bognor Regis)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian *(Ashford)*
Greenway, John
Hammond, Philip
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Heald, Oliver

Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John *(Orpington)*
Howard, rh Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert *(Salisbury)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
Maples, John
Mawhinney, rh Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Portillo, rh Michael
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Selous, Andrew
Shephard, rh Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(M-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thurso, John
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Tim *(S Suffolk)*
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Desmond Swayne and Hugh Robertson

Question accordingly agreed to.

ELECTRICITY (MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL [MONEY]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Electricity (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred with the approval of the Treasury by the Secretary of State with a view to or in connection with—

(a) the provision by the Secretary of State of financial assistance to British Energy plc or any company which either is or immediately before the passing of the Act was a subsidiary of British Energy plc (within the meaning of the Companies Act 1985);

(b) the acquisition by the Secretary of State or his nominee or by a Crown company of—

(i) any securities of any of those companies;

(ii) any part of the undertaking or assets of any of those companies;

(c) the carrying on of any undertaking acquired as mentioned in paragraph (b)(ii) or any undertaking using assets so acquired; and

(2) any increase in the sums payable out of money so provided under Schedule 12 to the Electricity Act 1989 which is attributable to the repeal by the Bill of paragraph 4 of that Schedule or to any other amendment of that Schedule.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

Question agreed to.

Select Committees

10.33 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): I beg to move,

That—

(1) Standing Order No. 152 (Select Committees related to Government departments) be amended as follows:

In the Table

Item 7, column 2, leave out from 'Office;' to 'and administration' in line 7 of that item;

After item 8 insert—

'Lord Chancellor's Department	Lord Chancellor's Department (including the work of staff provided for the administrative work of courts and tribunals, but excluding consideration of individual cases and appointments)	11';

and

(2) the Order of 5th November 2001 relating to Liaison Committee (Membership) be amended as follows: Paragraph (2), after 'International Development' insert 'Lord Chancellor's Department'.

With the leave of the House, I should like to introduce this simple motion, which seeks to establish a new departmental Select Committee to scrutinise the Lord Chancellor's Department. Paragraph (2) provides that the Chairman of the new Committee will be a member of the Liaison Committee. I commend the motion to the House.

10.34 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): That is all very well, but I think that the motion deserves more attention from the House than that. Of course, a case can be made for an additional Select Committee—I am sure that hon. Members will agree that the work of our Select Committees is of great importance—but it should not be so straightforward. Setting up a new Select Committee is not merely an administrative whim, but something of importance to the House and the taxpayer—a point that I shall touch on in a moment.

The case for setting up the Committee is relatively straightforward. One has only to glance at the list of ministerial responsibilities to appreciate the extent of those of the Lord Chancellor's Department. They cover matters as diverse as the constitution, criminal justice and the courts. When we talk about courts, we immediately involve our constituents. Although the Lord Chancellor, who presides over the Department, is a Member of the other place, he has responsibilities that bear directly on the constituents of all hon. Members.

I was surprised that the Electoral Commission was listed as one of the responsibilities of the Lord Chancellor's Department. Why the Lord Chancellor, magnificent though he undoubtedly is, should preside over the Electoral Commission, which deals with elections and is, one would think, our responsibility, is a subject on which we might want to dwell, perhaps not now but on another occasion. Perhaps that could be the first subject that the Select Committee considers.

Perhaps even more surprisingly, the Department is responsible for party funding. The responsibilities of the Lord Chancellor and his Department cover a remarkably wide range of activities, many of which are of direct interest to hon. Members and our constituents.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): It is not so surprising that the Department is responsible for party funding. My right hon. Friend will recall that the Lord Chancellor has been intimately involved with that subject.

Mr. Forth: I hope that my hon. Friend will expand on that in the debate, for which, unusually, we have unlimited time. There is therefore ample opportunity for hon. Members to examine such aspects of the Lord Chancellor's responsibilities in detail.

There is adequate rationale for the House to try to become involved through a Select Committee in the Lord Chancellor's Department. However, the remit is even wider, because the motion contains a teasing reference. In describing matters that the Select Committee covers, it refers to

> "Lord Chancellor's Department (including the work of staff provided for the administrative work of courts and tribunals, but excluding consideration of individual cases and appointments)".

I assume that that is origin of the intriguing piece in *The Times* today, which is headed, "Tribunal move to double Irvine's empire". It explains that the Lord Chancellor's Department, which is currently an astonishing 12,000 strong, will increase to some 25,000 by 2006–07. That provides a further rationale, if we needed it, for establishing the proposed Select Committee. The remit of the Lord Chancellor's Department will apparently be expanded to cover all tribunals in the country, with a staff of no fewer than 25,000 souls. It is difficult to imagine 25,000 people at the beck and call of the Lord Chancellor; that is a scary thought.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): My right hon. Friend eloquently outlines the destruction of the local basis of much of our business. The decision, which the Select Committee will doubtless examine early, to centralise all the staff who are currently employed by local magistrates courts committees will take the vital filter for advice to our local magistrates service away from the committees and hand it over to a central bureaucracy.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making point. It shows that, for all the Government's rhetoric and spin about decentralisation and local responsibility, the reality is different. My hon. Friend gives a classic example. Huge and growing central bureaucracies are being created and they are reaching out with their tentacles to every aspect of local life and our local communities. The worst aspect of all is that the Lord Chancellor will be at the head of one of those gigantic bureaucracies. That is another clear-cut case of why we in the House should have a Select Committee to examine the proceedings of the Lord Chancellor's Department.

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): My right hon. Friend will have seen on page 38 of the list of ministerial responsibilities, the Law Officers' Department—that of the Attorney-General and the Solicitor-General. Will my right hon. Friend invite the Minister to say whether the responsibilities of that Department are to be scrutinised by this Select Committee, another Select Committee or no Select Committee at all?

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I hope that the Minister might seek to catch your eye, Madam

Deputy Speaker, and, with the leave of the House, respond to the debate, as he was obviously reluctant—embarrassed, probably—to go into too much detail about why the proposal has been introduced. I hope that, through your good graces, he might answer the question that my hon. Friend has just put. There is a genuine question whether there is a Select Committee covering the Law Officers' Department, although I shall make a few comments on the desirability of increasing the number of Select Committees per se.

In passing, I utter a word of warning to the House. In this case there is, as I have suggested, ample justification for the new Select Committee. However, we voted last year to pay Select Committee Chairmen—I support that, and I think I am right in saying that the matter is with the Senior Salaries Review Body, which will, I expect, report to the Leader of the House in the foreseeable future—so taxpayers might be forgiven a touch of cynicism if they were to think, although I hope that none would, that we are in the business of increasing the number of Select Committees in order to increase the number of chairmanships in order to pay ourselves or some of our lucky colleagues higher salaries. That, of course, would not and could not be the case, but it might just flit across the odd taxpayer's mind, hanging as they are on every word of the debate.

Mr. Swayne: Given the breadth of responsibilities that the Committee will encompass, has my right hon. Friend given some thought to the large number of travel opportunities that could arise?

Mr. Forth: I was just about to come to that point. I am probably giving away a trade secret in saying this, so I shall lower my voice in the hope that it does not travel too far: recently, there has been a request for an increase in the Select Committee travel budget. One reason given for that is that we are increasing the number of such Committees. The logic, I suppose, is in some ways inexorable—more Committees, more need for travel. One begins to see a picture building up of a House of Commons voting itself more Select Committees with more Members wanting to travel more to more countries around the world for more fact finding.

I would have thought that those colleagues who are familiar with e-matters know that people can surf to their heart's delight, chat in ghastly rooms and do all sorts of other e-things and that that virtually eliminates the need for Select Committee travel. But not at all. Even those colleagues who are cyber freaks, familiar with the e-world, seem still to feel the need to travel extensively to do their fact finding, but that is a matter for another day.

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): A visit to the Lord Chancellor's apartment so that its members may see how public money was spent on the wallpaper would be a relatively cheap travel opportunity for the Select Committee. Given that the Leader of the House is such a good friend of the Lord Chancellor, he could arrange it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. The scope of the debate does not extend as far as the hon. Gentleman might wish.

Mr. Forth: Fortunately, Madam Deputy Speaker, I was not going to talk about wallpaper, as that is perhaps a matter for another day. I hope, however, that the House pays at least some attention to the point I am making. We want to be careful about how far we go in the direction that we are now taking. It will be important to justify each new Select Committee strictly on its merits and to give no hint that we are creating it for any other reason.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): There is one serious and worrying point to make. There is a question of possible interference by the new Committee in judicial appointments. It is axiomatic in our constitution that Parliament should not become involved in judicial appointments. Has that concern flitted across my right hon. Friend's mind?

Mr. Forth: It would have, but for the fact that the motion says that the Committee's work will be

"including the work of staff provided for the administrative work of courts and tribunals, but excluding consideration of individual cases and appointments".

I hope that that covers my hon. Friend's point. I would share his concern if there were any hint that Members of the House, even under the aegis of a Select Committee, would seek to involve themselves in the sort matters to which he referred. I hope, and believe, at this stage, that the motion's wording gives sufficient security against that.

As far as I know, we only ever increase the number of Select Committees. I do not think that we seek ever to reduce it. There may well be a good case for increases, as there is on this occasion, but is this a one-way process? Can we only ever increase the number of Select Committees? Might there not, with the passage of time, be occasions on which we would be justified in saying that the work of a Committee was otiose or redundant, or that one Committee could be readily combined with another? In that way, we could reduce the number of chairmanships and the amount of travel and give the taxpayer some relief.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): Along those lines, does my right hon. Friend agree that one answer might be to use the same solution that the Government have available to them when it comes to deciding how many Ministers they may have and pay? Would not putting a ceiling on the number of paid Chairmen of Select Committees meet my right hon. Friend's point?

Mr. Forth: That is a possible approach. Putting an arbitrary statutory limit on the number of Select Committees and having to prioritise within that number might well be the way forward.

I am worried that we have a tendency only ever to expand our role and the institutions, and therefore costs, of the House of Commons. It would be more responsible to look at ourselves much more critically. We are, after all, the custodians of the taxpayers' purse. We represent taxpayers and are supposed to be here to scrutinise not only the Government's expenditure but our own. In that spirit, although I believe that there is ample justification for the setting up of the Select Committee proposed tonight, I hope that such an action will not be seen as automatic, axiomatic or something that can be put through simply on the nod.

[Mr. Forth]

I recommend the motion to the House and to my colleagues but add that we must be ever vigilant against further suggestions that we should increase the number of Select Committees. Someone, somewhere—perhaps the Liaison Committee—will have to take a good look at that.

Mr. Leigh: I want to explore further the point that I raised earlier. Although the new Select Committee may not become involved in the appointment of a judge, we constantly receive complaints about judges, which we refer to the Lord Chancellor's Department. He often replies telling us that he cannot interfere in judges' work, and our constituents write back to us again. Might not Parliament try to become more involved in what judges do in their courts, and does that not worry my right hon. Friend?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is on to an important point. I was satisfied that the Select Committee could not interfere in the appointment of judges, but given that the Lord Chancellor is ultimately responsible for our judicial system, there is a distinct possibility that it will inevitably become involved in cases in which, for example, there have been complaints about judicial matters or other matters that should be strictly for the courts. I am not sure that I know the answer. Perhaps we should have foreseen that and sought to amend the motion. The best that I can offer my hon. Friend is that we, as a House of Commons, will have to keep a close watching brief on the Select Committee and how it conducts itself to guard against any temptation to do what he suggested might happen.

Mr. Swayne: I sense that my right hon. Friend wants to move on, but he has urged us to support the motion. In view of what he said earlier about the ratchet effect, can he reassure me in respect of the Select Committee on Public Administration—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We are not debating the Public Administration Committee.

Mr. Swayne: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Would it be in order to draw attention to the fact that some of the responsibilities taken on by the Lord Chancellor's departmental Committee, as proposed, are currently matters that come before the Public Administration Committee?

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order for the Chair.

Mr. Forth: If what my hon. Friend states were the case, I am sure that the Chairman of the Public Administration Committee either would have sought to amend the motion or would have been here to take part in the debate. Since neither event has happened, I must assume that he is content.

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight): I return to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), with which my right hon. Friend was inclined to agree. Would it not be more appropriate for a Committee of this House to scrutinise judicial appointments than to leave them wholly in the hands of the Lord Chancellor?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is getting into some interesting territory. That is the kind of matter that may well emerge in a different form from the debates about the reform of the House of Lords and the role that the Law Lords play. There is undoubtedly a case for having a separate supreme court. Following that, there may well be a case for considering the election of judges rather than their appointment, and so on. But, Madam Deputy Speaker, this is not the occasion for that debate. I detect from your demeanour that were we to pursue this matter at all—never mind much further—we would get into some trouble. I take a certain pride in the fact that I am rarely called to order; I do not say that it never happens, but it happens relatively rarely, even when I am tempted by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner).

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole) *rose*—

Mr. Forth: I hope that my hon. Friend is not going to tempt me to stray, but I will give way to him. Then I really must sit down.

Mr. Syms: As the Lord Chancellor's Department is responsible for the judicial system in England and Wales, will my right hon. Friend consider whether the membership of the Committee should consist only of English and Welsh Members rather than those from, say, north of the border?

Mr. Forth: You know better than I, Madam Deputy Speaker, that there will be a separate motion to consider membership. It is not a matter for today and my hon. Friend might like to consider the sensible point that he has raised in the context of that further debate. I believe that there is an amendment on the Order Paper that will allow him to deal with that very matter, since it touches on what he suggests.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I have listened to this claptrap, which is demeaning Parliament, particularly since so many Conservative Members are great travellers. On this point, the Lord Chancellor does not cover Scotland, but he certainly covers Northern Ireland, where he makes all the judicial appointments.

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman's charm school refresher course does not seem to have done him much good. In trying to be helpful to my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms), I said that a future debate would touch on the matter that he raised and allow it to be aired in a more relevant way. If the hon. Gentleman is going to get so tetchy at this time of night, he should go home earlier.

I hope that I have made the case for supporting the establishment of the new Select Committee, but I hope equally that, in future, we shall be careful not to rush too far, too readily or too frequently in such directions.

10.55 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am sure that the House will be relieved to hear that I shall speak briefly.

When I saw the motion on the Order Paper, I had a hunch that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) would want to speak. No doubt he has been wrestling with the temptation all day. The right hon. Gentleman has a Pavlovian reaction; the magic words "until any hour", especially at 10 o'clock, always encourage him to be in his place, although he may not be there earlier in the day when we are discussing matters that require longer and more careful scrutiny.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, must feel that, given the terms in which the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst has just expressed his support, it would have been preferable to have the right hon. Gentleman's opposition—it might have been shorter. However, I hope that the whole House will support the motion. I notice that the Conservative ranks have suddenly diminished, so perhaps an advantage of my speech is that I have cleared them out of the House.

We are delighted that the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, is in the Chamber this evening. The key issue is that there is a lacuna at present. The Lord Chancellor's Department has taken on important responsibilities. It is extremely important that when a Department of State has a wide range of responsibilities, there is a corresponding Committee of the House that can monitor its activities.

As the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst pointed out, in addition to its judicial responsibilities and its responsibilities for the law offices, the Department has important responsibilities for the way in which our constitution operates and for its future. The Electoral Commission and party funding are just part of that remit. It is thus extremely important that the Department has the attention of Members of the House through the scrutiny that only a Select Committee can give. Hitherto, the Select Committee on Home Affairs had most of the responsibilities in this field and its Chairman, the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), suggested that given the Committee's responsibilities to the Home Office, it was time to deal with the omission as regards the Lord Chancellor's Department.

We strongly support the motion and recommend its acceptance. We hope that the Select Committee will be up and running shortly. Through no one's fault, we have had a long wait for it. Since the last general election and certainly since the last reshuffle, which gave the Lord Chancellor's Department new responsibilities, it has been suggested that there should be a Select Committee. We believe that the new Select Committee has an important duty to perform on behalf of the whole House.

10.58 pm

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): The agencies of the Lord Chancellor's Department, such as the Land Registry, the Public Record Office, the Court Service and the Public Guardianship Office deserve attention from a Select Committee—not in opposition to the Government but to raise some of the issues that Members of Parliament and their constituents face when dealing with the systemic success or failure of parts of the Department.

We should recognise that some of the ministerial responsibilities of the Lord Chancellor and the Parliamentary Secretaries merit the attention of the Select Committee—in which I have an interest—in terms of either support or questioning. The Committee could get Ministers and their leading officials to justify their approach to matters that affect people the length and breadth of the land.

One might make a series of party political points, but they would not be appropriate at present. It is important to realise that all Departments, including the Lord Chancellor's Department, and Government agencies have serious responsibilities.

To refer to one of the remarks made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), we have too many Departments and it is not sensible to load responsibility for matters such as information technology on to Under-Secretaries in each Department. It is not sensible to tie such responsibilities to a junior Minister, when we do not get a cross-cutting Government report on what is happening with IT across the board. Such a report need not be in great depth, but just enough depth so that people can understand. One could take up various issues if there were a way to use perhaps the Liaison Committee to talk to the Prime Minister about unpacking some of the public relations spin that the Government put out.

This motion is overdue. Although the Select Committee may not be the most exciting in terms of the television cameras and the microphones, there will be possible benefits to the population. If the Lord Chancellor's Department and its agencies are helped to carry out their responsibilities, the public at large will benefit. There are degrees of justice and injustice in the Department's purview that deserve attention, which is why I hope the House will support the motion.

11 pm

Mr. Mark Francois (Rayleigh): I should like to make just a few points in contributing to the debate. First, the proposed Select Committee will have a particular responsibility, because it will attempt to shadow a Department, the principal Minister of which is based in the other place and therefore unable to answer questions on the Floor of the House. Apropos of that, it is worth recalling that in last week's debate on House of Lords reform, a very interesting suggestion was made: that it might be possible to change the arrangements of the House. The hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) is nodding. In fairness, he may have made that suggestion.

Andrew Mackinlay: It was one of my good ideas, which will not be implemented in my lifetime—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Francois: If I recall correctly, to do the hon. Gentleman justice, he suggested that it might be possible to change our arrangements, by mutual agreement between both Houses, to allow Ministers in another place to come here occasionally to answer questions.

[Mr. Francois]

I presume that that would be reciprocated in turn. That interesting suggestion bears further examination, and it is worth putting it on record again in the context of this evening's debate, perhaps to try to keep the suggestion alive, as it could be valuable.

Secondly, I should like to reiterate some of the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) about the dangers of the so-called ratchet effect. We are not here this evening to debate the economic condition of the country, but having read the business pages of the national newspapers, it is fair to say that the economic conditions are now turning a little more difficult than they were a year or so ago—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is right: we are not here to discuss the economic conditions of the country. Perhaps he will return to the motion under discussion.

Mr. Francois: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am pleased that we both agree. However, the point is that at a time when people will be looking more closely at how we in Parliament spend their money, it is very important that we can justify to all our constituents that we spend it effectively. If they see more and more Select Committees taking more and more overseas trips—in effect, ultimately, at their expense—there is a risk that they will grow increasingly irritated.

It is fair to say that the Select Committee might be tempted to travel the world to see other judicial systems in action—perhaps those in Europe, the United States and Asia to cite three examples off the top of my head—to compare them with our own. The Select Committee, if it is established, will therefore have to show restraint in that regard. May I say briefly in my own defence that the Select Committee on which I serve—the Environmental Audit Committee—has been particularly abstemious in that regard. We have had one overseas trip—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Once again, I remind the hon. Gentleman that the motion relates to the proposed Select Committee's terms of reference.

Mr. Francois: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. In that case, I shall not mention that the Environmental Audit Committee spent two nights in Germany at very small public expense.

Another issue is that the Chairman of the proposed Select Committee will, of course, be a member of the Liaison Committee. That will give its Chairman a right to ask the Prime Minister questions at the sittings that will be arranged from time to time. The practical issue is that I am given to understand that there is some friendly competition and jockeying of position among the various Committee Chairmen about who gets the chance—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We are not discussing the membership of the Committee, but merely the establishment of it.

Mr. Francois: I shall abide by your stricture, Madam Deputy Speaker. My sole point was that there would be more competition over who got to ask the question.

On modernisation, since the introduction of the changes, there has been tremendous pressure on all of us—even more than previously—to be in two or even three places at once. I notice that that issue even cropped up in the national press over the weekend. Establishing yet another Select Committee, on which some Members will wish to serve, increases the pressure on Members across the House to be in even more places at once. That additional pressure results from the introduction of changes by the Leader of the House, and the establishment of this Committee will impose an additional burden.

Mr. John McWilliam (Blaydon): Is the hon. Gentleman arguing that we should not have another Select Committee to scrutinise public expenditure that has not heretofore been scrutinised?

Mr. Francois: I am attempting to make the point that if we create an additional Select Committee, and we appoint Members to it, that will increase the pressure on those Members to be in different places at once during the week. All Members are experiencing that pressure as a result of the changes.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Once again, we are not this evening discussing the membership of the Committee.

Mr. Francois: I was simply doing my best to respond to the question that was asked of me, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am not responsible for the questions that are asked.

Peter Bottomley: If my hon. Friend looks at the list of ministerial responsibilities on page 41, he will see that one Under-Secretary—not one on the Front Bench now—has responsibility for freedom of information. If Members were criticised for not being in the House, would it be fair for that Under-Secretary to be on the Bench the whole time, while the number of MPs, journalists—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. That intervention is not relevant to this debate, either.

Mr. Francois: I know that this question is close to the heart of the Leader of the House because of the close and fraternal relationship that he enjoys with the Lord Chancellor. I am therefore sure that he will read our deliberations with tremendous interest in *Hansard* tomorrow morning, and that he will be forever grateful for everything that we have had to say about his noble Friend.

11.8 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): I want to refer specifically to the motion. It refers to

"consideration of individual cases and appointments".

Thus it specifies "individual cases", but does not qualify "appointments". The value of these debates comes from Parliament doing its duty: we are trying to tease out from the Minister exactly what the Select Committee will do. I am sure that the Minister will be able to assure me that although the word "appointments" is not qualified, the Committee will not be allowed to consider individual appointments. I think that he is nodding, but he can take up the matter when he makes his speech. Does that mean that the Committee can consider the question of judicial appointments in general? That would be a way in for the Committee, as it could argue that it is considering a certain type of person. There has been a lot of criticism from certain parts of the House about judicial appointments in relation to background and being out of touch. It is therefore important that the House knows exactly what is the Committee's remit in relation to appointments, as the Minister's words will be scrutinised with great care.

Secondly, as my right hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House has said, the motion also refers to

"the administrative work of courts and tribunals".

Will the Minister also lay down the ground rules clearly in relation to that when he replies? On reading that, one will think that it is absolutely clear: the Committee will not become involved in appointments; it will not become involved in what the judges are deciding in their courts; it will be involved only in administrative work.

However, I put to the Minister the point that I put to my right hon. Friend: our constituents write to us and complain about judges; we reply "I'm sorry. Parliament cannot interfere in the discretion of judges." I am in a long-running correspondence in which my constituent says "I'm complaining not about the judge's decision, but about his demeanour. He was out of touch. He wasn't listening to the arguments."

Therefore, I should like a clear steer from the Minister that the Committee really will be concerned with the pure administrative work, and that nothing in the wording of the motion will give a lead for it to start interfering in the way in which judges are running their own courts.

11.10 pm

Mr. Bradshaw: With the leave of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am tempted to agree with the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) that, although no one has spoken against the motion, one reason why we are here has more to do with the withdrawal symptoms of the shadow Leader of the House from his previous late-night sittings—

Mr. Tyler: Something of the night.

Mr. Bradshaw: Absolutely.

It might be helpful if I reminded the House why this matter is before us. It is because of a unanimous recommendation of the Home Affairs Committee. Much of what the right hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends have said this evening has been about the powers—some of them real and some of them imagined, some of them possibly in the future—of the Lord Chancellor's Department. But are they suggesting that those powers should not receive proper parliamentary scrutiny? No, they are not, because the right hon. Gentleman himself said that he supported the setting up of the Committee. Indeed, the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) said, I think rightly, that it was overdue. Therefore, I think that we can all agree on the importance of setting up the Committee. We are not here to discuss setting up any other Select Committees or the Committee's membership. It is a simple motion.

I should like to address the point raised at the end of the debate by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh). I am assured by the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), who is with me on the Front Bench, that he is right. The Committee will not be scrutinising the appointment of individual judges, but, in as far as the Lord Chancellor's Department oversees the work of the Appointments Commission, it may have a role in scrutinising overall the work of the Commission in terms of how the Lord Chancellor's Department already does so.

There is nothing more I need add to delay the House further.

Peter Bottomley: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I hope that the microphones carried the question of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) to the Minister about whether the Select Committee that we are debating, or any other, oversees the work of the Law Officers.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Mr. Bradshaw: I am happy to respond, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am told that that competence remains with the Home Affairs Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees),

RECOGNITION AND ENFORCEMENT OF JUDGEMENTS IN MATRIMONIAL MATTERS AND IN MATTERS OF PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

That this House takes note of European Union Documents No. 8395/02, draft Council Regulation concerning jurisdiction and the recognition and enforcement of judgments in matrimonial matters and in matters of parental responsibility repealing Regulation (EC) No. 1347/2000 and amending Regulation (EC) No. 44/2001 in matters relating to maintenance, and the unnumbered explanatory memoranda of 14 November 2002 and 9 January 2003 from the Lord Chancellor's Department and Scottish Executive Justice Department on the Presidency proposals for amendment of the draft Regulation; supports the underlying aim of extending the principle of mutual recognition to decisions on parental responsibility by establishing a clear and coherent set of rules for attributing jurisdiction, and putting in place arrangements for co-operation between the courts and central authorities of the Member States; considers that the proposed amendments would achieve the objectives of the United Kingdom in relation to child abduction; and welcomes the reinforcement of support for the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction whilst providing Community measures to supplement its provisions to enable enhanced European co-operation against the wrongful removal and retention of children.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): I propose to put together the Questions on the two motions.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Scotland Act 1998 (Transfer of Functions to the Scottish Ministers etc.) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 12th December, be approved.

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 18th December, be approved.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Madam Deputy Speaker: With permission, I shall put together motions 8 and 9.

Ordered,

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

That Mr Mark Hoban be discharged from the Science and Technology Committee and Mr Robert Key be added to the Committee.

TREASURY

That Kali Mountford be discharged from the Treasury Committee and Angela Eagle be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. John McWilliam, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

PETITION

Health Choice

11.14 pm

Lady Hermon (North Down): I have the great pleasure of presenting what I believe to the first petition from Northern Ireland on herbal medicines. The 136 signatures have been collected in my constituency by Mr. James O'Brien, who has been the proprietor for 25 years of the health store At Harvest in Bangor, County Down, of which I am a customer.

The petition reads:

"The petition of consumers for health choice and its supporters,

Declares that consumers in the United Kingdom have for many years maintained good health by choosing to take safe vitamin and mineral supplements and herbal remedies; and fears that the European food supplements directive and the proposed European directive on traditional herbal medicinal products would severely restrict the number and range of such products on general retail sale in the future.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons requires that the Secretary of State for Health does all in his power to protect the rights of UK consumers by ensuring that such European legislation does not unnecessarily and unacceptably restrict the availability of natural health products."

To lie upon the Table.

Disabled Facilities Grants

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Charlotte Atkins.]*

11.15 pm

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): The reason for my seeking this Adjournment debate is to highlight a problem that is well known to every Member of the House, and to suggest some solutions, which entail a co-ordinated approach being taken by Government, and spending that triggers longer-term savings. What I am after is fast-track access to a Government-backed incentive scheme for the installation of level-access showers as a major contribution to the goal of independent living for everyone.

Poor housing is sometimes seen as a Cinderella issue in the House, yet we all know that comfortable homes make for better health, safer communities, more independence and increased dignity of life. I am focusing on a particular aspect of the home: the need, and I suggest that it should really be seen as a right, for everyone to be able to bathe daily in warm water in their own home. Access to hot water is recognised as an emergency repair for landlords, but the hot water is no use if the individual cannot get in and out of their bath.

This is a particularly Anglo-Saxon problem. In warmer countries on the continent, and indeed in many parts of the developing world, showers—level-access showers—with the drain in the floor are the norm. In England, however, lounging in the bath became fashionable, so much so that the bath became a far more accepted piece of bathroom furniture than a shower. The problem was made worse when showers became fashionable because they were always installed over a bath, so that the stiff joints and infirmity that prevent access to the bath also prevent access to the shower. Surely in these days of central heating we could follow the example of warmer countries and redesign our bathrooms.

How many of us in the House have letters from constituents pleading for help? I quote from one:

> "My husband is 80 and I am 78. There is no way I can help him in and out of the bath as I am only 4ft 10."

How many constituents are there whom we never hear from but who are struggling with a daily wash at the basin in a chilly bathroom because they are unable to climb into the bath, but have never applied for an adaptation? The number of friends to whom I have spoken about this debate who have had a friend or relative in that situation has certainly surprised me. How often have we had profuse letters of thanks from disabled people whose life has been transformed by the installation of a level-access shower?

More seriously, how often have we heard from constituents whose application has been turned down? A housing office turned down a constituent of mine

> "because she said he was able to have a strip wash and was not incontinent."

It is commonplace for such cases to be classed as non-urgent, and even if people apply for help they can wait for years before they are considered for a bathroom conversion. The delays can mount up.

The first problem is discovering how to make the application. Some 30 per cent. of those questioned in the Joseph Rowntree survey in August 2001 had a problem gaining access to a disability grant. The second problem is waiting for an assessment. In many authorities, that has to be carried out by an occupational therapist, but they are in short supply, which can lead to a wait of eight months or more.The time that it takes for the occupational therapist to submit a report and for the authority to consider the recommendation can vary widely. If the recommendation is yes, there is another wait for the builder to assess and carry out the work; but if the answer is no, because the individual can manage a strip wash, the application may become non-urgent and take an additional 18 months at least. I have known people to wait three years: that is simply not acceptable in the new century.

Some 1,370 individuals are waiting for bathroom adaptations in Sheffield alone; some 658 of them are classed as non-urgent. The council recently allocated a welcome additional £500,000 to reduce the numbers, but I am not sure how that will affect the non-urgent cases. The 2001 Joseph Rowntree survey found that the most common reason for applications for major adaptations is the inability to bathe. Age Concern found that nearly a quarter of applicants mention bathing as the main reason for needing alterations to their homes.

I believe that I am speaking to a Minister who is sympathetic to my argument. The Government recognise that people want to live in their own homes and communities as they get older and are a little more unsteady. They also know that moving to residential establishments can be distressing, sad and hard for relatives and carers. The Minister's colleagues in the health team also have a huge interest in speeding up the number of bathroom adaptations to relieve the problem of bed blocking. The Community Care (Delayed Discharges Etc) Bill, which recently went through the House, has put pressure on local authorities to respond, but speed is crucial when a hospital bed is needed by someone else. It is often the bathing facility at home that is the biggest block to a patient's discharge from hospital.

In preparing for the debate, in addition to speaking to my constituents I consulted the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians, the Federation of Master Builders, the Institute of Plumbing, the Bathroom Manufacturers Association, Age Concern, both locally and nationally, the National Housing Federation, the Chartered Institute of Housing, Shelter, public health officers, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, disability organisations, Barnado's, which had specific concerns about disabled children, Sheffield local authority and its social services department, and the local primary care health trusts. They all gave me wholehearted support.

I want to attack the issue from two directions. Clearly there are ways in which we can make the grant systems more accessible and better funded, but if bathrooms were normally designed to include a level-access shower, rather than one over the bath, the problem would be hugely eased. Just as in the 1980s, when the provision by the Government of insulation grants for owner occupiers or private and public landlords raised the standards for all housing and made a significant input into energy savings across the country, a more universal approach to level-access showers in our bathrooms could make all our houses last as our homes for longer.

[Helen Jackson]

I pay tribute to the movement for lifetime homes, which is to be wholly supported. In one of its press releases it quotes someone as saying:

> "The ability to gain access to the whole house is wonderful. I'm no longer a prisoner"

in my own home. The pepper-pot approach to funding one-off bathroom adaptations is not as good value for money as further reform of building regulations and house improvement regulations that assume that bathroom design will include a sealed corner with a plug in the floor and a shower in the wall. It is a little like the proponents of diesel motor cars who argue that if diesel fuel had been discovered first no one would ever have used petrol for the internal combustion engine. We should note that the high-level and rather posh bathroom design journals include pictures of children, elderly people, adults and families using level-access showers, making bathing easy and efficient for the whole family.

In consultation with interested bodies, we have discussed the way in which a level-access shower grant scheme could work. There could, for example, be a modest flat-rate grant for universal access subject to building regulation checks, which would offer an incentive to owner-occupiers, tenants and landlords alike. For many, a simple incentive contribution like the old insulation grant would be all that it would take for large-scale work to be done. The Government could also consider issuing further guidance on housing improvement schemes, whether in the private landlord or housing association sector, so that level-access showers were considered an element of the work normally undertaken, and consider providing a financial incentive to achieve that.

That incentive would be additional to the existing disabled facilities grant scheme for people whose disabilities or hospital discharge mean that their needs require urgent attention, or installing a shower could be combined with other extra building work throughout their home. Another aspect that the Government may consider is the need in every case for an occupational therapy assessment, as that often leads to delays. Perhaps we should recognise that a simple request for help is often all that we should require. There should be a clear directive from the Government to local authorities about what should be classed as non-urgent and a further reminder should be given about the mandatory nature of disability facility grants. In some areas, the requisite six-month period applies in the private sector but not where housing stock is publicly owned. I believe that that is the case in many of the larger metropolitan authorities. As the prospect of years of waiting drives people who have a little cash to spare to invest in the work anyway, the Government have a duty to offer an incentive. My constituent Mr Chisnall struggled for many months following his wife's stroke to get help so that work could be done. Eventually he had a shower installed at his own expense, and in his words it has "transformed their lives".

Finally, installing the showers would offer a stream of useful work for local accredited builders and plumbers. The Federation of Master Builders believes that the industry could cope and has made many useful suggestions about quality control, simplicity and speed. As we await the publication of the draft housing Bill and the draft disability Bill, the Government have a chance to consider how such a proposal may be developed. I would be delighted to meet the Minister again with some of the bodies that I have spoken to after this debate to consider the issues further. We can be quite certain about one thing—my proposal would receive active and enthusiastic support from the public throughout the country, and bodies working with the elderly, the disabled and disabled children. Like me, they believe that it is simply unacceptable in the 21st century to fail to ensure that everyone has the opportunity of a warm all-over wash or shower to maintain dignity and independence in their home.

11.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Tony McNulty): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) on securing a debate on such an important subject. I thank her for describing me as a sympathetic Minister. I hope that she still takes that view by the time that I have finished speaking. I am grateful to her not least for bringing to my attention the problems encountered by some of her disabled constituents in Sheffield concerning delays to the installation of level-access showers. I agree with her absolutely that those delays are wholly unacceptable. In this day and age, such facilities are an absolute must.

To pick up one of my hon. Friend's points, I should like to make it clear that the Government's overall position remains that access to a bath or shower is a mandatory right for disabled people who are eligible for a disabled facilities grant. We consider the grant programme to be very important in assisting disabled people to remain in their homes and live independently for as long as possible.

That is why, when we recently reviewed local authority powers to provide assistance for housing renovations and adaptations, we decided to keep DFG as a mandatory right for eligible applicants. That is also why we have kept the money ring-fenced; it can be used only to help the disabled. My hon. Friend will know that we have unhooked much of what we give to local government, but we felt that it was important to keep DFG ring-fenced. For all other types of renovation assistance, we have given—I think quite rightly—local authorities much greater local discretion on how their funds are allocated. We cannot send a message that such a grant should be a mandatory right for those disabled people eligible and at the same time somehow retain flexibility.

In addition to preserving the mandatory DFG, we have since coming to power significantly increased the resources available to the programme. The Government meet 60 per cent. of the grant paid by local authorities, which must find the remainder from elsewhere in their budgets. In 1997–98, central Government resources available for DFG totalled £56 million for England, but the budget for 2002–03 is £88 million.

Securing additional resources for the programme is also one of the priorities for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and we are considering it as part of our work on preparing the communities plan. We will announce our conclusions in the next few weeks as well as announcing the DFG allocations to local authorities for 2003–04.

The problems in delivering a first-class adaptations service go wider than the DFG programme. Both housing and social services authorities have responsibilities to meeting the needs of disabled people in their area, either for advice or for the provision of equipment or adaptations. There is therefore a need for close co-operation between the two departments, and Government guidance has stressed the need for jointly agreed policies and procedures on how the various services should be delivered. In general, as my hon. Friend has said, it has become established practice for social services to provide equipment and minor adaptations, and for the DFG programme to deliver major adaptations such as stair-lifts and level-access showers, which may require structural alterations.

All owner-occupiers and all tenants, including those of the local authority, are eligible to apply for DFG, but the Government do not subsidise the local authority to carry out work on its own stock, so it is important that the authority also budgets carefully and makes resources available to provide an adaptations service to its tenants that is at least as good as that to owner-occupiers.

The local housing authority has additional discretionary powers, which it can use to top up the mandatory DFG system. Indeed, we have just legislated to simplify those powers under the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) Order 2002. The order gives local authorities much greater discretion on how they provide assistance for housing repairs, improvements and adaptations. Those powers could be used to provide specific forms of adaptations and to speed up delivery—providing, of course, that the local authority is able to make the necessary resources available.

Owing to the complexities involved, we have been working closely with the Department of Health to produce new best practice guidance to authorities on how an effective adaptations service can be delivered. I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend and the House that we will in the next few weeks be publishing new draft guidance for consultation.

Let me turn to the specific issue of the provision of level-access showers under the DFG programme. As I said, it is a mandatory right for disabled persons to receive a grant for the provision of certain facilities to their homes. Section 23(1)(f) of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 provides that grant must be paid to facilitate access by the disabled person to a room with a bath or shower, and to facilitate the use of such a facility by the disabled occupant.

In deciding whether to approve a DFG application, the local housing authority must consult with social services. In practice, that usually means that an occupational therapist employed by social services will assess the disabled person's needs. This must be with regard to the provisions of the DFG legislation that I have just quoted. If the disability of the applicant is such as to prevent access to the existing bath or shower, a new accessible adaptation will have to be provided, usually by means of a level-access shower. I entirely accept my hon. Friend's comments that that part of the process—the occupational therapist's assessment of the applicant—is in many cases the cause of the delay. That needs to be looked at.

The DFG legislation is also specific about the timetable for delivering the adaptations. Under the 1996 Act, the local authority is required to respond to any full grant application for DFG within six months. The local authority may delay the payment of any grant in cases where it has exhausted its annual budget, but for no longer than one year after the date of the full application. Government guidance states clearly that such delays should not occur in urgent cases where there is a serious health risk to the applicant. I accept my hon. Friend's point that often people go through the process of applying for such adaptations in times of adversity or trauma—for example, after a partner has suffered a stroke, as in the case of her constituent, which my hon. Friend quoted. Such cases should be treated as urgent.

I am aware that many local authorities use various methods of prioritising DFG applicants to highlight cases where urgent action is necessary. This is a sensible procedure which the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister encourages. I am also aware that some local authorities do not give very high priority to access to a bath or shower. Although that is a matter for the local authority, I must emphasise that it cannot lawfully override the mandatory right of a disabled person to have access to a shower or a bath.

Further delay can also occur because there are a number of procedures that have to be completed before a full DFG application can be made and the six months' clock starts to tick. It is at this stage that delays of two or three years can begin. An assessment by social services must be undertaken, and the applicant must submit tenders for the work to be carried out. Guidance from the ODPM has emphasised that the procedures should not be used to delay applications unduly, and we will repeat this advice and set out target times for the complete adaptation process in our new guidance. The guidance will state that waiting times for any adaptation of more than 250 working days, from the point of initial inquiry to completion, are unacceptable.

I have described the DFG process in some detail in order to point out that the legislation in place adequately provides for the provision of level-access showers to disabled persons who cannot use existing facilities. These mandatory provisions apply to disabled persons in the private sector as well as to tenants, including those in local authority-owned stock. It is for local authorities to honour their statutory duties.

Nationally, we have provided additional resources for DFG to ensure that that can happen, and in Sheffield's case we have provided all the DFG resources that the council has asked for and it is now taking action in that regard. In relation to their own stock, the Government provide authorities with significant resources to invest in council housing. These resources are not hypothecated to particular items of expenditure. It is for an authority to decide how much of those and other available resources it should allocate to renovation, improvement or other work such as adaptations for disabled persons, having regard to its legal obligations. I am pleased to hear from my hon. Friend that Sheffield council has decided to allocate additional resources for that purpose.

[Mr. Tony McNulty]

My hon. Friend also raised the issue of what more can be done in the design of new homes to facilitate the provision of level-access showers where needed. I take her point about that being a peculiarly Anglo-Saxon problem that is not of much concern or interest on the continent.

Since late 1999, part M of the building regulations has provided that new houses must make provision to manage the needs of family members who may become disabled. New homes are now required to include reasonable provision for disabled people to gain access to and make use of them, and a WC and washbasin should be provided on the same storey as the entrance. We keep the building regulations under review. We are currently reviewing the relevant sections that apply to non-domestic buildings and we may wish to review the sections covering domestic buildings at a future date, but my hon. Friend will understand that I can give no precise undertakings to that effect tonight.

However, I can say that, following the changes made in 1999, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published a guide entitled "Meeting Part M and Designing Lifetime Homes", which contained a foreword by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions, then Minister with responsibility for construction. The guide sets out a lifetime homes standard that includes a wheelchair-accessible entrance-level WC with drainage provision enabling a shower to be fitted. I can do no more than quote from and heartily agree with my right hon. Friend's words in the foreword:

> "This guide highlights the benefit of a little extra thought and care that needs to go into housing design in order to add the flexibility and adaptability found in lifetime homes. A number of local authorities also encourage use of Lifetime Home standards and house builders may also wish to go beyond Part M, as a minimum regulatory standard as they strive for excellence."

I completely endorse that view. As my hon. Friend said, if the lifetime home standards are endorsed, they will eventually eradicate the problems. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is encouraging new home builders to go for the lifetime standards model.

These are important matters and my hon. Friend has raised some important ideas. I shall not stand here at 11.40 pm and say, "Yes, they're all lovely and I'll go off and implement them", but I am more than happy to meet her and some of her colleagues—I fear that if she brings along the entire list of consultees, there will be no room in the Department, let alone my office—further to discuss this important matter. DFG has worked well in the past and it will continue to do so. Many of the issues that she highlights, including lifetime standards, delays and others are worth exploring further and I shall happily discuss them with her and some of the consultees with whom she worked.

I congratulate my hon. Friend again on securing the debate and raising these important issues, which concern a range of people in her constituency, mine and everybody else's. Such people very often fall through the cracks and disappear for want of strong voices. She is clearly a strong voice in support of her disabled constituents and raises issues whose importance is writ large throughout the country. I hope that we can together take matters forward and turn a good system into an even better one.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seventeen minutes to Twelve o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 28 January 2003

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Traffic Congestion

1. **Sue Doughty** (Guildford): If he will make a statement on his plans for (a) traffic and (b) congestion reduction. [93529]

The Minister for Transport (Mr. John Spellar): For strategic roads, we have introduced incident response units on the busiest motorways, and are working with the police on a range of measures to improve incident and traffic management to keep traffic flowing. In addition, we are in the process of building a new traffic control centre, and are planning a major trial of active traffic management systems on the M42 next year. That ties in with the Highways Agency's extensive programme of local improvements by seeking to make the best use of the existing trunk road network. In London, we have brought together all the key players, including Transport for London, the police and the boroughs, to keep traffic moving in London.

Sue Doughty: I thank the Minister for his reply. Given that his Department's advisory committee on trunk road assessment said that traffic reduction can improve economic welfare and that the Chancellor's own forecast for economic growth has been downgraded, will he come clean and admit that there are serious flaws in a reply given to me by the Secretary of State in which he said that "strong economic growth" will mean a greater increase in traffic and congestion? Has he abandoned his plan?

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Lady could have given some credit to the fact that an extra 1.5 million people are in work since 1997, which is a significant factor in increased demand on all transport networks, as we have seen with the growing numbers travelling on the tube and railway system. That is precisely why we are looking at how we can make best use of the existing network, both the highways and in London. We are doing so to increasing effect, but I do not underestimate the difficulties, especially those that arise from the strong economic growth in this country compared with other major economies.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): It is self-evident that during the school term there is more traffic on the roads than during school holidays, but it is also true that parents are concerned about the safety of their children. More women work these days and are making combination journeys, dropping their kids off before they go to work. What plans does my right hon. Friend have for looking at extending opportunities for safe and affordable school transport to reduce congestion on our roads during school terms?

Mr. Spellar: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. As she is aware, in her county of Yorkshire there has been an extremely successful experiment with school buses. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, along with the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, will shortly review the lessons of that experiment and look at how such a scheme could be rolled out. Of course, it is not just about bus transport, either scheduled routes or specialised buses, but about creating the facilities for safer school routes, whether for cycling or walking, and providing realistic alternatives to reduce the need or desire for the school run.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Yesterday, the Government announced a welcome U-turn in their approach to the London congestion tax. It is amazing that the Minister has not referred to that tax. The Government have said that they are committed to

"providing a uniform minimum standard of exemptions or concessions from local road user charges".—[*Official Report*, 27 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 521W.]

Can the Minister tell us when those concessions will be introduced? Will they be backdated to 17 February, and will they include help for parents, key workers, shift workers, small businesses and people living just outside the zone? Would it not be better to scrap the whole ludicrous scheme now?

Mr. Spellar: I do not have to tell the hon. Gentleman that, in the main, those matters are best addressed locally. Mayoral or local authority candidates can put their programme to the electorate, who will either endorse it or not. I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would want issues to be properly decided by the local authority in the light of local circumstances. Any scheme that is to be introduced must command the majority support of its electorate.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): What implications do the Strategic Rail Authority's unilateral announcements of cuts in rail services have for integrated transport and the reduction of congestion?

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend should reflect on the fact that the Strategic Rail Authority has introduced a number of measures precisely to increase reliability, which we know, anecdotally and from statistics and public opinion, is the main factor that people consider when deciding whether to take public transport or travel by car. There is no doubt that in certain areas train paths have been oversold, so if anything went wrong on the network the chances of recovery were greatly diminished, which has had a significant impact on the reliability of the system. The SRA believes—we think that it is right—that by taking out some of the less used services, it will be able, particularly with extended trains on other services, to provide a more reliable service and carry more passengers, which will sustain the growth of passenger traffic that has ocurred in recent years.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Further to that answer, are not the Department's claims to be interested in integrated transport increasingly bogus? What thought did it give to the impact on road congestion of sanctioning rail cuts such as those on the line from Bristol Temple Meads to Oxford, which have put thousands of additional cars on the road? Can the Minister at least give us an absolute assurance that there will be no sanctioning of the proposed cuts in rail freight grants, which, if they go ahead, will put millions of additional freight lorry journeys on to our roads each year?

Mr. Spellar: Some £40 million is going into rail freight grants this year alone. On reductions in individual services, those represent some 100 services out of 17,000. As I said in reply to the previous question, our objective is to ensure that we have more reliable services, because that is far more likely to attract people and retain them on the rail system than the current position. That is in line with the expectations of the travelling public and it is the right way to ensure a sustainable rail system.

Rail Services (Birmingham)

2. **Mr. Peter Luff** (Mid-Worcestershire): What recent assessment he has made of the (a) reliability and (b) punctuality of commuter train services to Birmingham; and if he will make a statement. [93530]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. Alistair Darling): The Secretary of State's directions and guidance to the Strategic Rail Authority require it to work to a range of objectives, including reliability, punctuality, and overcrowding. Rail performance has improved slowly over the past 18 months, but remains well below what passengers have the right to expect. Our priority is therefore to secure significant improvement in rail performance. The SRA has announced measures that are expected to improve reliability and punctuality throughout the country, including Birmingham.

Mr. Luff: Nothing in the Secretary of State's reply suggested that he really understands just how serious the situation is for Birmingham's commuter services. For schoolchildren, business users, leisure users and the disabled, every journey is like a bad dream, and too many are like a nightmare, and they are getting worse, not better. Even the information that is provided on station platforms is inadequate—never mind overcrowding, punctuality and reliability. Will he throw his weight behind the campaign for a Worcester Parkway station, which would increase capacity on services to Birmingham, and will he do all that he can to ensure that Central train services from places such as Droitwich Spa become decent train services, not the journeys from hell that they are at present?

Mr. Darling: I will certainly look at that proposal, but, as my right hon. Friend the Minister for Transport said a moment ago, the SRA announced changes to services, including the reduction of some 100 services out of 17,000 a day, in order to improve the reliability and punctuality of services.

The hon. Gentleman asked about Birmingham. Just before Christmas, I visited the station at Birmingham, and I can appreciate the problems that are occurring. In the past, Railtrack oversold the amount of track that it had. There are too many trains trying to get through Birmingham New Street, in particular, which has seriously affected congestion and punctuality. That is why the SRA took the very sensible steps to take out some services—as I say, it is only 100 out of 17,000 a day—which will help.

As regards information, the hon. Gentleman has a good point. As I told the industry last week, it could tell people a lot more a lot sooner than it does. There seems to be a kind of cultural malaise that has prevailed for many years. There is no reason why train operators cannot be more straightforward with people wishing to travel, and if there is a problem, they should tell them about it.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): In addition to improving punctuality and reliability, will my right hon. Friend accept that an important contribution to improving commuter trains to Birmingham generally would be an expansion of park-and-ride facilities? Discussions are going on at the moment about the creation of a station at Birmingham Great Park in my constituency and about the great need for park-and-ride at Longbridge station. Will he look into that to ensure that those plans are expedited?

Mr. Darling: Park-and-ride schemes are an extremely useful way of encouraging more people to use public transport—trains, as well as buses—and I shall certainly consider that. It is also worth noting that when the west coast main line upgrading is finished, that will improve capacity on services going to Birmingham and improve signalling and reliability.

All these measures—including the management measures taken by the SRA and the new investment going into the west coast main line—will improve reliability. As I said a few moments ago, there is no doubt that although there have been improvements, we still have a long way to go before train services improve to the standard that people rightly expect.

Overcrowding (Trains)

3. **Mrs. Helen Clark** (Peterborough): What action he will take about the causes and effects of overcrowding on trains. [93531]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. Alistair Darling): As I said a moment ago, the directions that I issued to the SRA require it to work to a range of objectives, which include tackling overcrowding.

Mrs. Clark: I am grateful for that reply. However, the question arose from my personal experience after Christmas of travelling from Leicester to Peterborough about which I wrote to my right hon. Friend. There were long delays and appalling overcrowding, and pensioners and children were sitting on the floor in the train. That occurs frequently on that line, because of the inability of Birmingham New Street station to cope with the increase in Virgin trains. Thankfully, I had to experience that only once, but it affects some of my constituents in Peterborough daily. What does my right hon. Friend intend to do about it, and when?

Mr. Darling: On the last point, as I have just said, and as my right hon. Friend the Minister for Transport said, there are problems at Birmingham. The SRA decided to reduce some of the services going through that station to ensure greater reliability and punctuality of services. Part of the reason for the overcrowding is that train services are not reliable and are not running on time, so they get busier and busier. The Virgin cross-country route, to which my hon. Friend referred, is one of the routes on which there will be a reduction in some services. That will allow the size of trains to be increased from four carriages to eight, which will help with overcrowding. In addition, some 4,000 new railway carriages have been ordered; there are about 1,500 in service.

The SRA study into the way in which the line is used, will improve reliability and punctuality, and changes will be made in relation to the London stations. There will be one operator at most stations, rather than several, which will allow trains to get in and out of stations more quickly. All these steps, together with the upgrades of the west coast main line, the channel tunnel rail link and other measures, will help, but I agree with my hon. Friend that for people to stand for long periods in trains is unnecessary and unacceptable, which is why we are determined to do something about it. It is interesting that the Conservatives never make any constructive suggestions to help that process. We are taking the measures that I described. Some of them are difficult, but they will make a difference.

Bob Spink (Castle Point): Is the Secretary of State aware that more than 3,000 residents of Canvey island travel by train each day using Benfleet station, where they find that the trains are often overcrowded when they arrive at the station? Is it time that we seriously considered providing a terminus station on Canvey island, so that we can cut train overcrowding and road congestion?

Mr. Darling: I cannot answer that specific question. It would be unwise for me to commit myself to building a new terminus without having considered all the implications. However, there is no doubt in my mind that the continued increased rate of investment going into the railways, which will mean more trains, improved rolling stock, and the management changes that the SRA is making in relation to franchising and the use of the network, will gradually mean better reliability and punctuality and reduce overcrowding. In relation to a number of London lines, measures are already in place to make sure that overcrowding is tackled. It will take time. There is no doubt that the railways have been through a difficult time over the past few years, as I think even the hon. Gentleman's party has acknowledged, but I am confident that the SRA is taking the right steps gradually to deal with two problems: a legacy of underinvestment, and the fact that some 20 per cent. more people are using the railways, which is a good thing, although the industry has been too slow and hitherto has not been properly managed to make sure that we can deal with the increased use. That is now in hand.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the crazy situation affecting Virgin trains at Wakefield station, where passengers are allowed to alight from the train, but not to board it? That means that passengers have to travel to Leeds to catch a train to go through Wakefield, which is causing congestion and extra traffic into Leeds. Will my right hon. Friend take it upon himself to try to rectify that barmy situation, whereby people can get off a train, but cannot get on the train at the same station? It is just crazy.

Mr. Darling: I have some sympathy with what my hon. Friend says. I heard on the radio the other day a man giving what I would regard as a not wholly convincing answer as to why that was being done. If a train stops at a station, passengers have a reasonable expectation that they can get on or off. Not only can I give him the undertaking that he seeks, but I am already on that case.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): The Secretary of State will recall the number of occasions on which his Government have made the same commitment to reduce overcrowding. They did so in October 2001, when in paragraph 44 of their response to the Select Committee's report on rail investment, they stated:

> "On commuter services, the priorities will be reductions in overcrowding and better reliability."

How does he square that commitment, which has been made repeatedly, with the Strategic Rail Authority's announcement that it is going to cancel 100 trains a day?

Mr. Darling: Let me explain yet again to the hon. Lady what the problem is. There are parts of the network where too many trains are running along the available track. The problem is acute in Birmingham, as has been said. Anyone who considers the railway for a moment will see that the difficulty is that, without a reduction in the number of services, that problem would be exacerbated.

Perhaps it would help the hon. Lady if I gave her an example of the sort of problem with which we are dealing. On one service, an average of six passengers were using a train that was built to carry 140 people. Surely, if taking that train out of service allows more trains to run more reliably, that is the right thing to do. Let me give her another Birmingham example. From October last year, as a response to the Virgin cross-country service, Central trains increased the number of services that it was running from two trains an hour to five. The result was congestion, as the trains simply could not get into the station. The SRA has reduced the number to four trains an hour, so the number of services has increased on the original number, but there is better management.

No matter what Government are in power, the railways need to be managed properly. Indeed, it is an indictment of the Government whom the hon. Lady supported in the past that they did not manage the railways properly. What the SRA has announced is essential to ensure better reliability and punctuality. I am very sorry that she cannot see that.

Trans-Pennine Express

4. **James Purnell** (Stalybridge and Hyde): What improvements for passengers he expects the new franchise for the trans-Pennine express to deliver. [93532]

The Minister for Transport (Mr. John Spellar): The new trans-Pennine express franchise is intended to provide for faster and higher quality long-distance passenger rail services between major towns and cities across the north of England. Its terms will reflect the outcome of negotiations with bidders, among other things.

James Purnell: When my right hon. Friend is next in the north-west, may I encourage him to pop into the Stalybridge buffet bar, which many rail enthusiasts believe to be the best on the network? May I also warn him that, while he is sampling one of the many Belgian bottled beers that we have on offer, he may be taken aback at the anger of commuters on the trans-Pennine express? Will he meet me to discuss the petition that was signed by more than 400 commuters and discuss how we can improve the reliability and frequency of the trains and redevelop the station? Will he urge the SRA to act on that petition?

Mr. Spellar: The first invitation is obviously a must for when I am next in the north-west. I think that I also detected an offer from my hon. Friend to stand a pint at the bar.

As I know what an assiduous constituency MP my hon. Friend is, I am sure that he will engage with his local authority to put a case to the Strategic Rail Authority to consider a rail passenger partnership in his area. Of course, I would certainly be more than happy to meet him to discuss this matter further.

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): Will my right hon. Friend come to Burnley at an early date to look at the need to improve the trans-Pennine service that runs via Burnley station, where there is tremendous potential? Everybody in Burnley is hoping that the new franchise will ensure that we get the service delivery to which we are entitled.

Hon. Members: What about beer?

Mr. Spellar: There was a certain lack in that particular request.

As my hon. Friend knows, I am due to visit Burnley in a couple of Fridays' time, albeit at half-past eight in the morning. I shall certainly look forward to discussing the matter with him further and I am sure that we can incorporate that into my visit.

Rail Services (Penzance)

5. **Andrew George** (St. Ives): What recent assessment he has made of the quality of main line rail services to Penzance. [93533]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Jamieson): The Government recognise the importance of main line rail services to Cornwall. Delivering significant improvement is our top priority. The Strategic Rail Authority has correctly made improving performance a clear priority; it is the passengers' prime requirement.

Andrew George: The Minister knows that punctuality has got worse for passengers in my constituency in the past five years. There are plans for further main line service cuts. Does the Minister therefore understand the extreme disappointment at the news that the SRA is due to terminate the rail passenger partnership fund, which we had hoped to use for the important dualling of the Probus and Burngullow eight-mile section? That would improve the efficiency of services that run to my constituency. Will he confirm that the lack of RPP funding will not jeopardise such services?

Mr. Jamieson: The number of trains from Penzance to Birmingham has reduced by one under the scheme that was announced earlier. The same service as last September now exists. The service passes through my constituency and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman welcomes the new Virgin Voyager service, which is a considerable improvement on the line. I know about the Probus to Burngullow section of the line, which is important for improving the reliability and throughput of trains. Under the Connecting Cornwall partnership for redoubling the line, Cornwall county council is consulting Network Rail. They are preparing a bid under objective 1 funding. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is glad that the Government fought hard to get that funding, which makes such a bid possible, for Cornwall. The SRA knows about the scheme, but it has not been presented formally for funding. When that happens, it will receive careful consideration.

Ms Candy Atherton (Falmouth and Camborne): Does my hon. Friend know that Railtrack signed an agreement that gave priority to local runners for the intercity services to and from Penzance? That leads to long delays through Cornwall. Will he urgently ask the SRA to reconsider the decision?

Mr. Jamieson: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. I am aware of the effort that she and others made to get objective 1 funding in the area. I assure her that her important point will be considered in the review of the services.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): Why did the Government and the SRA pour scorn on First Great

Western's proposals, which were announced last October, to upgrade the rail link to Penzance that passes through my constituency in Plymouth when they now back a £6 billion upgrade of the rail link to Scotland? Is there one rule for the west country and another for the rest of the country?

Mr. Jamieson: Many of the improvements that have been made to other parts of the network, for example, on the west coast main line and services into London benefit the west country as well as other parts of Britain. Congestion on other sections of the line is part of the reason for the services' failure to get through. If the hon. Gentleman had travelled on the service recently, he would know about some of the improvements. He smiles, but I do not know when he last travelled on the service. If he had, he would know about some of the improvements.

Hydrogen Fuel

6. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): What action he has taken to commission studies into the use of hydrogen fuel in transport. [93534]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Jamieson): The Department has commissioned a study by Ricardo Consulting Engineers into the lifecycle carbon dioxide benefits of vehicles, including hydrogen vehicles.

We have also commissioned an expert study of the benefits of various alternative fuels, including hydrogen.

Both studies have been published on the Department for Transport website.

Mr. Dalyell: On 9 December, some of us in the parliamentary scientific committee heard a convincing presentation on hydrogen by Derek Charters of MIRA—the Motor Industry Research Association—and Professor Richard Clegg of British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. It was realistic and well researched. What sort of time scale can we expect for the reports to result in some action?

Mr. Jamieson: I thank my hon. Friend for his question on that important matter. I know of his long-standing interest in it. It is difficult to predict the long-term future because some specific technological changes have to be tackled first.

There is the very important issue of the storage and transport of hydrogen, and there are a number of associated issues, not least the development of fuel cells, an important matter with regard to the use of hydrogen.

My hon. Friend will also be aware that some important environmental issues need to be addressed before we go full steam ahead with hydrogen. The hydrogen would have to be produced from renewable means. All the information that we have suggests that it is likely that, in perhaps 30 or 40 years' time, the future of transport will be in hydrogen. In the meantime, the Government are taking a number of very important measures that will reduce the amount of pollution and the amount of CO_2 from vehicles in the shorter to medium term.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Will the Minister allow me to help him by telling him that the answer to the question is that it will be between 15 and 30 years before hydrogen can be used as an everyday fuel, particularly in motor vehicles? It depends on when the technology is available. When he talks to his ministerial colleagues in the Department of Trade and Industry will he ensure that the work at Culham carries on and is fully funded, so that we can see whether nuclear fusion will be a proper option or whether it could be solar power or wind power that generates the necessary hydrogen?

Mr. Jamieson: The hon. Gentleman and I at least agree on the time scale. He said 15 to 30 years, and I said about 20 to 30 years. The hon. Gentleman is probably aware of the Government's powering future vehicles strategy, which brings together four of the important partners in Government Departments and draws together the threads of the policy on this matter. We have also brought together many of the stakeholders in industry, the environment, the oil-producing industry and the car industry to address some of these important issues. Grants are available through the Department of Trade and Industry to assist in the matters that the hon. Gentleman raised. If he wishes to take those forward through my Department or the DTI, we shall be very pleased to see that.

Gourock-Dunoon Catamaran

7. **Mr. Alan Reid** (Argyll and Bute): What discussions he has had with the Maritime and Coastguard Agency regarding the safety of passengers travelling on the catamaran Ali Cat from Gourock to Dunoon. [93535]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Jamieson): Surveyors from the Maritime and Coastguard Agency inspected the Ali Cat on 29 October, 21 November and again on 28 November 2002 with the Health and Safety Executive. The ship was found to be operating safely. Minor recommendations were made to reduce movement of the gangway and the MCA continues to monitor the situation.

Mr. Reid: I thank the Minister for that reply. He will be aware of the incident at Dunoon pier on 16 January, about which I have sent him statements from passengers. Will he ensure that a public inquiry is held into that incident because passengers were close to being killed? At that inquiry, will passengers or their legal representatives be able to question the managing director of CalMac and the owner of the vessel, because in letters to the press those gentlemen have arrogantly dismissed passengers' concerns? Will the role of the MCA also be questioned? It is a matter of great concern that the MCA granted the vessel a licence to operate in those waters. The main concern is the safety of the vessel not at sea, but at Dunoon pier.

Mr. Speaker: Order. That is far too long.

Mr. Jamieson: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very important matter. I know, from the correspondence that he has sent me and the evidence that he has received from his constituents and others, that a very serious situation could have developed on 16 January. I share his concerns. I assure him that the Maritime and Coastguard Agency has launched a very full investigation of the points made by his constituents and others. The pier authority at Dunoon has now fitted a wave gauge to assist the masters of vessels. I think that the problem is not so much the vessel and its quality, but the conditions in which it is operating. Caledonian MacBrayne issued instructions to masters not to embark or disembark passengers when waves were higher than 0.6 m. I shall look very carefully at the agency's investigation. Once we have its report, we shall decide what further action to take.

David Cairns (Greenock and Inverclyde): Given that the catamaran normally operates on the Solent as a pleasure cruiser in the summer months, the Minister will understand that there will be concerns about its suitability for use on the River Clyde in the depths of winter, when conditions are frequently as bad as those to which he alluded. What assurances can I give my constituents who use the ferry regularly that when they do so, they will be travelling in complete safety?

Mr. Jamieson: My hon. Friend's comment is extremely important. The point is not that the vessel is inherently unsafe but that the conditions and height of the waves on the day to which the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mr. Reid) referred created the danger. When the Maritime and Coastguard Agency has delivered its report and made its recommendations, I shall certainly ensure that Members are informed and that anything we can learn from those is used in the operation of the vessel.

Power Supplies (Rail Network)

8. **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): If he will make a statement on the availability of power on the rail network. [93536]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. Alistair Darling): The Strategic Rail Authority has put in place measures to ensure the upgrading of the power supply to accommodate the new trains for services to the south and east of London.

Tom Brake: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. Will he confirm the report in this week's *Public Finance,* which says that the SRA—in other words, the taxpayer—will have to pay hundreds of millions of pounds in compensation for new carriages being left in sidings due to a power supply shortage? What services will have to be cut to pay for that compensation? Finally, will he confirm that the power supply shortages have led to the delay in withdrawing the less safe mark 1 carriages?

Mr. Darling: It might help if I explain the position to the hon. Gentleman and the House. The power supply on the lines to the south and east of London should have been upgraded some years ago. This is another Railtrack legacy that we have to deal with. The power supply was put in on most lines in the 1930s, and a bit more work was done in the 1960s. It should have been foreseen years ago that the new rolling stock would not be able to run efficiently on the existing power supply. That is being remedied, and the SRA and Network Rail will spend about £1 billion over the next few years to upgrade supply.

At the moment, we think that between 300 and 500 trains will not be able to be introduced according to the proposed timetable—towards the end of 2004—but they should be in service by mid-2005. The SRA and Network Rail are getting to grips with the problem, and the money is going in to ensure that the trains can run as they were designed to run. I am afraid that this is yet another example of a problem that Railtrack should have seen and done something about years ago.

Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): My right hon. Friend said that there are too many trains on the old track, but he knows that we have new track in Kent—the channel tunnel rail link. When he comes to decide where those trains will stop, will he ensure that they stop in Thanet, which is one of the poorest areas of Kent, and the Medway towns, which are the engine for the regeneration of the Thames gateway? Never mind the offers of imported beer made during the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (James Purnell)—if the Secretary of State makes the right choice, he can have the finest ale, which comes from the garden of England.

Mr. Darling: I see that, at least among Labour Members, there is a growing tendency to offer strong drink in return for additional rail services. As my granny would have said, that is not always the best way to take key decisions. The SRA is looking at what domestic services could be increased and improved when the channel tunnel rail link is continued. I understand perfectly, as my hon. Friend has raised the matter with me on a number of occasions, the desirability of improving the service, particularly from north Kent to London. The SRA is considering that, so he perhaps ought to offer a drink to it as well as to Ministers—we never know what might happen!

Mr. John Horam (Orpington): Is it the case that operators such as Connex South Eastern can deal with the problem of lack of power supply only by running the new trains in what they describe as a degraded fashion—slower than they should be run?

Mr. Darling: It is true that if the power supply is not of the strength needed, it affects the operation of the trains. As I said to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) a few moments ago, the difficulty is that Connex, which ordered the trains, and Railtrack, which was responsible for the network, ought to have seen the problem so that it could have been dealt with far earlier. As it is, I expect that the majority of the new rolling stock coming on to the service will be able to run until the end of 2004. The 300 to 400 trains that would otherwise have come on to the line will come on by mid-2005.

The fact is, I am afraid, that because Railtrack did not do the work when it should have been done, the standard of service was inevitably not as high as it should have been. Unfortunately, that remains the case. There is no shrinking from the fact that, until the power supply is fully upgraded, trains will not run as they should.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): Any 10-year-old boy playing with a train set knows that two engines on the same electric line run at half the speed possible for just one train. Why did not the rocket scientists who run Connex and who used to run Railtrack notice that? Is my right hon. Friend certain that the time scale for putting new power into the south-east will be as short as possible?

Mr. Darling: I certainly hope that it will be. The answer to my hon. Friend's question is that there were too many people in Railtrack who did not spend enough time thinking about what was happening on the track but who were over-concerned about the possibilities of property development. It is an indictment of the previous Government that the company that they set up to run this country's rail network was focused not on running the railways but on how much money could be made out of property development.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): A moment ago the Secretary of State said, "Whatever Government are in power, the railways need to be managed properly." The fiasco that he has just described will take place next year—seven years after this Government took office. Is he really saying that it has nothing whatsoever to do with him? Is this the "not me, guv" Government?

Mr. Darling: Actually, I was agreeing with what the hon. Gentleman said just before Christmas, when he published his long-awaited railway policy. I heard him on the "Today" programme at about half past six in the morning when he announced it. What he said bears repetition:

> "The fruits of increased investment"—

and I thank the hon. Gentleman for the acknowledgement—

> "are often overshadowed by the problems that continue to beset rail infrastructure. It should be acknowledged that Railtrack failed to get to grips with these problems."

That is a welcome admission that Railtrack did not live up to the expectations of those who floated the company in the mid-1990s. As I have told the House on a number of occasions, the SRA and Network Rail are getting to grips with the problem. The Opposition were extremely critical only a few months ago of those bodies, but I note that the same policy document to which I have referred already makes it clear that it is now Conservative policy to support Government policy on Network Rail. Thank goodness those bodies are getting to grips with the problem, as that is the only way in which we are going to improve the quality of services for passengers in the south-east of England who have suffered far too long from inadequate services, overcrowding and lack of reliability. Those problems are now being addressed.

Mr. Collins: Since the long-term applicability of the right amount of power to the rail network clearly depends on predicting accurately the level of passenger and freight demand, will the Secretary of State answer the important question dodged earlier by the Under-Secretary about the axing of rail freight grants? Instead of saying what that grant will be this year, will the right hon. Gentleman say what it will be next year and the year after?

Mr. Darling: The £40 million applies to next year as well. The SRA is constantly looking at its budgets to ensure proper cost control. That is right, and it is something that the SRA will continue to do throughout its lifetime. Cost control is another thing that Railtrack let rip. One reason we face problems with investment is that Railtrack had no idea about how to control costs. The SRA continues to support rail freight, not only through grants but because the charges on rail freight are slightly less than on passenger trains. All sorts of measures are being taken, including, for example, increasing capacity for freight on the west coast main line. The Government are committed to getting more freight off the roads and on to the railways.

I am glad that the hon. Gentleman, in his new Conservative party policy, has accepted what is happening to some extent. We now have better management, and one other ingredient—sustained money going into the railways. The Government will double the amount going into the railways between 2001 and the end of this Parliament. That is essential. When the hon. Gentleman next comes to look at his policy, he might also want to reconsider the Conservative policy of cutting spending by 20 per cent. That would be devastating.

Waterloo-Exeter Rail Line

9. **Mr. David Laws** (Yeovil): What plans he has to increase rail investment on the Waterloo to Exeter line. [93537]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Jamieson): On 6 November 2002, the Strategic Rail Authority announced a new approach to the South West Trains franchise, which excluded infrastructure enhancements on the Waterloo-Exeter route. Towards the end of this month, the SRA will publish its revised strategic plan setting out its priorities for the network.

Mr. Laws: Does the Minister understand how disappointed many people in the south-west are that the SRA should have U-turned on its plans to dual the Salisbury-Exeter stretch of line? Is not it time at least to consider a more limited scheme that might dual particular stretches of track to improve reliability and safety? Given the spirit in which Labour Members appear to go about their lobbying, would the Minister be willing to meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) over a cider at Yeovil Junction railway station to discuss how we can get to the bottom of the matter?

Mr. Jamieson: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that the SRA has to prioritise its funds for lines where there is the greatest pressure. He has heard today, from Members on both sides of the House and not least from his hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives (Andrew George), about the pressure for extra spending on certain parts of the network. The new approach to franchises focuses on improving reliability and replacing some of the slam-door trains.

I should very much enjoy a pint of cider in the west country with the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath). As the hon. Member for Yeovil is described as the highly regarded deputy economic spokesman of his party, who has been given the job of cutting £2 billion out of the budget before the election, perhaps he could explain, over that pint, how he will afford some of those improvements in the unlikely event that the Liberal Democrats come into government.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): As Chairman of the Standards and Privileges Committee, I am taking an increasing interest in the inducements that are being offered in these exchanges.

The Minister will be aware that the Waterloo to Exeter service runs through important stations, such as Overton, Whitchurch, Andover and Grateley. Is he also aware that when a seven to 15-year franchise was on offer to South West Trains the company was prepared to make substantial capital investments, but that as only a short extension is now on offer it is understandably more reluctant? Will he give an assurance that the SRA will step in and make the improvements to which we were all looking forward?

Mr. Jamieson: I note the right hon. Gentleman's comments, although I notice that he did not offer me any "seducement" to visit his constituency.

The right hon. Gentleman makes a good point, but the capital to which he referred was not always available in particular franchises—it was not actually connected to them. I can assure him that we recognise the importance of the line and of those stations, but he must recognise that the SRA, with the available funding, has to deal with the priorities as they stand, including the competing demands from his hon. Friends and other Members on both sides of the House.

Birmingham Northern Relief Road

10. **Tony Wright** (Cannock Chase): If he will make a statement on progress with the construction of the Birmingham northern relief road. [93538]

The Minister for Transport (Mr. John Spellar): The construction of the M6 toll motorway, formerly known as the Birmingham northern relief road, is the responsibility of the concessionaire, Midland Expressway Ltd. The road is on programme for opening early in 2004.

Tony Wright: I am grateful for that answer. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that part of the purpose of that road is still to stop my constituents using it? As I understand it, the strategic purpose of the road is to relieve through traffic on the M6. If so, that can work only if my constituents and other people in south Staffordshire have reliable and effective ways of getting in and out of the conurbation. At present, they do not. The Chase line is horrendous. May I ask that one bit of my right hon. Friend's Department talks to the other bit? If that new road gets clogged up with my constituents—if they can afford to use it—it will defeat the purpose and in 20 years we shall have demands for a relief road to relieve the relief road.

Mr. Spellar: I can confirm that the primary purpose of the road, as my hon. Friend rightly says, is to relieve the significant bottlenecks at the rail interchange and spaghetti junction, which create problems not only for west midlands industry but also for industry and commerce much further afield. I am sure that he will have held discussions with the motorway concessionaire in order to determine how the interests of his constituents can be served, but I take his point: we also need to look into other modes of transport—as we have pointed out from the Treasury Bench today—to ensure access not only to New Street but to the other stations in central Birmingham, thus freeing up traffic in the conurbation.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The M6 toll road will not only improve connections between the south-east and the north-west; it could also improve connections with Wales through the M54. Is the Minister aware that only four or five miles of single carriageway—the A460—would link the M6 toll road with the M54? May I induce the Minister with a mouldy sandwich at an M6 service station to improve the links between the M6 toll, the M54 and Wales?

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Highways Agency has commissioned consultants to complete a feasibility report on possible alignment. It is due to be completed at the end of March 2003, and it will be put to the Secretary of State in the spring. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will make representations after that.

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister of State was asked—

Regulation

21. **Mr. Henry Bellingham** (North-West Norfolk): When he next expects to meet representatives of the small firms sector to discuss the better regulation agenda across government. [93521]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Douglas Alexander): In the normal course of my duties I attend many functions and events at which I meet business people and we speak on a wide range of topics.

My right hon. Friend Lord Macdonald of Tradeston leads on better regulation. Today, the Better Regulation Task Force is hosting a conference of small firms at which the Government are represented by the Minister with responsibility for small businesses at the Department of Trade and Industry, the Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, South (Nigel Griffiths).

Mr. Bellingham: I am very pleased to hear about that, because the Minister will be aware of the grave concern in the business community, especially the small business community, about the intolerable burden of regulation. Is he aware that Lord Macdonald launched his regulatory reform action plan a year and a half ago? He promised that in the first year and a half there would be 64 regulatory reform orders, which are much needed by the small business community. How many of those orders have been made?

Mr. Alexander: This provides a helpful opportunity to clarify the position. The Opposition have fundamentally misunderstood the commitment that was given. The regulatory reform action plan contained 268 proposals, of which only 63 were regulatory reform orders. I think that there is therefore a case for the hon. Gentleman to look at the commitment that was given and the progress that is being made towards those goals.

Ian Lucas (Wrexham): Will the Minister assure me that the views of small businesses are taken into account when devising the Government's approach to regulation? As someone who previously ran a small business, I know that regulation is of great concern to businesses that employ, for example, fewer than half a dozen people. Are there specific representatives of small business on any of the bodies that the Government consult when framing policy?

Mr. Alexander: Yes, I draw particular attention to the Better Regulation Task Force, headed by David Arculus, on which there is small business representation. The conference that it is hosting today will see the launch of the small firms impact test, which is included in revised Cabinet Office guidance and is consistent with the work that the Government have taken forward in a range of ways to tackle regulation. The Government set up the Small Business Service at the Department of Trade and Industry actively to promote a "think small first" strategy at all stages of policy development.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Given the unarguably disproportionate effect that red tape and bureaucracy have on small firms—the point that my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Norfolk (Mr. Bellingham) has made—and given that the Federation of Small Businesses has claimed recently that many small business owners are bewildered by the changes that the Government keep making and are reluctant to employ new staff for fear of unintentionally falling foul of complex laws, will the Minister help the House by telling us whether he has one of the Government's famous targets for deregulation and getting rid of red tape? If so, what is it? If there is one and he is prepared to tell us what it is, how long will it take to reach that target at the present rate of deregulation?

Mr. Alexander: On the point about employment creation, this Government have created more than 1 million jobs since 1997, many within the small business sector. The regulatory reform action plan contained a large number of commitments—268. The level of progress is currently 27 per cent., and given that we have three further years in which to continue to pursue this work we will take it forward on a month-by-month basis.

There is a fundamental division across the House on this issue. We make no apology for the national minimum wage, the extension of maternity leave, and the introduction of paternity leave and paid holiday for the first time for many employees across the country.

Public Appointments

22. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): What progress is being made in providing training for people making an application for public appointments. [93523]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Douglas Alexander): The Government are keen to encourage people from all backgrounds to apply for public appointments. For example, my Department has participated in a national outreach campaign of regional seminars led by the Ministers for Women. These seminars gave practical advice on the skills and competencies relevant to public appointments and information on how to apply.

Mr. Chapman: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is desirable that people appointed to public offices should be representative of society as a whole and that, to achieve that, we need to make people aware of not just the opportunities that arise but the contribution that they could make? Does he agree that, if we do not do that, people on public bodies will continue to be middle class, middle aged and, often, men in suits, rather than having a fair representation of women, ethnic minorities, younger people and the various strata and components of our society?

Mr. Alexander: I endorse everything that my hon. Friend has said. The Government want the boards of public bodies to be representative of society as a whole. It is fair to acknowledge not only the tremendous work that is done by public bodies the length and breadth of the country but the work of the Commissioner for Public Appointments, who has taken forward a range of initiatives to try to ensure that we capture the necessary diversity in public bodies so that they can work with excellence.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is training mandatory in those circumstances where it is available?

Do the Government have a list of approved possible suppliers of such training? If so, how many does the list comprise?

Mr. Alexander: Training is not mandatory in the sense that some people are ideally qualified on the basis of past experience to discharge their responsibilities in public bodies. Given the tenor of previous observations about regulation, I should be surprised if the Opposition were now suggesting that there must be mandatory training for every public body, but perhaps they are now advocating that.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth): Does the Minister accept that manual workers are badly under-represented on such bodies? What steps will he take to increase representation? How might I encourage people from that background in my constituency to become public representatives?

Mr. Alexander: I certainly endorse the desire to ensure that every section of society is well represented on our public bodies. One of the distinguishing features of the way in which public bodies are now advertised is that we are determined to ensure that people in communities throughout the country are made aware of such opportunities, rather than having to rely on our traditional Whitehall network to know that such opportunities are available. I believe that we can continue to do more, and I am encouraged by the strength of feeling in the House on this matter.

Correspondence

23. **Mr. Graham Allen** (Nottingham, North): What steps he plans to take to improve the speed and relevance of replies by Departments to letters and inquiries from (a) hon. Members and (b) the public. [93524]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Douglas Alexander): The Cabinet Office issues guidance to Departments on the handling of correspondence for Members of Parliament and the public. However, it is the responsibility of individual Ministers to ensure that their Department responds to all correspondence promptly and accurately.

Mr. Allen: It is very unfair to ask the Minister this question since his replies are prompt, full and an example to all other Ministers. Indeed, I believe that Sir Andrew Gordon, the chief executive of "Ofmin", may well consider making my hon. Friend a beacon Minister. May I tell my hon. Friend that the standard that he delivers does not necessarily apply across Government? There is increasing discontent among hon. Members on both sides of the House about the speed and fullness of some of the responses to Members. That must be writ large in terms of the public. Will my hon. Friend seek to ensure that his colleagues reply as promptly and fully as he does?

Mr. Alexander: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind words. Of course I acknowledge that there is concern in the House about this important matter. We have a responsibility to the House as Ministers to reply promptly. I pay tribute to the work done by the Select Committee on Public Administration on this issue, about which the Government have made clear their determination to improve standards. We are continuing to work towards those goals.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Given that MPs' letters are the last resort for many desperate constituents who have suffered severe bureaucratic delay and that, according to parliamentary answers, the Department of Health, the Home Office and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have between them 1,500 MPs' letters unanswered after six months, will the Minister bring the authority of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Secretary to bear on the Departments that are not delivering, although I am not sure whether that will work with the Lord Chancellor, to whom I wrote on 8 October about the temporary closure of Berwick court and who still has not replied long after the court has reopened?

Mr. Alexander: I shall be happy to pass on the right hon. Gentleman's concerns to the relevant Ministers.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The hon. Gentleman will perhaps know of the proposal to use Caythorpe Court in my constituency as an emergency centre for refugees. Is he aware of the strong opposition to that in my constituency? Is he aware that, on 14 December, I wrote to the Minister of State responsible, but did not receive a reply until 17 January, after a parliamentary question asking for a reply? Is he aware that, on Monday last week, I asked for a meeting? I have been told that there are personal reasons why I cannot have a meeting until 11 February. Accordingly, I have asked the Home Secretary for a meeting and, so far, that has been declined. Does the hon. Gentleman think that that pattern of conduct is in accordance with the conventions and practices of Ministers or the House, or is in any way satisfactory?

Mr. Alexander: I can only reiterate that as the concerns raised by the right hon. and learned Gentleman relate directly to the Home Office, I will pass them on to the Home Secretary.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Is the Minister aware that one of the problems with ministerial replies to correspondence is not just the speed or fullness of the reply but whether the Minister answers the question? Is it possible to advise officials that it is not good enough to pull together a few standards paragraphs on a subject? It is helpful to read the letter and answer the question that the correspondent has put.

Mr. Alexander: The present guidance, "Handling Correspondence for Members of Parliament: Guidance for Departments" sets out the principles that Departments should follow when replying to Members' correspondence.

Fire Dispute

12.31 pm

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. John Prescott): With permission, I shall make a statement on the fire dispute and the Government's proposals in the light of the breakdown of negotiations at ACAS.

The House will be aware that all sides welcomed the resumption of talks after last Tuesday's 24-hour strike. The chair of ACAS agreed terms of reference for those talks with both the Fire Brigades Union and the employers. The terms of reference are very wide and say that both sides should

> "bring their respective agenda to the table and neither side would seek to rule any issue in or out".

Despite that, the FBU executive decided yesterday to go ahead with further strikes, and at 9 o'clock this morning the FBU walked out for the fourth time. It will be on strike for 48 hours and at present it is scheduled to walk out again for a further 48 hours on Saturday morning.

While we sit here, the armed forces and other emergency services, including the police and the many retained firefighters who have continued to work during the strikes, are providing cover for the striking firefighters. I am sure that the House will want to join me yet again in expressing our thanks for their courage and hard work and for the way they have conducted themselves throughout this dispute. I have made it clear that the armed forces will have the resources that they need. As I said when I made my last statement to the House on 20 January, we have now provided 177 red engines to augment the green goddess fleet. For the first time during these strikes, we now have a number of aerial water towers to provide cover in extreme situations. The armed forces also have 30 new thermal imaging cameras.

The history of this dispute has been one of last-minute ultimatums and walkouts by the FBU. Let no one in this House be in any doubt: the switch from a series of eight-day strikes before Christmas to a programme of one-day and two-day strikes after Christmas does not represent a change of heart on behalf of the FBU; far from it. All it represents is a change of tactics. Its aim is minimum pain for FBU members and maximum disruption for everyone else.

It is the Government's duty to maintain public safety, and we will continue to do so. The House should be aware, however, that so far this dispute has cost the taxpayer more than £70 million, and costs will continue to rise at £1 million a day for as long as the dispute continues, whether or not the FBU is on strike. That money has not come from the reserve; it has come from programmes in my Office, many of which are designed to help the most needy in our communities.

The FBU is now trying to shift its ground by claiming that this dispute is about job cuts and protecting the fire service rather than pay and modernisation as set out by Sir George Bain's independent review of the fire service. The FBU is not interested in the modernisation agenda. It has put out false and misleading information about thousands of job losses and hundreds of fire station closures. That is a gross distortion of the proposals set out by Sir George Bain. Sir George made it clear that there is absolutely no need for compulsory redundancies. Modernisation will not lead to hundreds of fire station closures. Instead, it will lead to a better fire service, greater safety for the public and more rewarding careers for fire service employees. The FBU is now seeking a judicial review of the proposed repeal of section 19 of the Fire Services Act 1947, which is now before the House and is recommended by the Bain inquiry. That is a sign of how completely it is opposed to modernisation.

The repeal of section 19 will do no more than put the management of the fire service in local hands. All it removes is a bureaucratic obstacle, but it is one that the FBU has used to good effect to protect its outdated working practices. Contrary to what the FBU claims, local communities will still be consulted on fire service priorities and plans. That has not changed. Let no one be in any doubt: the FBU's claim remains, as it has for the past nine months, a 40 per cent. pay rise for firefighters and a 50 per cent. pay rise for control room staff without any commitment to modernisation whatsoever—no change, no compromise, no modernisation.

Talks at ACAS started on 4 December. There have been days and days of talks about talks, yet the FBU has walked away from any substantive negotiations. I have had numerous discussions with the general secretary of the FBU, and the Government have given him the benefit of the doubt, but this latest strike, coming so soon after the terms of reference for the negotiations were agreed, leads me to conclude that the FBU executive is not serious about a negotiated settlement.

The latest round of strikes confirms that the FBU is playing cat and mouse with the employers, the Government, public safety and public money. The Government and local authority employers want a fully modernised fire service providing the best service to the public. The FBU refuses even to negotiate about that. The employers are now rightly insisting that in light of the past two months of strike action, talks cannot take place while strikes are in progress or threatened. As yesterday's decision by the FBU shows, the union is determined to press ahead with further strikes. As a result, negotiations have broken down and we are in deadlock.

The fire service is not like any other industry. The public cannot be put at risk on a weekly or monthly basis. It is essential to resolve the dispute. We all want a resumption of talks. The employers have rightly put forward a fully costed proposal on pay and modernisation based on Sir George Bain's agenda. That is the only basis for negotiation. But the Government have to be prepared if the FBU continues to refuse to discuss modernisation. Against that background, I have concluded that the time has come to take a further step to help break the deadlock.

As a matter of priority, I will introduce legislation in the public interest to take new powers of direction over the fire service. Those powers will, I hope, bring a new and much-needed sense of reality into future negotiations. I will discuss, through the usual channels, including the devolved Administrations, the best way to introduce the legislation. I will draw on the provisions in the Fire Services Act 1947 that were repealed in 1959. Those provisions allowed a Secretary of State to specify the pay, terms and conditions of the fire service. In addition, we will propose powers to direct the fire

[Mr. John Prescott]

service on its objectives and the use of facilities and assets. Legislation itself will not end the dispute, but it is prudent to take those powers to use, if necessary, to help to reach an agreement.

The current strike is due to end on Thursday morning. I hope that the FBU will sit down again and negotiate with the fire service employers, but, for the avoidance of doubt, the Government's position will not change. We will continue to implement the Government's part of the Bain agenda; we will continue to resist the strikes; and we will continue to do all that we can to protect public safety, especially at a time when there is a heightened level of terrorist threat and our armed forces are under increasing pressure from competing demands.

It will take some weeks to put in place the legislation and the discussions and consultations that I have proposed. Meanwhile, the House will agree that the best possible outcome is for the employers and the FBU to reach a negotiated agreement. I urge the FBU to call off further strikes and get back to the negotiating table in the remaining weeks available.

David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): May I begin by thanking the Deputy Prime Minister for making his statement and for prior warning of it? I should like to add our support to his calls for the FBU to call off its irresponsible strike action. May I also take this opportunity, as he did, of offering the thanks of the House to the armed forces, the other emergency services and, most particularly, the retained firefighters, without whose service the safety of the public could not be guaranteed?

Sadly, we are becoming all too familiar with hearing a statement from the Deputy Prime Minister on fire strikes. Today we will continue to look for answers to the questions that are still unanswered. By taking this opportunity to raise a number of practical matters with him before dealing with the substantive new announcement, I hope that I will give the House time to digest the full import of his proposal.

Throughout this action, we have tried to extract from the Government commitments in several areas, including transitional funding and the effects that modernisation will have on the fire service. Yesterday, the Deputy Prime Minister told a Select Committee that this 48-hour strike would cost the taxpayer £6 million; that is on top of the £70 million cost of the strikes to date. Will he confirm those figures to the House, and, given that this is such a large sum of money, precisely how he will meet the transitional funding required? Also, exactly which of the public services that he referred to will be reduced, or eliminated from his departmental budget, as a result of the union's needless strike action? Will he also confirm that those fire authorities that have already modernised will not be hit financially as a result of any budget shortfall?

As the Deputy Prime Minister said, throughout this action the Fire Brigades Union has repeatedly claimed that modernisation will mean job losses and the closure of fire stations. The best way to dispel lies is with the truth. Will he tell the House what job losses and station closures he expects as a result of modernisation? Since it is in everybody's interests to ensure that members of the union return to work as soon as possible, can he refute union claims that his plans for the fire service will result in 4,500 job losses and the closure of 150 stations? If he cannot refute those claims, can he tell the House how he will maintain high service levels throughout the country and especially in rural areas, and—as I have asked him before—halve the level of deaths, as has been done in other countries?

Given the FBU's irresponsible action, members of our military are yet again on the streets of the United Kingdom, protecting the public from fires. The cover they have provided throughout the action has been excellent, and we thank them for that. Everybody wants this series of strikes to come to a rapid end, and that means persuading the firefighters that Bain is a good deal, and that they should persuade the FBU to accept the deal.

The dominant and immediate issue, however, is that of public safety, particularly given the combination of possible terrorism at home and war in Iraq. Last week, I asked the Deputy Prime Minister specifically about the cover provided by 16 Air Assault Brigade, and how it was going to be replaced when that unit was committed elsewhere. I am afraid that he tried to bluster his way out of the question. As column 26 of *Hansard* shows, he said:

> "I should point out that most of the quotes that the right hon. Gentleman gave came from the press. I am not as confident as he is about press reports on these matters".—[*Official Report*, 20 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 26.]

I suspect that his civil servants gave him a talking to after that, because a day or two later he had to write to me. The key sentence in his letter was:

> "For strike action on 28 January"—

today—

> "16th Air Assault will be replaced in full."

In the past two weeks, the Ministry of Defence has failed to give an answer on this, and last week the Deputy Prime Minister refused to give an answer. Can the House of Commons now have a straight account of exactly how the Government are going to protect the public, with troops being deployed to Iraq?

Of course, the Opposition have faced this lack of response from the Government before on raising public safety issues. First, the Government deny the significance of the issue, then they rubbish the feasibility of the proposal, and finally they try to claim credit for doing what we called for in the first place. We saw this with the red fire engines, and I suspect that we will do so again with the use of the law in this dispute. As we agreed last week, the risks of strike action increase every week with the combined threats of terrorism and war in Iraq. This week, the prospect of resolution of the strike looks as far away as ever. So the House can understand the Deputy Prime Minister's frustration, and his probable belief that these negotiations will get nowhere in the foreseeable future; indeed, that is pretty much what he said today.

As I understand the Deputy Prime Minister's proposal, he will take to himself the right to impose a conclusion of the negotiation process, and to decide the firefighters' terms and conditions. What is absolutely unclear is what he will do if they continue to strike, against his decision. We will look at this proposal carefully, and if we are persuaded that it will work we will facilitate its progress through the House; however, we do not know that it will stop the strike. It may well end the negotiations, but it will not stop the strike, and doing so is the key issue.

Throughout the strikes, the Deputy Prime Minister has rubbished our calls for an injunction, calling them inflammatory. Does not the action that he has proposed today inflame the situation without necessarily providing any prospect of a resolution? This morning, the Minister for Local Government and the Regions rightly said that the strikes are

"completely pointless, would not achieve anything . . . and put the public at risk."

He was right, but if that is not a public interest argument for an injunction stopping the strike, I do not know what is.

I ask the Deputy Prime Minister once more whether he will request the Attorney-General to seek an injunction against the strike on public interest grounds. We all know that the final decision will be made by the courts, but that will not happen without initial action by the Deputy Prime Minister. We will look carefully at his changes to the 1947 Act, but action to stop these dangerous strikes is what the public want.

The Deputy Prime Minister: At the beginning, I should express appreciation for the right hon. Gentleman's appreciation and support for the emergency services, which everyone on both sides of the House fully endorses.

On the cost of the dispute, I told the Select Committee that I thought that it was about £5 million, although there are other estimates. However, it is probably something like £1 million a day, but we have to pay more if we are using troops during the dispute, so it may well be £2 million a day. There are negotiations between different Departments, and various costs are involved, so I hope that the right hon. Gentleman accepts that I cannot be precise. However, I have said that the net cost to the Department is £70 million; if other Departments are included, it is about £100 million, which is a considerable sum. I pointed out to the Select Committee that I therefore face some difficult choices, as that cost will not be funded from reserves but from my Department's budget. Sometimes, as the right hon. Gentleman well knows, Departments underspend and sometimes they overspend, and I have to make a judgment about where that money will come from, but it will come from the Department. The more money that is used for the dispute, the more difficulties are created—do I cut back programmes or, indeed, do I find transference money necessary for the two or three-year deal proposed by Bain?

I shall have to deal with those difficulties as they arise, but we cannot be certain that they have been resolved until negotiations have been concluded. I believe that the right hon. Gentleman and I agree that we would like the dispute to finish. I would like the negotiations to result in a settlement with as little bitterness as possible. The longer disputes go on, the greater the difficulties. It is far better to have an agreement, which is why I fundamentally believe that it is far better to provide opportunities for an agreeable negotiated position than to impose a solution. The right hon. Gentleman asked whether legislation will in fact secure what he wants—the ceasing of a strike if he made it illegal or the Attorney-General took action. The situation is difficult, but the evidence does not necessarily lead one to accept that by introducing such legislation the dispute will be ended. I do not believe that that is the case, and my own experience shows why. One has to make a judgment, and I have sought to do so.

If I can just deal with the role of the Attorney-General, I emphasise to the right hon. Gentleman that it is not the Government's job to make a judgment about the Attorney-General. I notice that every time a statement is made in the House, the shadow Attorney-General is never here to give his view.

David Davis: I will bring him next time.

The Deputy Prime Minister: Well, do that so I can ask him directly for his advice. It will be the same as the advice I get from the Attorney-General—he has to make a judgment. He consults, takes various matters into account and makes judgments about public safety, but it is he who makes the judgment—the Government cannot direct him to do so. The right hon. Gentleman can be assured that the Attorney-General keeps himself fully informed of the situation. We are therefore at odds about the best way to use legislation. I have proposed intervention and the possibility of an imposed solution, which allows an awful lot more time while discussions are under way in the House and consultations are conducted for negotiations to continue. I would like a negotiated settlement—let us be clear about that. I want the employers and the employees to work to find a settlement themselves.

My proposal almost suggests an end-date for the negotiations that have been going on for nearly 12 months since the first announcement of strikes. In any reasonable assessment one would assume that a negotiated settlement could be achieved within a 12-month period. I hope that that will be done in a shorter time but, quite apart from the extra costs involved, we are in special circumstances and are reaching a stage where public safety is a concern. Everyone in the House praises the emergency services currently in operation but we all accept that they are not as good as having full-time firefighters. I am therefore obliged to bring the situation to a conclusion, hence the reason for my judgment today.

As for jobs lost, the Bain inquiry makes it clear that there is no need for compulsory redundancies, even through the modernisation proposals, and refers to the number of early retirements through the pension scheme. The situation faced by those [illegible] the union is quite different from that which was faced by the miners, who were told, "We're closing 100 pits and 100,000 workers will be redundant from tonight." That is not the position that is facing the fire workers, and it is wrong for them to suggest that it is.

The closure of fire stations is unjustified. Again, I refer to the Bain inquiry. At the end of the day, we have to strike a balance between intervention and prevention; that is what the new risk assessment is about. Risk assessment is not new to the fire service—it has constantly undertaken it in relation to the siting of fire stations. That should continue, and it is not proposed that it should change, but the balance between intervention and prevention that Bain talked about is an important part of it.

[David Davis]

As regards public safety concerns and the use of armed forces, whenever there is a deployment of whatever divisions of whatever parts of the Army, the armed forces have told us clearly that there will be no reduction in the numbers of people deployed and that full cover will be provided. All that I have to do is to accept the word of armed forces representatives that they have the same amount of people, that the trained personnel are in place and that they can maintain the same level of service. I have no reason to doubt that, and I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman was doubting it. He played around with which regiments are here and which are there. That is fair enough—he might find it interesting—but for me the reality is whether the same amount of troops are deployed in the same way and whether they possess the same skills. We are giving them extra equipment. That is good enough for me, and if it is good enough for the armed services, I accept their word on that.

In all such matters, Secretaries of State are accountable for making a balance of judgment, and I have given the House my best consideration of that. Apparently, the Opposition would rush into making legislation to ban strikes or to give directions to the Attorney-General. That would not help the situation. I have struck a balance that means that there is an end to the time in which negotiations can take place. I shall take powers, with the consent of the House, to implement such an agreement. If it is not implemented, I can implement it through the power that I am seeking today. The important point is that there is time to continue the negotiations. That is what we want—for both parties to get back to the negotiating table.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his statement, and join him, on behalf of my right hon. and hon. Friends, in expressing our thanks to the armed forces, to the other emergency services and to the many retained firefighters who are working to help the public during strikes.

As he will know, Liberal Democrat Members have agreed with him on many of the actions that he is taking during the dispute, including the need for a fair pay settlement linked to real modernisation along the lines of the Bain review. However, we cannot agree with the statement. Does he not realise that rushing the proposed emergency legislation through the House will be seen as a measure that is designed to inflame the dispute, not to solve it? Throughout the dispute, the Deputy Prime Minister has worked hard to win over the hearts and minds of firefighters. Why, then, is he now seeking to alienate them with this panic measure? Will he acknowledge that rushed emergency legislation has a very chequered history in this House? Does he recognise that if rushed legislation on dangerous dogs was flawed, rushed legislation on fire services could be fatal?

The Deputy Prime Minister claims that yesterday's decision by the FBU executive was the trigger for today's statement. We share his regret and anger that the FBU has pressed ahead with strikes and appears to have decided to turn its back on ACAS, and we share his view that the Government could not leave that decision unanswered, and did indeed have to act. However, surely now is the time for compulsory and binding arbitration. Why have the Government not announced that they will require the FBU and the employers to attend talks at ACAS, forcing both sides to the negotiating table? The Deputy Prime Minister says that he wants the involvement of the independent arbitrator, and that is the most sensible way forward.

Does the Deputy Prime Minister not realise what a dangerous precedent he is setting? Who will be next on the Government's hit list for imposed pay settlements without negotiation or independent arbitration? This is a huge centralisation of power. Will the Government's next target be health workers or teachers, or will Ministers reserve such treatment for the emergency services, including the ambulance service? The Deputy Prime Minister rightly tells us that his top priority is public safety. Does he not realise that if Ministers were to intervene in two-hour stoppages, however frustrating, the practical effect could be to reduce public safety, as firefighters would be likely to withdraw their labour completely?

Will the Deputy Prime Minister explain why he is reported to have said that transitional funding for modernisation could be cut if strikes go ahead? Does he realise that far from punishing the firefighters, that would punish the British public and local communities? Will he also explain his astonishing revelation that the cost of the strike is coming not from the reserve, but from his own Department's budget? How he can justify that decision, which he himself admits will hit those most in need?

Throughout the dispute, Liberal Democrat Members have given the Government the benefit of the doubt. We completely agreed that the FBU's 40 per cent. pay claim was outrageous and that any fair pay settlement must be linked to real modernisation. Yet we also believe that today's statement is a major mistake by the Government. The Deputy Prime Minister is in great danger of losing the support of the public and of the House.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for offering the typical support that Liberal Democrats provide in such difficult situations.

As I understand his case, he believes that there should be fair negotiations connected to modernisation, and that both parties should be involved. We can all put our hands up in favour of that—for nine months, we have been trying to get the two parties to do precisely that. His solution appears to be to force both sides to go to arbitration. Presumably, that would require some legislation to direct them, but he is telling me that I should not use legislation in that way. At the moment the firefighters are refusing to go to ACAS, and I do not think that they will change their minds simply because the Liberals get up and say that they should do so or that I should not introduce legislation. Does he accept that I would require legislation to direct them to go in as a negotiating team? Does he think that that is an easy process? It certainly is not. He is not jumping up to correct me, so I assume that he accepts that we need legislation. Curiously, the Liberals have supported similar legislation—the Fire Services Act 1947. Admittedly, there were not so many of them then, but nevertheless they supported the essential principles of that Act. In various disputes, the Secretary of State has to make decisions in areas where public safety could be threatened, and that is presumably why such provisions were included in the 1947 Act.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that I am rushing the legislation, but that is not so. I have to consult everybody, including the Liberals—I have started that process, and perhaps they will rethink their position—and I must then make a proposal to the House, which will debate the primary legislation. I suspect that there may even be a statutory requirement to lay an order, so that the House would have to debate the matter again. That is not a quick process. It will take several weeks for the House to discuss the proposals, which means that there are many weeks in which the negotiations can continue without any enforced situation. It is a matter of judgment, and I have decided to take this course of action, which allows for negotiations, but says to both parties, "You cannot continue to have deadlock in this situation without facing possible intervention with the agreement of this House."

Mr. John MacDougall (Central Fife): Would my right hon. Friend join me in expressing his condolences, and those of the House, to the family and friends of Sidney Lennon, who was affectionately known as John Lennon, his wife Linda and his son Paul, who tragically died through fire at their home in my constituency, in Hill Road, Kennoway in Fife, at 3 am on Sunday morning? Sadly, in those tragic circumstances, the issue of the Bain report cropped up in the media. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me that there are no proposals by the Government that would weaken public safety during the early hours of the morning, which are known by fire brigade staff as the dead hours?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I can tell my hon. Friend that I read of a tragic case—I think that it was in the *Daily Mirror*—in which people died during the evening in terrible circumstances in a fire that occurred at their home. I am sure that all hon. Members would want to express their support and deepest sympathy, through my hon. Friend, for the family that is facing such tragedy.

I can give my hon. Friend an assurance that public safety will be maintained at the highest level. He mentioned the Bain report—the point of that was to increase fire coverage. It is not always a matter of intervention. The tragedy of many deaths that occur as a result of fires at night is that although the firefighters are quick to get there, a fire that might have been prevented by fire prevention techniques of some kind is often already well advanced. I do not know whether that was so in the case my hon. Friend mentioned. There is a great deal of evidence to show that we should emphasise prevention rather than intervention and achieve a better balance between them. That is precisely what the Bain inquiry proposed, and I want to discuss with the FBU how we can achieve that.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): As the last Secretary of State who had to face prolonged public sector strikes, may I commend the right hon. Gentleman for the fact that he continues to take a firm stance on the firefighters' strike? Will he tell the House when, according to the latest Government estimate, the continued need to use the armed forces in the dispute will start to impact negatively on national security in the context of Iraq?

Mr. Prescott: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his words of support. As regards the armed services, we would take their advice. They tell us that the use of troops in the present dispute does not impinge in any way on the contribution of the armed forces to the situation in Iraq or to fighting the fire dispute. I am sure that they will make it clear if it does impinge on their capability. Obviously, these matters are assessed from time to time. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman would agree that it would be better if we brought the dispute to an end, preferably by negotiation. What I have done today is to set an end date to the negotiations.

Mr. Doug Henderson (Newcastle upon Tyne, North): I have a lot of sympathy with my right hon. Friend's suggestion in his statement that there is a need to reform the employers' side of the negotiating structure in the fire service. I understand the need for change in that respect, but may I prod him about his intentions in a situation where the Secretary of State imposes a settlement? Will there be an implied no-strike clause included in the legislation whereby in the event of a union not accepting the Secretary of State's position and taking industrial action, an injunction would be sought to bring the union and its members back into procedures?

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend is aware of the sensitivities involved in such matters. He is right to point out the responsibilities of the employers in these circumstances. That was pointed out by Bain, who proposed radical changes for the employers as well as the trade unions. We have already set in hand a number of changes on the management side, which require Government action. I have indicated to the House that we intend to do that.

With regard to the Secretary of State taking action in the way that I described today, it is not an imposition on the unions; it is an imposition on the fire authorities, which have the responsibility for the payment. That is how it was envisaged in the 1947 Act, and that is how we envisage it. If the employees refuse to accept the payment through their banks, I assume that they can send the money back. The more serious point is whether they decide to continue to strike. That is a judgment to which the FBU will have to address itself. It should make that judgment soon, rather than maintaining for a number of months the threat to public safety and the expense. The matter needs to be drawn to a conclusion. Any idea of guerrilla tactics going on for 12 months or so, which some have advocated—holding odd strikes from time to time—is unacceptable and does nothing to help public safety. I have made it clear that that will not be tolerated.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): At the Kineton army base in my constituency, with the British Army's ammunition dump, the defence fire services have two modern, fully equipped fire engines. In the normal course of events, one of those fire engines is made available to assist in local emergencies, but they have received an unequivocal order, which I have seen,

[Mr. John Maples]

that in the present fire dispute, neither of those fire engines should in any circumstances be made available to help with emergencies. Apparently that order comes from the Ministry of Defence and therefore, presumably, there are similar orders to defence fire services across the country. The Deputy Prime Minister is not exactly famous for fighting his battles with his hands tied behind his back. Why is he doing so in this case?

Mr. Prescott: I do not know the details of the matter, but I will look into it. It is right for the Ministry of Defence to make decisions about the use of its own equipment in these circumstances. I do not want to prejudge the issue; I will investigate it and write to the hon. Gentleman.

Jim Knight (South Dorset): I met the chief fire officer of Dorset on Friday last week to discuss the dispute. He told me that some of the modernisations that are mentioned in the Bain review have already been implemented in Dorset and other authorities in the south-west, and savings have been made accordingly. Will the employers, and will my right hon. Friend, when he takes new powers of direction over the fire service, assume that modernisation savings can be made evenly across the country?

Mr. Prescott: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. I am well aware that in a number of brigade areas some changes have taken place—some with FBU agreement nationally and sometimes with disagreement. One of the difficulties that I have experienced is that when one negotiates with the FBU one cannot assume that what it proposes will be carried out at brigade level. I have found that to be a problem in Gold command, for example. I will certainly want to look at all the modernisation measures, which should apply to all areas. The brigades that have gone ahead and implemented some of the measures should not be disadvantaged in the settlement simply because they have carried out those proposals. We will take that into account.

Adam Price (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): Since the last time that the fire service was effectively nationalised was during the second world war under Herbert Morrison, the Deputy Prime Minister will appreciate that he is proposing a fairly draconian measure. Does he accept that it seems to fly in the face of the Bain report, which explicitly stated that the fire service cannot be run as a central command function? If the devolved Administrations indicate that they do not want to go down the centralising route, will he allow them to retain the existing arrangements? Finally, further to the point made by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), can the Secretary of State explain what possible advantage there is for the FBU in entering into negotiations, when it is repeatedly told that there is no room for negotiation and that the Government will veto any deal and impose their own will?

Mr. Prescott: That does not seem to fit with the events, which I have watched closely. Before the FBU goes into discussions, it wants to lay down all sorts of conditions. The union stated in December that it wanted to go to ACAS and that nothing would be ruled in or ruled out, but it still will not walk in and talk. It has had days and days of talking, and a few minutes of face-to-face negotiations. That is not a good way to deal with matters. I always understood that each party went in and put its case to ACAS without ruling out any other party going in. The parties sat in different rooms and ACAS officials shuttled between them to try and find some agreement. It is not unusual for demands to be made of other parties. The role of ACAS is to try and find a way forward. The FBU has announced that if there is no prior agreement, it will not go to ACAS to discuss the matter. That is stupid. It is not acceptable and casts doubt on the union's real intentions.

With regard to the decentralisation of powers, curiously one of the problems that I have is that I am trying to decentralise by taking powers away from me as Secretary of State under section 19 and the union is against that. We need to achieve a proper balance. I have said, and Bain said, that the Fire Services Act 1947 should be reviewed. I have informed the House that my judgment about many of the recommendations and the balance between them will be in the White Paper that I will shortly publish.

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): We understand my right hon. Friend's predicament. He may well bring in legislation to compel arbitration, but he cannot compel agreement. That is the nub of the problem. Does he intend to impose Bain through arbitration or through legislation? Again, if he cannot get agreement, he will stack up major problems and create a great deal of bitterness. I say that with a great deal of sympathy for my right hon. Friend. I appeal to him to think carefully before he brings any legislation before the House.

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend speaks a great deal of common sense. I have wrestled with the thought for a considerable time. I have been pressed from some parts of the House to introduce legislation immediately. I have never felt from my own experience, and neither does history teach, that legislation can force free people to do what they do not want to do. It is a human right to withdraw one's labour, and we have reinforced that in legislation in the House and under European conventions. We have to find a balance between all those considerations, particularly with regard to emergency services such as the fire service. Even there, if we try to force a deal on the fire service and it will not accept it, we will have another problem. I recognise that, but in my judgment people will come to the view that it is better to settle the dispute by negotiation.

All I am asking is for the union to sit down and talk. I am not asking it to accept any details, nor are the employers. We just want to sit down and talk. All reasonable people would expect that. I am trying to provide the conditions for it to take place. There will be a number of weeks before we begin to discuss possible legislation, which gives the continuing possibility, after nine months of dispute, that some kind of agreement can be found. What I am doing is indicating that we cannot continue to tolerate the continuation of the dispute with tactics that are deliberately designed to drag it out, cost a great deal more and cause the greatest of inconvenience generally with the least inconvenience to the fire workers. In those circumstances, I have to say on the Government's behalf that that is not acceptable practice.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): The Deputy Prime Minister rightly referred to the fact that retained firefighters have continued to work. Indeed, as he well knows, in my part of Cambridgeshire and many parts of the country, the retained service normally provides all cover, regardless of strikes. The Retained Firefighters Union does not have negotiating rights, so negotiations are carried out on behalf of retained firefighters by the FBU. Is the Deputy Prime Minister aware that, during the autumn, a provisional agreement was made on retained pay that would have resulted in a considerable reduction in income for a large proportion of retained firefighters? Given the sterling work that the retained service has continued to do in providing cover, does he agree that it would be astonishing if it were made the sacrificial lamb in the outcome of the talks?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The Government's view is that there should be a fair deal for everyone. Many of the retained firefighters are members of the FBU, which would claim the right to negotiate for them, but I am aware of the difficulties faced by those who are not members of the FBU and are not represented at the negotiating table. That was pointed out by Bain, who makes a number of recommendations about changing the structure of negotiation and discussions in the industry. We are considering those issues and I shall make a statement in the White Paper when we have reached our conclusions.

If people decide to go on strike, it is their right to do so. People who decide not to do so—in this case, they belong to another organisation—have the right to work at their workplace, and we should express our appreciation. That is a judgment for individuals, but I am aware of the difficulties and we will address the issue in the White Paper.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): I recently received a letter from a firefighter at Edlington fire station in my constituency in which he rightly pointed out that there has been modernisation in South Yorkshire, including the use of defibrillators and work with the community. He wanted reassurance that the Government acknowledge that there has been modernisation in certain parts of our fire service. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, to that firefighter, to the public and to everybody in the House, that prompts the question why, if it can happen in South Yorkshire, it cannot happen throughout the rest of the country?

The Deputy Prime Minister: One of the difficulties that we face is that different judgments can be made in different areas, whether on the central emergency control centres or defibrillators. That raises an important issue. Such matters should be subject to national decisions. The use of such equipment should be agreed in the industry between the unions and employers and implemented. As the general secretary has pointed out, sometimes a recommendation is made, but brigades do not implement it because they have a certain amount of authority. We will have to address that question. If we get a national agreement but a brigade says that it will not implement it—one of the problems that the process involves—we will have to do something about that. We will consider those difficulties in the White Paper. We want to reassure and thank those who have adopted modern methods that we think should be advanced in all areas and brigades. We should have a system in which that applies automatically, rather than in which single brigades make a decision about those important issues.

David Burnside (South Antrim): Those of us from Northern Ireland will welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's statement and give the legislation sympathy and scrutiny. Will he please give a commitment that the matter will be kept on a national level, not a decentralised one? It is important that it is debated, discussed and solved nationally. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that a firefighters' strike in coming weeks and months could seriously endanger life in this country? If we are going to war, one of the immediate reactions may be an increase in terrorism against the United Kingdom. The impact and threat of such an increase while firefighters are involved in a dispute will be to endanger life nationally. Will he try to solve the matter as soon as possible?

The Deputy Prime Minister might like to know that I met the FBU on Friday. Its members on the ground are reasonable men whose own worst enemy is their leadership. The matter needs to be settled as quickly as possible and that needs to be done at a national level, as we are moving into very dangerous territory in terms of the possibility of war and the threat of terrorism.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have made it clear to the House that I should like the dispute to end as soon as possible on agreeable terms. I am making an appeal that serious negotiations should take place and lead to conclusions. I have proposed that other actions be taken if that does not happen over time.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about the national issue, I referred to the Fire Services Act 1947, which was a United Kingdom measure. Indeed, at that time, the devolved Administrations did not exist and powers were not given to devolved authorities in different areas. The 1947 Act introduced a national requirement and I have to talk to devolved Administrations as much as other bodies to see how they feel about these matters. I have given them very quick notice—it is natural that I should do so—but I have reassured them that I will be having discussions. How we deal with the matter is a national issue, but if devolved Administrations feel that they want to deal with it differently, I must seek discussions with them.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): The Deputy Prime Minister failed to answer explicitly the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), so may I be more explicit in asking it? If he takes the power to impose a settlement and the FBU continues to strike, is he now considering taking the power to withdraw the

[John McDonnell]

right of firefighters to strike? If so, many will see this as an attempt to provoke an all-out strike and an attack on trade union rights in this country.

The Deputy Prime Minister: That is quite the opposite of what I intend, but the hon. Member is known for exploiting different statements made in the House to bad effect. Let me make it clear to him: I have said time and again in this House that I do not think that the dispute can be resolved with legislation. I have resisted many of the claims that have been made by those who say, "Why don't you use anti-strike legislation or instruct the Attorney-General?" The hon. Gentleman is not always here, but if he reads the record, he will see that I have been saying that from time to time, and I believe it. All that I am doing today is saying that there must be an end to the negotiations. The dispute has now run for nine months, and I hope that it ends quickly, but if it continues, that will not be acceptable. In such circumstances, I will have a responsibility to say, "If you cannot come to an agreement and there is a deadlock, we cannot sit here and whine." I have a responsibility for public safety and to see that a deal is implemented. I hope that those circumstances do not come about and that we will not need the legislation that I am talking about. The matter might be settled tomorrow and I might not have to talk about it again. That would be good.

If the hon. Member is asking, "What would happen if?", I point out that that is always the big question in politics. I hope that reasonable people will take into account the fact that we are trying to find a negotiated settlement and are providing more room for that to happen, but those involved will have to see that there is a timetable. If they choose not to do so, I will have to consider the circumstances. I know from my own experience that free people cannot be forced to work if they do not want to do so, but this is a matter of balance. I heard the same argument about prison officers, police and so on. *[Interruption.]* It did not lead to the circumstances to which he refers, although, presumably, that is what he predicted, as he does from time to time. In those circumstances, a judgment has to be made at the appropriate time. I am still ever hopeful that he will make a reasonable statement to reasonable men, rather than inflaming the situation, as he does from time to time. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Mr. McDonnell should be quiet.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I can call every hon. Member who stands, but they must be brief and ask only one question.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): Having sat in a green goddess for the first time on Friday in Plymouth—I admired it in a classic car kind of way, but saw that it was prehistoric, unsafe and completely unsuitable for firefighting work—may I press the Deputy Prime Minister to try to ensure that many more red engines are made available? After all, they are owned by the people of this country and not the striking firefighters, and he has repeatedly said that public safety is one of his primary concerns.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I had a similar experience when I rode on a green goddess in Leconfield in east Yorkshire. One admires the skills that are deployed in manoeuvring such old vehicles. We must give our armed forces the best facilities that we can for the job that we have asked them to undertake. Approximately 177 red engines are being used. There must be a balance between their deployment and that of the green goddesses. That is achieved in the way the armed services consider best and sufficient. We shall always try to fulfil their demands, but we currently have the balance that they requested.

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): As a trade unionist, I am bitterly disappointed that we have reached the point of my right hon. Friend considering legislation. I ask him again not to listen to Conservative Front-Bench Members. They clearly want to do nothing but take the dispute to court to break it. It is interesting that they use phrases such as "stopping the strike." That can happen only through a negotiated settlement.

I implore my right hon. Friend to look beyond the dispute at the Fire Services Act 1947. Does he agree that it bears no resemblance to the operation of the modern fire service?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have great sympathy with my hon. Friend. I take no pleasure in coming here to discuss such a move; indeed, I do so reluctantly. Agreement about work and conditions should be between the two parties.

At the time, people perceived the 1947 Act not as anti-trade union legislation but as a means of arbitration when two parties could not agree in the special circumstances that applied. It was fully supported by Labour and Conservative Members. However, that was more than 50 years ago, and people may feel differently now.

Our recognition of the right to strike lies at the heart of the matter. I would think very carefully before taking it away from people. However, it is important that people who get into a dispute reach an agreement in negotiations. We have had nine months of negotiations, if they can be described as such, yet the claim is still 40 per cent. That is unacceptable and people must sit down and negotiate seriously.

I am here today because there appears to have been a change of tactics—rather than a change of mind—and an attempt to drag matters out. In that case, I have to make a judgment and come to the House to present it. It is not a happy judgment for me, but I am doing what I believe to be right. I always told hon. Members that I would do that.

Patrick Mercer (Newark): I spent Friday with two watches at Newark fire station. As soon as the evening watch came on, there was a shout and the fire crew were out in an amazing and admirable 45 seconds. They got on to the A46 very efficiently. However, the town and the firefighters believe that there will be job losses and that Newark will become a day station with no night cover except for retained firemen. As far as I can ascertain, there is no basis for that in fact. I therefore beg the Deputy Prime Minister to dispel those rumours in as clear English as he possibly can, and to try to clarify matters without exacerbating the problem.

The Deputy Prime Minister: Another ex-Army type—they have always brought to the House some arrogance, which we enjoy from time to time.

Local committees will decide matters that affect fire stations. Repealing section 19 of the Act gives responsibility for such decisions to local committees. The people in the area will therefore have maximum influence on them.

Fire risk cover must be taken into account, and a proper balance must be struck between intervention and prevention. Again, the committee will make that judgment. I believe that that is right and that the hon. Gentleman's constituents will welcome it.

Mr. Iain Luke (Dundee, East): No one benefits from a prolonged firefighters' dispute, but does my right hon. Friend accept that many elements of the trade union movement will view his announcement with concern and, indeed, outrage? However, I hope that it will give time for thought. If the FBU returns to the negotiating table and embraces discussions on modernisation, will the Government find extra money in view of the contention that, in the past, firefighters were offered 16 per cent. over two years? Given the profound nature of the proposals in the Bain report, will the Government make a commitment to find extra money if the employers want to go down that road?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Let me make it clear that the 16 per cent. over two years was not agreed between the relevant parties, although I believe that it was discussed. We said that, as Bain pointed out, a settlement of 11 per cent. for two years and a possible agreement to extend that to three years would require a transfer of funds. It is therefore possible that the negotiations could have led to more than 11 per cent., but we never got to that point. I simply ask the FBU to sit down and discuss that. It claims that there will be redundancies and that fire stations will close. Why does it not sit down, negotiate and find out? If it finds that its judgment is correct, I assume that the members will walk out. That is called negotiating. I hope that they will not walk out, but that happens in negotiations.

I understand my hon. Friend's point about outrage, but only a few months previously the rest of the local authority workers, who are paid from the same fund, got less than 4 per cent. a year for a two-year programme, yet the FBU asks for 40 per cent. Local authority workers feel outraged that 40 per cent. from the same fund could be regarded as justified. They believe that they are entitled to more, and they have a point. I have to strike a balance, and 4 per cent. and 40 per cent. do not balance properly.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk): Will the Deputy Prime Minister provide some clarity about the time scale to which he is working for introducing the legislation? When does he propose to publish a draft measure? Is he working on the basis that it will end the dispute or is it intended to deal with future disputes? I am not clear from his answers whether he intends to ban strikes as part of the agreement. Would he consider the alternative of moving towards an agreed no-strike arrangement? That might be an attractive way forward because there must be better ways in which to resolve disputes in emergency services than the débâcle so far.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have some sympathy with the idea of a better way; I call it negotiations. It is a pity that we have not concluded them. However, we must bear it in mind that negotiations have taken place with the firemen for nearly 20 years when there have been no disputes. An agreement was reached 20 years ago. That is what people would like, but we are in the process of replacing the agreement with another. Although I have often made it clear that the Government consider all options—we must do that—rushing into strike legislation will solve nothing. If I impose a settlement that the FBU refuses to accept, further difficulties will ensue. However, I should prefer to face that. I am putting my faith in negotiations.

The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the difference when dealing with emergency services. The White Paper will deal with that point, which the Bain inquiry raised. My judgment is to ask the FBU to continue negotiations.

The hon. Gentleman asked how long legislation would take. That depends on the consultation, but I am talking about weeks, not months. However, weeks remain available for negotiations. I cannot therefore answer the hon. Gentleman. If I introduce legislation, hon. Members will want to debate it and any recommendations that flow from it. I cannot give an exact time, but we are looking at weeks, not months. The negotiations cannot go on and on in deadlock. I have a responsibility to act and I have given my best judgment today.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Given the Deputy Prime Minister's comments about the unreasonable actions of the FBU leadership, does he consider them, to quote Harold Wilson, "a small group of politically motivated men"?

The Deputy Prime Minister: They are a group of people who feel strongly about their negotiations and want to conclude an agreement. The leadership currently suggest that they want to follow the route of more industrial disputes; that is their right. However, I intend to introduce legislation in a specific period if the deadlock continues.

Victoria Climbié Inquiry

1.29 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the Victoria Climbié inquiry.

The report of the inquiry is being published today. It is available in the Vote Office. I am grateful, Mr Speaker, for your agreement that Victoria's parents should have had advance access to a copy of the report.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I established the inquiry in April 2001 under the chairmanship of Lord Laming, formerly the chief inspector of social services. We are both extremely grateful to Lord Laming and his advisers for producing a searching and detailed report and recommendations.

Words in a report can never be enough for a family whose child has died in such terrible circumstances. I am grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Climbié for seeing me last week and allowing me to express, on behalf of the House and the country, the sorrow we all feel at the death of their beloved daughter, Victoria. Anyone who has had the privilege to meet Mr and Mrs Climbié cannot fail to be struck by their quiet dignity in the face of what happened to Victoria.

I hope the report provides them with some comfort as it seeks to answer the questions any parent would ask: what exactly happened? What went so wrong? What needs now to change to prevent services that are supposed to keep children from harm failing in the way they failed Victoria so badly and so repeatedly?

Lord Laming's inquiry lasted more than a year. His report runs to some 400 pages. We will study its 108 recommendations with care. Today I will outline the inquiry's findings and the Government's initial views. We will make our substantive response to the report as part of the Green Paper on children at risk, which we intend to publish this spring.

Victoria Climbié was part of a large, loving family living in the Ivory Coast. Her parents had agreed she could come to Europe in order to be educated. This was not about giving Victoria away; it was about giving Victoria an opportunity. All they wanted—as any parent would—was for their daughter to have the best education. Instead, she suffered the worst cruelty.

Victoria arrived in Britain with her great-aunt, Marie-Therese Kouao, in April 1999. Within a year she was dead—murdered by the people who had taken the principal responsibility for caring for her: Kouao and her boyfriend, Carl John Manning. Both are now serving life imprisonment.

The cruelty experienced by Victoria before her death is truly the stuff of nightmares. Manning told the trial that Kouao would strike Victoria daily with a shoe, a coat hanger and a wooden spoon. She would hit her toes with a hammer. Victoria's blood was found on Manning's football boots. He admitted hitting her with a bicycle chain.

Victoria's final days—in the depths of winter—were spent living and sleeping in a bath in an unheated bathroom, in her own urine and faeces, bound hand and foot in a bin bag.

Despite valiant efforts on the part of NHS staff, Victoria died of hypothermia, after months of abuse, on 25 February 2000 at St Mary's hospital, Paddington. She had 128 separate injuries to her body. She was just eight years old.

It is a shocking but sad truth that about 80 children a year die from abuse or neglect. While a civilised society must do everything it can to protect children, sadly a few adults will always manage to perpetrate abuse, not least because those who do are, by definition, manipulative and secretive.

What makes Victoria's case so appalling, however, is that while the unspeakable abuse she suffered happened behind closed doors, in secret, Victoria herself was never hidden from the authorities or the agencies empowered by Parliament to protect children like her.

Victoria was known to three housing authorities and involved with four social services departments—in Brent, Ealing, Enfield and Haringey. Despite receiving allegations that she had been abused, none of the councils even managed to undertake a proper assessment of her needs. Social services did nothing to help her.

Victoria was known to two separate child protection teams of the Metropolitan police. Despite being told that she had probably been deliberately harmed, they failed to investigate the alleged crime. The police services did nothing to help her.

Victoria was referred to the specialist Tottenham child and family centre, managed by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Despite marking her case as urgent, it failed to take any action to see Victoria. The NSPCC centre did nothing to help her.

Victoria was admitted to two different NHS hospitals—the Central Middlesex and North Middlesex. Despite suffering scalding to her head and face, and other evidence that staff saw of beatings and abuse, she was discharged and returned to her abusers. The NHS did nothing to help her.

Between April 1999 and February 2000, on more than a dozen occasions the relevant services had the opportunity to intervene to protect Victoria Climbié. More than 12 times in 10 months they failed to do so. This was not a failing on the part of any one service. It was a failing on the part of every service.

As Lord Laming says,

> "The extent of the failure to protect Victoria was lamentable. Tragically it required nothing more than basic good practice being put into operation . . . doing the basic things well saves lives . . . Victoria died because those responsible for her care adopted poor practice standards."

Lord Laming considers that the current statutory framework for child protection, set out in the Children Act 1989, is basically sound. I take little comfort from that. Sound legislative policy and guidance is, frankly, useless unless we can be sure that it is implemented effectively and consistently.

Those who take on the work of protecting children at risk of deliberate harm of course face a difficult and challenging task. As Neil Garnham QC told the inquiry,

> "Hundreds of children benefit every year from efficient and timely intervention by social workers, police officers and hospital staff. We would do children like Victoria no favours if we demonise entire professions as we seek to understand and remedy the weaknesses and deficiencies highlighted by a single case."

While public servants should enjoy our support, they should not expect our excuses. There were failures at every level and by every organisation which came into contact with Victoria Climbié. There were problems with staffing and with resources. In Haringey the council was spending substantially less than the standard spending assessment it had been allocated for children and families. In Brent the council was spending just half of what it had been allocated.

Lord Laming rightly describes as breathtaking the unwillingness of some of the most senior people in these agencies to accept that they were in any way accountable for these failures. It is his concern with this lack of accountability that leads Lord Laming to recommend change through the creation of new national and local structures for services for children and families. Lord Laming rejects proposals to separate child protection services, but calls for better co-ordination from top to bottom.

It is an all too familiar cry. In the past few decades there have been dozens of inquiries into awful cases of child abuse and neglect. Each has called on us to learn the lesson of what went wrong. Indeed, there is a remarkable consistency both in what went wrong and what is advocated to put it right. Lord Laming's report goes further. It recognises that the search for a simple solution or a quick fix will not do. It is not just national standards, or proper training, or adequate resourcing, or local leadership or new structures that are needed. It is all of these things.

In recent years there has been a renewed effort to improve safeguards for children: the Protection of Children Act 1999; the Care Standards Act 2000; programmes such as quality protects and sure start; new work on systems for identifying, referring and tracking children at risk.

Alongside the fuller response that we will include with the Green Paper in the spring, I can tell the House that there are important steps I intend to take immediately.

First, the inquiry is highly critical of the local services that failed Victoria. Since her death each has been subject to review. Some have been restructured. Some staff have been disciplined, others dismissed. In the light of the Laming report, it will be for each employer to determine whether further action is necessary against individuals, including those in senior managerial positions. In the meantime, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I are asking the inspectorates responsible for health, police and social services to undertake further joint monitoring of these local services in north London to provide independent assurance that standards are, indeed, improving.

Secondly, the inquiry concludes that in all agencies there was a low priority given to the task of protecting children. The Home Secretary has made child protection a priority through the national policing plan. He has asked chief constables to review force child protection units and consider how to action the recommendations of the report and reflect them in their local policing plans.

Additionally, I am today writing to all chief executives in local health services and local authorities emphasising their duties towards vulnerable children and the need to reflect them in their budget decisions. Social services budgets will rise by an average of 6 per cent. in real terms in each of the next three years. NHS budgets will rise by nearly 7 per cent. Extra resources should help employ more staff, including an extra 5,000 social workers, at a time when applications for social work courses, which fell for almost a decade, are now rising.

Thirdly, the report highlights inadequacies in the training of front-line professionals. Training for police officers is already being reviewed and we will ensure that Lord Laming's recommendations are fully taken on board. Social work training is also being fundamentally overhauled. From September, a new three-year social work degree will be introduced to raise the standards and status of the profession. It will focus on assessment, communication and working with other professionals—the areas where Victoria was so badly let down. The Home Secretary and I also intend to ask the professional bodies responsible for training police, social services and NHS staff in child protection to oversee a review of training needs, including a better focus on inter-agency training.

Fourthly, the report highlights the failure of agencies to adhere to common standards in the care of children. I believe that the Laming report re-emphasises the need for new national standards to which all local health and social services can work. I can tell the House today that I intend to publish the first part of those standards, covering the care of children in hospital, next month and the remaining standards by the end of the year.

Fifthly, the report says that there was confusion about guidance on aspects of child protection. Within the next three months, I intend to secure the replacement of all existing local guidance with new, shorter, clearer guidance that will reach every one of the 1 million professional staff dealing with the safeguarding of children. I also intend to simplify the wider range of Children Act guidance. It runs to more than 1,500 pages and covers 15 volumes. Some of it is out of date. Our intention is to reduce it by 90 per cent., make it available in a single volume and update it regularly.

Sixthly, more than half Lord Laming's recommendations are aimed at correcting repeated failures in basic professional practice. We are today issuing a checklist of those recommendations. Police, health and social services are being asked to guarantee that, within the three-month deadline demanded by Lord Laming, those basic elements of good professional practice will be in place.

Seventhly, the report says that there was a fundamental failure to translate good intentions into good practices. The Home Secretary and I have therefore asked the relevant inspectorates to supplement their planned joint inspections with a new programme of further visits to verify that those elements of basic good practice are being implemented, particularly where there are concerns about local services. We will also consider whether further powers are needed to intervene earlier and more effectively.

Finally, Victoria needed services that worked together. The report says that, instead, there was confusion and conflict. Down the years, inquiry after inquiry has called for better communication and better co-ordination, but neither exhortation nor legislation has proven adequate. The only sure-fire way to break down the barriers between those services is to remove them altogether.

[Mr. Alan Milburn]

Fundamental reform is needed to pool knowledge, skills and resources to provide more seamless local services for children. Therefore, I am today inviting health and social services, and other local services such as education, to become the first-generation children's trusts. Those pilot children's trusts will mean that local services for children are run through a single local organisation.

We will explore a range of models, including children's trusts, that could be led by local authorities and others, and that could be established as new public-interest organisations, drawing in the expertise of the community, private and voluntary sectors. In future, services for children must be centred not around the interests of any organisation, but around the interests of the child. Nothing—no existing organisation, no existing structure—should be allowed to stand in the way. We will of course consider in the Green Paper Lord Laming's recommendations for further structural changes.

Those reforms cannot be the end of the matter. If some good is to come out of this tragedy, lasting change must come out of it too. Lord Laming is determined that that is what should happen, and the whole Government share that determination. Victoria's parents asked for nothing more for their daughter than the opportunity of a better life in our country. I am deeply sorry that she did not get that simple chance.

We cannot undo the wrongs done to Victoria Climbié. We can, though, seek to put right for others what so fundamentally failed for her. That is what Lord Laming's report demands, and it is what the Government are determined to do. I commend the Laming report to the House.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his statement and his courtesy in making it available to the Opposition earlier.

Clearly, this is an appalling human tragedy first and foremost, and it is right that we remember the feelings and sensitivities of Victoria's parents as we discuss the details of what needs to be done. That a defenceless child could be subjected to such unspeakable acts of savagery over such a long period brings shame on our society. Those who are brave enough to do so can only imagine the terror, pain and misery that she must have endured, but this is also a shocking tale of individual professional failure and systematic incompetence.

During the past 30 years, there have been more than 30 inquiries into the deaths of children who were known to social services. None seems to have had much effect. We all agree, time after time, that it must never happen again, but it does. Lauren Wright, John Smith and Ainlee Walker are only a few of the large number of those who have been failed by the system.

There are a number of questions that I want to raise with the Secretary of State, although I do not expect him to answer them in his response, as they cover important and sometimes conceptual and cultural issues that we need to examine in far more detail than is possible in the House today. Every report says that something must be done. Why will this one be different? How will the House be able to monitor progress in a truly transparent way so that this one does make a difference?

Communication is the main problem among different agencies. How will that improve in practice beyond just setting up new structures? What role is envisaged for the greater use of information sharing and early detection? Intelligence gathering can succeed only on a local basis. What review of the Data Protection Act 1998 will the Government undertake to ensure that nothing stands in the way of the proper sharing of information?

Will the Secretary of State tell us what action has been taken against the social workers involved in this case to give us a guarantee that they are not still responsible for children? What progress has been made to fill gaps in social work, especially in London and the south-east?

The Secretary of State did not touch on one subject: it is estimated that about 10,000 children in England and Wales are privately fostered—80 to 90 per cent. of them are west African—despite the Utting report identifying private fostering as

> "clearly an area where children are not being safeguarded properly, indeed an unknown number are likely to be seriously at risk."

Will the Government be taking any action to regulate private fostering to approved lists of people only, having failed to include that reform in the Adoption and Children Act 2002? To what extent does the Secretary of State believe that the current classifications of "children in need" or "children in need of protection" militate against appropriate protection? What changes are to be made? In a case such as Victoria's, once a child is categorised as requiring family support, the child's need for protection falls from notice.

If the status of social workers is being improved and more responsibility given, equally, what measures are being put in place to ensure that incompetent social workers are disciplined as toughly as other medical professionals? What does the Secretary of State think has been learned from the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, which placed a positive duty of care on parents to promote children's well-being? Do the Government favour a single system of referral and assessment to address needs—for example, child safeguarding teams proposed by the NSPCC along the lines of existing youth offending teams and sure start? Should sections 27 and 47 of the Children Act 1989 be amended to include police and GPs as agencies that should support the local authority when it is carrying out its duties in relation to children in need of protection?

Despite what the Secretary of State said, the new police national plan 2003–06 lists child protection under the heading "other policing responsibilities". I hope that the right hon. Gentleman's statement today reflects a change of mind on behalf of the Home Secretary about the importance that child protection will be given.

Above all today we need to make sure that the changes recommended by Lord Laming and being introduced by the Government will allow us to get to a system in which we all know clearly where the buck stops. Professional failure on this literally fatal scale cannot, and must not, be tolerated. We welcome the concept of children's trusts, but I am sure that the Secretary of State will be well aware that the devil will lie in the details, including budget sharing, which will be worked out later.

I fully understand the difficulties faced by professionals in this very difficult area. I have been there myself. I can think of nothing that I have ever done professionally as stomach churning and terrifying as telling parents that I suspected them of having abused their child. However, the primary responsibility for professionals is to the child in their care, not the professional relationship with the carer, as it has been too often. Difficult though it may be, we need to encourage that cultural change in all the professionals who deal with children. "I'm too busy/didn't suspect it/didn't have enough resources" are excuses that we cannot allow to be tolerated.

In the time available today, it is not possible to do justice to the detailed conclusions and analysis in Lord Laming's report. I hope that we will get a chance to debate those matters in great detail in Government time over the coming months. Whatever measures need to be taken must be taken, and quickly. The Conservative party will willingly give its support in this most justified cause.

Mr. Milburn: I am extremely grateful for the tone and much of the content of what the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) has said, and I shall try to respond to some of the detailed points that he made.

The hon. Member for Woodspring said that there have been a lot of inquiries over the years. That is certainly true. There have been both statutory public inquiries such as the Laming report and more private inquiries into the deaths and abuse of neglected children. The hon. Gentleman asked what was different about this report and about what we could make different, and he also wondered whether any inquiry had resulted in change. I think that some of them did result in change. The Children Act 1989 is a prime example, and Lord Laming considers it the bedrock of the legislative framework for the protection of children in our country.

However, I was very heartened to hear Lord Laming say on the radio this morning that the inquiry had already had an impact, even before publication of the report. I believe that he is right. For example, the Metropolitan Police Service has fundamentally restructured its child protection services. Quite rightly, it has brought those services under the aegis of serious crime, which is arguably where they should always have been housed. That is welcome, and there have been other changes in both the national health service and social services. We must build on those changes.

The hon. Member for Woodspring asked whether we could be assured that there would be appropriate monitoring of change and improvement. That is one of the issues that we will need to consider extremely carefully as we craft the Green Paper. Lord Laming's principal recommendations concern the central issue of accountability—how we can ensure that, from top to bottom, the interests of the child always come first, and that the different agencies involved in providing care and sometimes treatment are fulfilling their responsibilities. In due course, the Govt will present proposals on that.

The hon. Member for Woodspring asked about the disciplining of individual social workers. Some have been disciplined and others dismissed. However, Lord Laming makes a very strident point in his report when he states that front-line professionals—in social care, health care or the police service—failed to carry out the elements of good professional practice. Some have paid a price for that failure, but it is noticeable that the people in charge of some of the local agencies have not suffered a similar fate, and no consequences have been felt at any level of the organisations involved.

People in charge of organisations at local level—whether they have political or managerial responsibility—need to examine the Laming report's conclusions very carefully indeed. As the hon. Member for Woodspring rightly said, they should also examine their consciences.

The hon. Member for Woodspring mentioned gaps in social worker numbers. Haringey is the authority most criticised in the report, and it was charged for the longest period with caring for Victoria during her stay in this country. It had terrible problems with the numbers of locum staff and of vacancies among social workers. It took a conscious political decision—and I think that it was the right one—to invest more money in social services and to increase pay for social care staff. Those decisions have helped to plug some of the social work vacancies that Haringey was carrying. If one local authority can do that, others should learn the lesson.

With regard to private fostering, Lord Laming has asked the Government to carry out a review of the relevant law. We are undertaking that review, and the conclusions will be part of the Green Paper.

The hon. Member for Woodspring asked what the Government were going to do in respect of incompetent social workers. It is worth placing on record that, overwhelmingly, social workers do a very difficult job very well. The temptation for people—not necessarily in this House but outside it—will be to point the finger of blame. In these circumstances, that is extremely easy. However, we must ensure that there is adequate support for social work staff, and that the right safeguards are in place.

As far as safeguards are concerned, the new general social care council will, for the first time, regulate and register qualified social workers. That will be an important step towards establishing the sort of assurances sadly lacking in this case.

The hon. Member for Woodspring asked about national policing priorities. Ensuring that adequate child protection is in place is part of the violent crime priority, which is a national priority for the police service.

Finally, the hon. Member for Woodspring made a very telling point when he said that, all too often, what happens in cases such as this is that the interests of the people with the responsibility for caring come before the interests of the child. In this case, that is graphically true. Time after time, Kouao was interviewed and spoken to. Her needs were assessed and she had frequent and continual meetings with social care staff and other staff in the caring professions. It is noticeable that at virtually no point did anyone bother to ask Victoria what was happening to her.

That can be described only as a lamentable failure. We need to get the training and the relevant structures right, but most of all we must get right the culture of these vital public services. We have those services for one reason—to serve. None has a God-given right to

[Mr. Milburn]

exist. The interests of those services should lie only in serving the interests of the child. That is what we must ensure happens in the future.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for giving me the opportunity to see the report and his statement in advance. I associate myself and other Liberal Democrat Members with the sentiments expressed by the right hon. Gentleman and by the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) about the report and about the sensitivities involved in this tragic case.

Reading through the report, I had a terrible sense of déjà vu. The same weaknesses encountered before led to the same mistakes being made, and they led to the same missed opportunities to do what was necessary to ensure that the nightmare of neglect and abuse described by the Secretary of State did not happen to Victoria. There is no quick fix, so may I ask the Secretary of State some questions?

The right hon. Gentleman talked about rationalising and replacing a welter of guidance and documentation. That is welcome, but can he tell us whether that will include clarity about what is risk and what is harm? All too often, there is confusion about that, with different definitions being applied in different parts of the country.

Will the Secretary of State say more about the children's trust proposals? The Liberal Democrats welcome the proposals in their pilot form because there is a need to explore new ways of integrating services locally. Will further guidance be published to assist local authorities in deciding whether they want to take the opportunity that he is offering them? Does he accept, however, that the boundaries between agencies will remain even when children's trusts are in place?

Will the Secretary of State say more about the area child protection committees? Legislation alone is not enough, but does he agree none the less that all the agencies involved in an ACPC must have a statutory duty to take part? In too many places, they do not join in as they should.

Lord Laming's recommendations referred to the need to move to a new system of safeguarding and promoting welfare and away from merely keeping registers. Can the Secretary of State ensure that everyone will turn up to child protection conferences and that the general practitioners and teachers are there? All too often, the key players do not take part.

Recommendation 16 rightly refers to the need to address information sharing. Information must pass freely and confidentially between the agencies. The report proposes that the Secretary of State issue guidance. When will he do so? It should be issued as soon as possible.

As the Secretary of State said, training is a key issue, but it can succeed only if we can recruit and retain enough staff. The chief inspector of social services has told us all that there is a serious crisis in the recruitment and retention of social workers. What additional steps are being taken, not least to reward experienced social workers who choose to stay at the front line to do their job and who really make a difference?

The national agency proposed in the recommendations has many characteristics similar to those required in a children's commissioner. I hope that it can indeed become a children's commissioner. Will the Secretary of State end the consideration process and confirm that the Government will introduce a children's commissioner in England?

As we look back on 30 years of inquiries into children's deaths, the milestones in the development of our child protection system have been marked, sadly and tragically, by the gravestones of children who suffered a nightmare of neglect and abuse. The Liberal Democrats will work with the Government to ensure that the system is strengthened and resourced and that it delivers a better quality of life for all our children.

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments and very much agree that there is no quick fix. However, one striking thing about the Laming report is that although Lord Laming, who has a wealth of experience as a former chief inspector of social services, recognises that some changes will take time, he has wisely put a time scale on some of the changes that he recommended. Although he realises that there is no magic wand that can be waved, he says that about 88 or 89 of his 108 recommendations should be capable of implementation in some shape or form within six months. That is why I took action as I did today. I have distributed the recommendations to local authorities and the national health service and written to them about what my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is doing as regards police services. We have to get the balance right and I think that we are capable of doing so. We can fix what can be fixed quickly while recognising that some of the structural and cultural changes will take time.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the revised guidance would include clarification about whether a child was at risk or at harm. I read the report in considerable detail and it is clear that sometimes there is—at best—confusion about whether a case comes under section 17 or section 47. If it is a section 47 case, it goes up the list of priorities, but if it is a section 17 case it is deprioritised. That is one of the issues that we shall need to address in the guidance and we shall look carefully at that.

We shall issue guidance on children's trusts and an invitation to local authorities, the NHS and other organisations to make proposals. The trusts could take a variety of forms.

In recent years, there have been a number of recommendations on the structure of the ACPCs—for example, that they should be placed on a statutory footing. We must now consider such recommendations in the light of Lord Laming's broader structural recommendations to ensure that we get the overall structural balance right. The ACPCs could provide an important focus for local agencies to come together locally. However, partnership works well only when it is real rather than nominal. Although things vary throughout the country, all too often there is an assumption—for example, in the NHS—that the committees are really the responsibility of social services and no one else. We must be extremely careful to understand that what Lord Laming says is not specifically addressed to social services. He is not addressing one part of the care system, but the whole care system. It is only if we get the whole system right that we shall avoid the problems that were encountered in this case.

More needs to be done about recruitment. However, the case of Haringey—of all places—should fill us all with hope. Haringey had the worst record and, arguably, some of the worst services. Who would want to work in Haringey? Well, people are working there and they are doing so because the council took the decision to raise the status and the pay of the social work staff that it employed. That is a lesson that other local authorities should heed.

Lord Laming makes recommendations about the children's commissioner, but housed within a particular national, regional and local structure. We shall need to consider carefully whether that makes sense when we make our considerations for the Green Paper.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Members of the House have the first responsibility for dealing with these issues and that it is essential to hone our anger and concern about what we have heard today into a determination to transform children's services and ensure that such a scandalous chain of events never happens again? Does he also agree that the Government have a huge responsibility to face some of the difficult issues that have been around for such a long time? For example, we need to put children's rights at the heart of any agenda for children, to address the fundamental need for a children's commissioner for all parts of the United Kingdom and to address the important point that, under the law, children have less protection from assault than adults. We must deal with private fostering and invest thoroughly and comprehensively to ensure that all who work in services for children, especially in child protection services, have the status, pay and career prospects that they deserve.

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend makes some telling points. He referred to anger. Both the anger and the incredulity of Lord Laming and his advisers about what happened are crystal clear from the Victoria Climbié inquiry report. It is more than a sorry tale: it is repeated failure at every level. The constant assumption made in almost every agency and by almost every member of staff was that Victoria's needs were being catered for by someone else, somewhere else. As we now know, nobody was catering for those needs. As my hon. Friend says, we really must learn those lessons now.

There are responsibilities both for local services and for national Government. The fact that we are publishing the Green Paper in the spring, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced some time ago, is a recognition across the whole Government that the existing structures, nationally and locally, need change. Some of the issues that my hon. Friend raised will of course need to be detailed in the Green Paper.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): Listening to my right hon. Friend's reasoned statement, I was struck by the fact that, 30 years ago, I had just started in local authority child protection social work, and we had recently had the Maria Colwell report on an appalling set of circumstances. I find it incredible that I am here 30 years later after 35 inquiries listening to more or less word for word the same story and the same sad, tragic picture. However, I have taken some comfort from the statement today in that communication between professionals has been a key element all the way along the line. As someone who has argued for integration of professionals at local level and co-location, I warmly welcome the comments that my right hon. Friend has made today.

May I press my right hon. Friend on a more fundamental matter touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson)? It is clear that physical punishment was an issue in this sad and tragic case. My right hon. Friend is looking at the policies of countries such as Sweden on delayed discharges and foundation hospitals. Will he also look at what other countries have done on child protection? Sweden acted to outlaw the physical punishment of children by parents 10 years ago, and while we have experienced at least one child death per week at the hands of parents and carers in the past 10 years, Sweden has had none. Will my right hon. Friend consider that as a matter of urgency?

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is always worth listening to on these issues. He has campaigned long and hard for many years both before coming into this place and since he has been a Member of Parliament for better integration and co-ordination of services. There are important lessons that we need to learn from that.

It is crystal clear from this and all too many other cases that services were simply pointing in opposite directions. Social services were doing one thing, the health service was doing another and the police were doing a third thing. The consequence of that is confusion: people are passed round the system and, unfortunately, there is intervention later rather than sooner. Those are issues that we need to address. However, I say in all candour to my hon. Friend that I am cautious about confusing what happened to Victoria Climbié with issues around smacking and the reasonable chastisement of children. What happened to Victoria was of a quite different order. I know that my hon. Friend knows that. He knows the Government's position on these issues. Of course we will keep them under review, but it is important to separate the extreme violence that happened to this poor child from the sort of issues that my hon. Friend raised.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement today and his proposals to publish a Green Paper. He clearly recognises that the fundamental causes of the 80 deaths from abuse per year of vulnerable children are a lack of liaison between the relevant agencies and a lack of accountability. Both were clearly demonstrated in the tragic case of my constituent Lauren Wright.

Does the Secretary of State intend to make the new guidance statutory? Is he in a position to say today—perhaps not—how children's trusts will improve accountability?

Mr. Milburn: I know that the right hon. Lady has taken an active interest in these matters, not only in the case of Lauren Wright but in her previous guise as

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Education Secretary in the Conservative Government. She is aware that the current guidance is statutory. That is the problem. We have to get the right combination. Of course we have to have statutory guidance. Of course we have to have the right system of monitoring. Of course we have to have the right system of accountability. Of course we have to have the right system of training. Of course we have to make sure that we have decent local management who take responsibility rather than ducking it. Of course we have to have the right structures.

Several colleagues on both sides of the House have asked what is so different about this situation and the Laming report. I believe that the difference is that we have a broad sweep of recommendations covering all the issues and a vehicle, in the Green Paper, by which they can be addressed. It is only if we get accountability, structures, training, funding and local management right that we will avoid some of the terrible problems that children down the years have had to face. I believe that we have an opportunity to do that. Children's trusts are a means to that end. I believe that they will improve accountability. One local organisation will be responsible for protecting vulnerable children and people will not continually pass the buck.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): The Secretary of State will be aware that the Laming report explicitly directs most criticism, and places most of the responsibility for what happened to Victoria, not on the front-line staff but on senior managers and councillors in the local authorities. Time after time, events such as this happen, senior managers get themselves a media adviser and we hear the same old interviews about lack of resources. In many cases, those people go on to even better and more highly paid jobs. I believe that one way to stop such events happening again is to make sure that senior people take the responsibility that they are paid to take.

The practice of private unlicensed fostering, largely by west Africans, has gone on for a long time. At best, it causes all sorts of trauma. At worst, children are open to all sorts of abuse. It is time that the Government moved to close this practice down.

Mr. Milburn: To make managers accountable there has to be a proper system of accountability from top to bottom. That is what Lord Laming addresses in his recommendations. We will consider those recommendations seriously because that form of accountability is not present in the current system.

On private fostering, we will take extremely seriously the representations that have been made to us not just by Lord Laming but by others. However, let me strike one note of caution about reviewing the law on private fostering and the Victoria Climbié case. It is true that, legally, Victoria was being privately fostered. No one knew that, for one simple reason. Her great-aunt Kouao lied about who she was. She called Victoria "Anna" and said that she was her mother. Even if we had had changes in the private fostering legislation on the statute book, it would not have stopped the person responsible for caring for Victoria lying. She would have continued to lie.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): For Cambridgeshire Members, I am afraid that the painful recollection of the Rikki Neave case serves only to heighten our distress at what happened to Victoria Climbié.

Substantial benefits may flow from the introduction of children's trusts, but will the Secretary of State consider in the Green Paper two consequences that ought to flow from that proposal? First, having a children's trust does not automatically remove professional demarcations and boundaries—they could persist inside one. Is there a case, therefore, for giving one professional worker, whatever their discipline, responsibility for the services provided to a child and the authority to draw together the relevant services within the children's trust and impose requirements on other services?

Secondly, if one puts all the services within the trust, one makes the accountability clearer, but the service is unified and hence potentially more resistant to external scrutiny and more likely to cleave to a single explanation. Is it not therefore more important for there to be an external voice—if not that of the children themselves, then a children's commissioner—to speak on behalf of children from an independent, external standpoint?

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments and questions. On his latter point, we will address those issues as part of the Green Paper. On the first issue, I very much agree about professional demarcations and boundaries. The disaster would be to break down boundaries between structures and organisations but retain precisely the same boundaries between professionals. That is why it is so important that we have asked various professional bodies, local government and the training organisations to produce proposals on that. For example, I have never fully understood why the skills of health visitors and those of social workers cannot be put together to offer better support to families and children in times of trouble. We should be perfectly capable of doing that.

The hon. Gentleman puts the accent on flexibility and partnership working, but that has to apply as much at the level of the individual professional in those services as at that of the individual services.

Mr. Shaun Woodward (St. Helens, South): The Secretary of State will be aware that, for 10 years, I have been a trustee of the charity Childline, which takes tens of thousands of calls each year from children who, mercifully, do not die, but many of whom suffer in silence and never reach social workers or anyone else for protection.

Childline, along with every other major children's charity, has argued for a children's commissioner for England for a number of years. The Secretary of State spoke about culture. The problem is that civil servants, by and large, do not want a children's commissioner for England. If he wishes to tackle the culture of child protection, he will have to tackle the culture of

Whitehall, which does not want to create a children's commissioner for England. Since every children's charity supports the creation of one, will he agree to change that culture in Whitehall? Will he act quickly to do so, because I believe that a children's commissioner would make a serious difference in protecting children?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. Although we all know that this matter is grave, deeply disturbing and complex, may I appeal for brevity in questions and answers, as that is necessary if I am to call every hon. Member who is seeking to catch my eye?

Mr. Milburn: I shall do my best, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

As for getting such things out into the open, it is very important that there was a public inquiry. Indeed, before he joined the Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) was one of those who argued very strongly that a public inquiry should be conducted properly in the open, so that people could hear and see the evidence for themselves. That has been achieved.

As for a children's commissioner, I understand the concerns and views of the organisation with which my hon. Friend is associated. Of course we will consider those issues in drafting the Green Paper. Again, let me say that it is very important that any structure or post that we put in place fulfils a function that will make a difference. Let us forget about making suitable gestures or getting the right symbolic policies. Symbolic policies do not save lives. What saves lives is good practice in social services offices, NHS hospitals and local police stations. That is the focus of the Laming report. Of course we have to ensure that we get the right combination between the national and the local, but let us remember where services are delivered: not in Whitehall, but in local communities.

Hywel Williams (Caernarfon): I welcome the new three-year degree for training social workers, but does the Secretary of State accept that there is value in shorter, postgraduate qualifications for people with relevant degrees, as they would be more likely to attract people with life experience, whom we so desperately need to provide improved services?

Mr. Milburn: Basically, we need both. We need people who have had a former occupation or those who have a suitable qualification to come forward. If we can achieve that on a postgraduate basis, so much the better, but the training has to be right to raise the profession's status as much as anything else and to ensure that we have the people to carry out this very difficult task. As I say, good social workers deserve to be valued, not vilified.

We have to ensure that the training is right. That is why, for example, in our proposals for the new three-year social work degree, we say that no one will be able to go into post unless they have carried out 200 days of practice on the front line, so that, when they go into post, they are experienced in precisely the sort of difficulties that social workers face day in, day out. One of the tragedies of this case is that very inexperienced people were put into the most difficult position imaginable, and we have to avoid that in future.

Ms Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley): I, too, welcome the emphasis on increased training for all staff involved in child protection. However, it is not clear how those staff will be required to demonstrate their competence in child protection before they begin working with children. How will the Secretary of State ensure that all staff—not just social workers, but those in health care, the police and, indeed, those in education, who see many of those children day in, day out, at school—have the required skills, not just the training, to be able to fulfil their responsibilities?

Mr. Milburn: As my hon. Friend rightly says from her own experience, it is important that the people who work in those difficult professions have suitable competence, not just when they start, but throughout their careers. That is why it is important that we are commissioning the review of training requirements to ensure that all those who have a responsibility for safeguarding the interests of children—whether in the police service, the social services or the health service—are properly versed not just in child protection procedures, but in child development, too. That will help to ensure the competence of those people, who do a difficult job, sometimes in pretty difficult circumstances.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): I welcome the statement. Will the Secretary of State say why he will publish a Green Paper, rather than a White Paper, which might imply more urgency? As my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) mentioned, the tragic Lauren Wright case involved her constituency, but the senior social worker involved—the team leader—was a constituent of mine, and he did indeed resign. Can the right hon. Gentleman tell the House whether there is anything in the Laming report about the Lauren Wright case? We have heard a lot today about the failings of social services—morale is obviously battered in Norfolk—but we must get across the point, surely, that the overwhelming majority of social workers do an excellent job in very difficult circumstances. What advice would he give Norfolk county council as it tries very hard to improve the recruitment and morale of social workers?

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he has said, and I very much agree with it. I hope that the balance is struck appropriately in relation to the coverage of such issues, particularly the role of social workers. He asks why we will publish a Green Paper, rather than a White Paper. We will certainly introduce proposals in the Green Paper that will be subject to rapid implementation, but it will be right to consult more broadly on other proposals, particularly if we propose far-reaching recommendations for structural change.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): How will my right hon. Friend ensure that social workers on the front line will receive the supervision and support that they need to deal with such very difficult situations? That seems to be the key to this issue.

Mr. Milburn: That is important, but, with respect to my hon. Friend, more is needed. We need people on the front line who are competent. We need management and leadership who demonstrate competence, and we need an accountability structure to ensure that. Those are

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precisely the issues that Lord Laming has been grappling with in his recommendations, and we shall consider those issues in the Green Paper.

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood): When my right hon. Friend is developing the new national structures, will he consider especially the need properly to track children and their families as they move around the country? He will be well aware that many families are attracted by the bright lights of Blackpool. Sadly, all too often, those families bring with them problems. They must not be lost in the system, and not only social services, but health services and the other agencies need to know that they are there.

Mr. Milburn: I am pleased about what my hon. Friend said, as many of the points that have been made today highlight the role of social services. As we all know, however, vulnerable children require the support not just of social services but of a range of other services, too. I know that some might be tempted to point the finger purely at one part of those services, but that is not what Lord Laming identifies: he identifies a failure across the piece. He uses a graphic phrase, which is the right one: "widespread organisational malaise". That is precisely what is present in this case. We must deal with that for the future.

In relation to issues such as identification, referral and tracking, my hon. Friend is right that there is a group of vulnerable children out there, and it is important that we get the balance right and make sure that issues of civil liberties and data protection are dealt with properly and appropriately. We must also have information systems, however, that are capable of identifying where the children are in the system to make sure that they do not disappear, whether in Blackpool or anywhere else. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety is undertaking some good work. A £24 million pilot project is taking hold in different parts of the country, and by the autumn we want to make sure that that sort of system is being spread throughout the rest of the country.

Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): In 1993, a report was made to the Government of the findings from a national inspection of private fostering. The author was the social services inspector, Lord Laming. In 1998, the Utting report, by a former chief inspector of social services, was published. We have now had a further Laming report, and we will have a further review. There are 8,000 to 10,000 children involved, many of whom have come halfway round the world, and fewer checks are done for them than for child minders. These children are among the most vulnerable, as report after report has stated. In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), my right hon. Friend issued a caution about private fostering: if we had a registration scheme, it would not necessarily have saved Victoria's life. I accept that, but does he accept that, given all the overwhelming evidence and the reviews presented to his Department, it would be one more safeguard for protecting vulnerable children?

Mr. Milburn: In truth, there are mixed views. My hon. Friend cogently argues from one perspective on the issue, but there are other perspectives. I hear what Lord Laming said in his report today, and I know what William Utting recommended. It is therefore right and appropriate that, as the Green Paper will address in the round the issues of children at risk—I hope that my hon. Friend welcomes that opportunity to get the system right in that respect—we consider the various views and recommendations in that context. That is what we plan to do.

Dr. Desmond Turner (Brighton, Kemptown): One of my constituents who came to see me recently was the teacher who detected the first signs of stress in Maria Colwell in my constituency. I promised to pass on to the Government her suggestion that all professionals involved with children—nurses, social workers, doctors or teachers—should share a common social service practice module as a compulsory part of their training. That might go some way towards addressing the problem shown in all these reports, which is that, basically, one can have all the systems one wants, but if the people who operate them fail, through lack of quality of training or culture, nothing will succeed.

Mr. Milburn: I agree with my hon. Friend except in one respect: teachers, police officers and others should be properly trained, but not in social services practice. They should be trained in child development, child protection and the safeguarding of children. If we genuinely want services in which there is not confusion and fragmentation but integration and co-operation, we must ensure that we have people who are capable of operating those services in that way. We must therefore have training that reflects those principles.

Ms Debra Shipley (Stourbridge): The failure to protect children shames all of us. I welcome my right hon. Friend's comments, and the comments of the shadow Secretary of State, which I support. There have been endless inquiries, and there will be a Green Paper in the spring. By May or June, another child will have died, and by the time the White Paper comes out, yet another child will have died. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me that the process will be speeded up and put high on the agenda? In terms of delivery, we must have one person who is accountable at a local level. That person should be the chief executive—I have senior legal advice on this matter, and have brought it to the attention of the Prime Minister. We also need co-ordination at ministerial level. Coverage by three Departments—the Department of Health, the Department for Education and Skills and the Home Office—is not good enough. Even with the best intentions, children are slipping between the cracks in provision, and they are dying as a result. I suggest that a Cabinet Minister should be made responsible for child protection.

Finally, will the extra resources mentioned by my right hon. Friend be ring-fenced? For example, in my well-run borough of Dudley, child intervention happens at level 5, although, according to the Government's guidance, it should happen at level 2. Will the resources that he mentioned allow intervention in my constituency at level 2, which is necessary to protect children?

Mr. Milburn: It must be right that we do not delay in doing anything that can be done without delay. That is precisely why we are taking action today: not just publishing a report but writing directly to those who have responsibility for leading these organisations, not only in local authorities but across the national health service, too. We are giving them a three-month deadline within which they must make sure that all the elements of good practice, which are basic common sense and which were simply not in place in Victoria Climbié's case, will be in place in the future.

Secondly, my hon. Friend refers to the need to ensure that we have appropriate structures at national level. There is more that we can do in that regard. She should not, however, understate what has been done so far, such as the advent of the children and young people's unit and its work, and the role of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety, who has particular responsibility in that regard. On resources, again, we must get the balance right. Ultimately, the difference is that those of us sitting—or standing at the Dispatch Box—in the comfort of the House do not have to deliver a single service to a single child. The people who must do so are the people outside. Those are the people who should be empowered and held accountable, as a quid pro quo. That is why I happen to think it is right to have less ring-fencing rather than more. In the end, public money is involved, and those people must decide how to spend the money appropriately to serve their local communities, and they should be held to account stringently and rigorously for that. If we do that, we will get the right balance between national responsibilities and local ones.

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West): I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to addressing this problem. Since the Maria Colwell affair in 1973, there has been a demonstrable failure to address it effectively. Will he clarify the respective roles of the proposed children's trust and the existing area child protection committees? Will he give an assurance that in future somebody at local level will be accountable, perhaps chairing a body that must legally own that particular responsibility, and that a statutory obligation should be placed on the agencies concerned that the people they send should be suitably qualified? Lastly, if something goes wrong, there should be a mechanism for a thoroughgoing and independent investigation, not a botched and obfuscated investigation as we had in Haringey when the Victoria Climbié affair first came to light.

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend makes a succession of extremely important points. It is important that we learn from things that go wrong. The only way of doing so is to get the facts out into the open. That is why the report and inquiry have been so widely welcomed.

I have great sympathy with my hon. Friend's comments on the area child protection committees. He will see in the guide to children's trusts, which has been published today, that one of the forms that they could take, for example, is to group together all the services in the local area that perform functions relating to child protection, mental health services or wider children's services. The important point about that is that, once again, it provides an opportunity for local services, whether in the public, private or voluntary sector, to come together in a way that is appropriate to meet the needs of sometimes different local communities in different local circumstances.

Points of Order

2.40 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Would it be indelicate to suggest that a fraction of the understandable compassion that we heard in the past hour for children in this country should be directed towards the traumatised children of Iraq? My point of order is this: what does it take in this House of Commons to get an emergency debate when we are on a motorway to war, which will end heaven knows where? Is not it desperately important for us to have a debate on a substantive motion on what is happening with the weapons inspectors? Millions of people outside the House think that it is high time that we had such a debate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): The hon. Gentleman hovers between a point of debate and point of order. He knows that there are ways to influence those people who are responsible for determining the business of the House, but the Chair is not one of them.

Angus Robertson (Moray): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You will be aware that, like many other hon. Members, I represent coastal communities that face severe trauma from losing their livelihoods and way of life as a result of European Union fishing quota cuts. You will also be aware that a written statement has been laid before the House and a statement has been made by the Scottish Executive today about compensation plans. Do you know whether the Minister with responsibility for fisheries intends to come before the House so that hon. Members, especially those who represent fishing communities as I do, can question, cross-examine and scrutinise those proposals, including the lack of an application for EU match funding, which may help many thousands of my constituents?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, the hon. Gentleman is indulging in a fair amount of argument. The Chair has no intimation of such a statement, but the relevant Department is due to answer questions this week. That may or may not provide an opportunity for him to pursue the matter.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Yesterday the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) expressed his concern on a point of order about the withdrawal of a question tabled in my name. He suggested that it had been withdrawn as a result of pressure placed on me. May I explain to the conspiracy theorists that the reason is much more mundane? It is simply that the bmi plane was delayed. The fact that the relevant Minister told me that he had arranged for that delay and the delay of the subsequent British Airways flight as well was simply an attempt at humour on his part.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) left his remarks open to the possibility of a perfectly simple explanation—although probably not as simple as that one.

Mr. Mark Simmonds (Boston and Skegness): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I require your assistance and guidance. Yesterday, the General Affairs and External Relations Council delayed the decision on extending sanctions against Robert Mugabe and his regime. Tomorrow, EU ambassadors meet, but that forum does not have legal powers to extend sanctions; only the Council of Ministers can do that. The next Foreign Affairs Ministers meeting is not until 24 February, which is six days after the present sanction regime expires.

Can you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, bring pressure to bear to insist that the Foreign Secretary comes to the House to explain his attitude to Mugabe's invitation to Paris, and to explain what procedures and mechanisms are being followed to ensure that sanctions are renewed prior to the key date of 18 February? If they are not renewed, Mugabe will be at liberty to travel not only to Paris, but to London, which would not be acceptable to the Government or the House while people starve and suffer brutal retribution at the hands of his thugs in Zimbabwe.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman must not engage too much in the substance of debate, however strongly he feels about the subject. He must know that the Chair has no power to command a Minister to come to the Dispatch Box to make a statement. He may, however, find an opportunity to raise the matter, perhaps even at Prime Minister's questions.

Crown Employment (Nationality) Bill

2.44 pm

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for and in connection with the removal of general restrictions as to nationality which apply to persons employed or holding office in any civil capacity under the Crown; and for connected purposes.

The Bill would remove the existing restrictions placed on the employment of non-UK nationals in civil capacities under the Crown. In place of the current system, it would open up all civil employment under the Crown to applicants of any nationality, apart from those positions that would be restricted to UK nationals under rules made by the Minister for the civil service, or by another Minister or other Crown official to whom he has delegated the power to make such rules. Before dealing with the detail of the Bill, let me make it completely clear that it does not deal with asylum, immigration or work permits, and it does not affect the requirements for non-UK nationals to get leave to remain and to work in the UK before they can take up employment.

The rules restricting the employment of foreign nationals by the Crown have their roots in legislation decided 200 years ago. The Act of Settlement 1700 provides that no person born out of the kingdoms of England, Scotland or Ireland, or the dominions thereto belonging, should be capable of enjoying any office or place of trust, either civil or military. That prohibition has been amended over the years and does not apply to Commonwealth citizens, citizens of the Irish Republic or to British protected persons employed in a civil capacity.

Section 6 of the Aliens Restriction (Amendment) Act 1919 provides that no alien shall be appointed to any office or place in the civil service of the state. Contrary to popular belief, an alien is not a funny green man from Mars with a TV aerial sticking out of his head, or a character devised by Mr. Steven Spielberg. Alien is defined in section 51(4) of the British Nationality Act 1981 as a person who is not a Commonwealth citizen, a British protected person or a citizen of the Republic of Ireland.

During the second world war, defence regulations permitted the temporary employment of aliens if no suitable British subjects were available. That was replaced by the Aliens' Employment Act 1955, under which the prohibitions were relaxed so that aliens could be employed if they were either appointed in a country outside the UK, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man in a capacity appearing to the Minister to be appropriate for aliens, or employed in accordance with a certificate issued by a Minister with the consent of the Minister for the civil service. So either no suitably qualified UK nationals are available to do the work or the alien must possess exceptional qualifications or experience to do the job. Certificates last for five years and must then be renewed.

For the year 1999–2000, the number of persons employed under those certificates was a mere 20. The European Communities (Employment in the Civil Service) Order 1991 amended the law to allow nationals of member states of the European communities, their spouses and certain children to take up civil employment under the Crown, apart from public service posts as defined by the European Community treaty. The rights of nationals of member states of the European communities were extended to nationals of member states of the European economic area by section 2(1) of the European Economic Area Act 1993. Against the background of a possible legal challenge to the European Court of Justice, further changes were made in 1996 to put Irish and Commonwealth citizens on the same footing as other non-UK EC nationals. An amendment to the civil service management code was made to restrict Commonwealth and Irish nationals from being employed in posts that were reserved for UK nationals.

The effect of the existing rules, therefore, is that foreign nationals may be employed abroad in any civil post under the Crown, which includes the diplomatic service if the Minister considers it appropriate. However, for civil employment under the Crown within the UK, Commonwealth citizens, British protected persons and nationals of member states of the European economic area may be employed only in posts that are not public service reserved posts, and nationals of all other countries may be employed only in UK non-reserved posts if one of the very rarely issued certificates is in force.

Although 75 per cent. of civil service posts in the UK are available to Commonwealth, Irish or EEA nationals, the remaining 25 per cent. requiring the special allegiance of public service posts are entirely reserved for UK nationals. More posts are reserved than is operationally necessary, but that is unavoidable due to the present definition based on the EC treaty. Attempts to define public service posts must follow EC case law and are subject to judgments of the European Court of Justice.

The net effect is that it is a criminal offence, even if done by mistake, to employ a non-Irish EEA national in a public service reserved post; to employ any alien in any civil service post at all, apart from the tiny number of certificated exceptions, and although it is legal to employ in a non-reserved post the alien spouse of an EEA national living in the UK, under the freedom of movement provisions, it remains an offence to employ the alien spouse of a UK national.

That all sounds very legalistic and technical, but I believe the anomalies can best be illustrated by examples. As I have said, the Bill will not change the rules on asylum and immigration in any way. In my constituency, like many others, we now have long-standing communities, for example from Iran and Iraq, mostly comprising highly skilled professionals, many of whom were senior public servants in their home countries, who fled persecution by those dictatorships many years ago. They, and their children, who may know no other country, are entirely barred.

In Hendon, we have Chinese and Japanese communities, and also UK citizens married to people from those countries, which are important trading targets. Assuming that they retained their own citizenship, those Chinese and Japanese people are barred from, for example, jobs in the Department of Trade and Industry, but if their spouses were French, rather than British, they would not be barred.

[Mr. Andrew Dismore]

A Turkish Cypriot is eligible for a non-restricted post, but a Turk is not. The notorious Abu Hamza, the fundamentalist cleric who most people think should be kicked out of this country, if not put in jail, has UK nationality and could be employed in any post, although I doubt that he would want to apply, and, if he did, I assume that he would not pass the interview. However, the American national widow of a British victim of 11 September would be entirely excluded from Government employment.

As in so many things, the police service is ahead of the game. I first raised this nationality anomaly in the context of the police regulations over two years ago, and I am pleased that it has been dealt with in the Police Reform Act 2002. Subject to proper immigration status and competence in English, and with certain reservations for sensitive posts, nationality is no longer a barrier to joining the police, and that has made a great difference to police recruitment.

In our country, some 850,000 residents of working age are not UK, Commonwealth or EEA citizens, and are thus excluded entirely. In London, one of the world's great, diverse cities, 350,000 people, or 9 per cent. of the working age population, are entirely excluded, not just from the higher echelons, but even from applying for the most junior social security clerk's job. It is no wonder that we have difficulty filling civil service jobs in the capital, when so many of my fellow Londoners are entirely out of the equation.

My Bill will tackle those bizarre and discriminatory anomalies by sweeping away the existing complex, interlocking legislation, and replacing it with a simple amendment to the Act of Settlement, so as not to prohibit the employment of any person in any civil capacity under the Crown, and at the same time empowering the Minister to make rules in respect of nationality requirements for certain categories of posts, which I envisage as those where it is clearly necessary, and in the national interest, for the job to be reserved for a UK national, which is about 10 per cent. of the total. It is expected that the Bill would open up 90 per cent. of all posts to selection on merit, regardless of nationality, enabling us to build a civil service that reflects the diversity of the society that it serves. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Andrew Dismore; Ms Karen Buck, Mr. Iain Coleman, Mr. Andrew Love, James Purnell, Linda Perham, John Austin, Clive Efford, Mr. Stephen Pound and Keith Vaz.

CROWN EMPLOYMENT (NATIONALITY)

Mr. Dismore accordingly presented a Bill to make provision for and in connection with the removal of general restrictions as to nationality which apply to persons employed or holding office in any civil capacity under the Crown; and for connected purpose: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 31 January, and to be printed [Bill 48].

THE SPEAKER'S ABSENCE

Ordered,

That the Speaker have leave of absence on Wednesday 29th January to attend the funeral of Richard Buchanan, JP, Member for Glasgow, Springburn, from 1964 to 1979.—*[Gillian Merron.]*

Orders of the Day

Railways and Transport Safety Bill

[Relevant documents: Minutes of Evidence taken before the Transport Committee on 18th December 2002, relating to London Underground PPP: New Developments, and supplementary memoranda from Transport for London and the Department for Transport, HC 200-i (typescript available in the Vote Office).]

Order for Second Reading read.

2.54 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. Alistair Darling): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill will allow us to take important steps to improve the safety of transport. It will set up a rail accident investigation branch; it will introduce new alcohol offences in relation to marine and aviation activities; and it will create an independent police authority for the British Transport police. The Bill contains other measures, which will help to improve the safety of transport, and it will make minor amendments and additions to the Greater London Authority Act 1999 in relation to the tube. I shall deal with each of those matters in turn to show how the Bill fits in with measures that have already been taken to deliver a safer and more reliable railway.

Part 1 makes provision for a rail accident investigation branch with responsibility to investigate rail accidents, including accidents on the tube. Clause 3 enables Lord Cullen's recommendations to be implemented by establishing such a branch, which will act independently of the industry and its regulators and carry out its investigations openly. It may help if I explain briefly why it is necessary.

Following a railway accident, it is necessary to find out as quickly as possible what caused the accident and to enable remedial action to be taken as soon as possible. That can happen now, but we believe that the present system needs to be improved in line with the recommendations of the Cullen report following the Paddington rail crash. At the moment, after a rail accident the police help the rescue operation and secure the site, and after that their interest in is investigating any criminal acts. The Health and Safety Executive inspectors, Her Majesty's rail inspectorate, also attend the site because of their health and safety interest. They investigate the cause and, if appropriate, they will prosecute any breaches in respect of health and safety.

At the moment, we do not have any one body with sole responsibility for finding out quickly what went wrong and why the accident happened without attempting to attribute blame. That is necessary because, very often, lessons need to be learned quickly. That is what happens now in the case of an air or marine accident, and it works well. Lord Cullen was right to recommend that the Government set up a rail accident investigation branch along the same lines. Following the accident at Ladbroke Grove near Paddington, Lord Cullen recommended that such a branch be established along similar lines to the aviation and marine accident investigation branches, and that is what we are now doing.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Can the Secretary of State explain why, in the case of motor vehicles, extra speed is dangerous and we ought to have more limits on speed, but in the case of the railways, we ought to urge trains to go faster and faster? Is not it the case that as trains cannot steer out of the way of danger and cannot brake very well, extra speed will cause more accidents?

Mr. Darling: The situation is a little more complicated than that. There are obvious differences between rail travel and road travel. Generally speaking, trains run a lot faster than cars, but provided they have the right safety equipment, such as signalling and braking power—

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Darling: I should like to finish this point before I give way to my hon. Friend.

Provided that trains have the right signalling, the right braking power and other safety mechanisms, they can run very fast. Indeed, passenger trains in this country have been running at 125 mph for many years now, to a large extent without incident, and trains in other parts of the world, such as the TGV in France, run at even higher speeds. Provided that the right safety precautions are taken, there is no reason why trains should not travel at those speeds.

Cars are rather different, for obvious reasons. They run in a different environment, and all the evidence shows that, depending on the conditions, cars that are going too fast can put drivers and other road users at risk. With respect to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), there is a substantial difference between trains running at speed on the railway and cars running at speed on the roads.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose*—

Mr. Darling: I shall give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) first.

Mr. Hopkins: I apologise for interrupting my right hon. Friend earlier. To reinforce his point, the Shinkansen system in Japan has been running at very high speeds for many decades without a single fatality.

Mr. Darling: That is right. Those trains are designed to run at high speeds and they have the necessary braking systems and track signalling.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Darling: If we are to have a debate about the merits of cars and trains running at high speed, I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson).

Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): I seek my right hon. Friend's guidance about braking power. He is right

[Alan Simpson]

to point out that Cullen made two proposals for massive structural change. One relates to the investigation of accidents and the other to the avoidance of accidents. The European model that my right hon. Friend mentioned is premised on the introduction of the European railway traffic management system for braking, or ERTMS. That was also a central point of Cullen's recommendations. The suggestion was that the regulations for the introduction of that system should be in place by 2004, and that all trains capable of travelling at more than 100 mph should be equipped with the new system by 2008. There seems to be an important gap—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. That is far too long an intervention.

Mr. Darling: I shall come on to train protection, and, if my hon. Friend does not mind, I would like to do so at what I consider to be the right point.

Mr. Bercow: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Darling: Well, since the merits of fast cars and fast trains are not included in the Bill, I shall give way just once more, and then I want to make some progress.

Mr. Bercow: I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. The intentions behind the Bill are laudable and we all hope that, in practice, its effects will be beneficial. However, does he not think it noteworthy that a Bill that contains 110 clauses and seven schedules appears to contain no fewer than 73 references to regulation? Could we not have had a better idea of what the content of those regulations might be, and can he at least tell the House now whether they will be subject to the negative procedure of the House, or to its affirmative counterpart?

Mr. Darling: That sounds to me like an extremely good bid to participate in the Committee stage of this Bill, when all these issues can be explored at length over several weeks.

Mr. Bercow *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Darling: Perhaps some of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues would be very pleased to see him consigned to a Committee for several weeks. The making of regulations is not uncommon in this regard, but these issues can be discussed in Committee. The point that I was going to make before the intervention of some 10 minutes ago is that widespread support exists for setting up the rail accident investigation branch—

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Darling: I want to make some progress, but I promise every hon. Gentleman sitting in the House, given that there are not that many of them, that I will give way in due course.

The fact that I think that this is the right thing to do is based on the experience of the air accident investigation branch and the marine accident investigation branch, both of which have worked very well since they were set up. The former body was set up in 1922 and the latter in 1989, and although they operate in different ways, they have been extremely effective in getting to the bottom of what happens in an accident, without attributing blame. Moreover, they have been able to reach conclusions infinitely more quickly than does the current system in respect of the railways, and on that basis I hope that this proposal will be accepted on both sides of the House.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): In framing his proposals, will the Secretary of State bear in mind the experience of bereaved families such as those involved in the Potters Bar railway accident? Almost nine months after that accident, those families are still waiting for an early acceptance of responsibility, and for an authoritative and full explanation of what took place. Does the Secretary of State agree that such explanations assist in the grieving and healing process for such families?

Mr. Darling: I am very much aware of the keen interest that, for obvious reasons, the hon. Gentleman takes in the Potters Bar accident. The whole point in having a rail accident investigation branch is precisely in order to get an explanation of what happened as quickly as possible. That is one of the things that many of the relatives of those who lost their lives in that crash, and many of those who were injured, want to know as quickly as possible. So the setting up of the RAIB will be a major step forward, and it will speed matters up far more than does the current system, under which a very long time often elapses before we find out what happened and why.

Mr. Brian H. Donohoe (Cunninghame, South): Although I welcome these proposals, we must consider the fragmentation of the industry, which the Transport Committee has examined. Given that safety is of paramount importance, I wonder whether the Secretary of State's proposals go far enough. Should we not combine all the agencies that he identifies, so that a single agency can look after safety?

Mr. Darling: No, I am afraid that I do not agree with my hon. Friend's final point. It is important to recognise that the two existing branches operate in different ways partly because of the characteristics of the industry. For example, in investigations undertaken by the air accident investigation branch, the manufacturer, air traffic control and everybody concerned are usually anxious to get to the bottom of what happened very quickly, because it may be necessary to send instructions around the world in respect of the operation of particular aircraft. On marine accidents, a slightly different approach is often taken, and the industry is structured in a different way. It has been put to me by the air accident investigation branch and the marine accident investigation branch that much of their expertise and specialism might be lost if they were merged into a single body.

I therefore think it better to establish the rail accident investigation branch and to allow the three branches to continue. If a compelling case is made in future for bringing them together, we shall look at it, but at the moment—given what I know about how they work and the nature of what they have to deal with—we would lose a lot more by setting up a single branch, rather than continuing with the existing system. What is striking about the air and the marine branches is that both work very well and seem to be highly successful; indeed, other countries throughout the world look at them and ask how they can do the same. If something works, it is best to leave it well alone.

Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): My right hon. Friend mentions the legacy of the rail industry, and for the reasons that he gives there is a great need for technical resources in order to carry out investigations quickly. Does he foresee that the new branch will have its own technical resources, or will it procure them from places such as the former research station at Derby, the facility through which British Railways Board built up the expertise to which he alludes?

Mr. Darling: The answer to that is probably a bit of both. My hon. Friend is probably aware of how the air accident investigation branch works. It has its own technical back-up in Farnborough, but in carrying out investigations it is heavily dependent on outside bodies. No one branch could include the expertise necessary to consider every aspect of a train incident, for example. I am certain that, from time to time, the new branch will need to go to outside bodies to get the expertise that it needs, and that is what people would expect.

Linda Perham (Ilford, North): The Secretary of State mentioned accidents on the tube, and he will probably agree that it would have been useful if this measure had been in place when Saturday's accident happened. My constituents and I use the Central line a lot; indeed, there were 800 people on the train in question. We certainly need to look at accidents on the tube rather more seriously than we have in the past.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Had the RAIB already been in existence, the chief inspector would probably have decided to look at Saturday's accident. As it is, we are a considerable way down the line in finding out what happened on the tube on that day, and the causes of that accident are becoming fairly clear. As my hon. Friend doubtless knows, London Underground is in the process of deciding what needs to be done to put trains back on the Central line. It clearly wants to be sure that it has identified exactly what happened, and to take appropriate remedial action, before restoring the trains. However, my hon. Friend is right, and the new branch, had it been in existence, would have wanted to get involved.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate) *rose*—

Mike Gapes (Ilford, South) *rose*—

Mr. Darling: I shall give way in order of seeing: first, to my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Glenda Jackson).

Glenda Jackson: I am grateful to learn that my right hon. Friend is committed to allowing interventions from both genders in this House. I strongly endorse what he says about the London underground, and I realise that inquiries into the most recent accident are ongoing. However, it is not the case that as far back as the summer of 2001, when a potentially very serious accident occurred in which four trains became blocked in a tube during the hottest day of the year, London Underground's internal inquiry found that the failure was one of command and control? Indeed, some reports on the most recent accident on the Central line point the finger at the same fault. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that we do indeed learn from such mistakes, and that London Underground's current management is urged to make public such inquiries?

Mr. Darling: I spoke to the managing director of London Underground this morning, and he agreed that the findings of the inquiry should be made public, which is the best thing to do. All inquiries should be made public so that people can see for themselves what lessons can be learned. It would not be right—and possibly I would be out of order—to go through what I know and what people believe happened on Saturday, but I can assure my hon. Friend that an inquiry is being held. As soon as its conclusions are known, I hope that London Underground will make them public. At the moment, however, further investigations need to be carried out.

Mike Gapes: The Secretary of State will be aware that the implications of the accident on the Central line are serious for people who commute to work in central London from east and west London. He will be aware that it has been predicted that it could be at least several weeks before the Central line is operating properly. In those circumstances, will he join me in calling on the Mayor of London to delay the introduction of congestion charging until the Central line is fully operational; otherwise there will be continued chaos and pressure throughout east and west London as a result of the crash?

Mr. Darling: No doubt, the Mayor of London will want to consider that in relation to the new scheme. I accept my hon. Friend's point that the loss of the Central line will have a major impact on commuters who normally use it, but I believe that he would agree that it is important that London Underground identifies correctly the cause of the accident, then makes sure that it takes the right remedial action before trains are put back on the track.

If it is all right with hon. Members, I should like to make progress and return to the point touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Cunninghame, South (Mr. Donohoe). It is important to remember that safety is not an add-on extra—it must be seen as an essential part of every activity, indeed every decision, every day on the railways. The new branch will help, but we must ensure that the right management and controls are in place, particularly for maintenance. As I have said before, the Strategic Rail Authority has provided the industry, with strategic direction, and under its leadership different parts of the industry have worked together and have been able to get to grips with difficult problems that need to be resolved.

Maintenance is critical to safety, which is why Network Rail is making a number of fundamental changes to the way in which it controls maintenance, so

[Mr. Darling]

getting a much-needed grip on it. We must ensure that there is accountability for what happens, and certain steps are essential if safety on the railway is to be improved. Under Railtrack, as the House will know, decisions about maintenance were farmed out to other companies in too many cases. There was no end-to-end responsibility or accountability, but that is now changing. Network Rail is operating in the public interest, and is putting safety and reliability first. In future, Network Rail will decide what work is done and how it is done. Critically, it will make sure that the work is done properly, because rigorous control of maintenance is essential for safety, as well as making good business sense. As existing maintenance contracts end, Network Rail will decide whether to extend existing arrangements or to tender new contracts to take the work back in-house, as it will do on the route between Reading and Paddington, for example. Contractors will only be appointed when Network Rail thinks that that is the right thing to do. However, whatever it does, it will ensure proper supervision of work from start to finish, which is essential and will meet demands from Members on both sides of the House for proper supervision and accountability in maintenance work. In addition, the franchising arrangements that are being overhauled will allow for tighter management of train services and ensure that some of the deficiencies left over from privatisation are finally tackled and dealt with.

With the changes that we have now made, we have the means to manage the railway, but that needs to be underpinned by substantial investment. That brings me to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South about safety. Rail investment in real terms will be more than three times as much as it was in the decade leading up to 1997. Indeed, spending will double in the four years between 2001 and 2005, and will buy new, better and safer rolling stock—there is almost £1 billion-worth of new rolling stock now on the track, and more is on order—will help to pay for the west coast main line and other improvements and upgrades, allowing for safer and reliable travel, and will pay for the train protection warning systems that are now being installed.

I can tell the House that train protection warning systems have been installed on 97 per cent. of trains and 76 per cent. of the necessary tracks. The programme is well on the way to completion. By the end of this year, the rest of the work agreed with the Health and Safety Executive will be complete, and a warning system will operate on all trains. There are, of course, some parts of track where a warning system has little or no safety benefit so, with the HSE's agreement, one will not be installed there. However, on the great bulk of track, all the work agreed with the HSE will be completed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South asked about the European position. There are three levels of warning system in Europe. Level 1 uses line-side signals and, although it could be installed in this country, it would restrict capacity on busy lines. It is fitted on a comparatively small number of lines in Europe, and its use is not widespread. Level 2, which is a slightly more sophisticated version, uses transmission-based signalling—it is installed on the train instead of on the track—and would allow increased capacity. However, the House needs to be aware that level 2 of the European safety system works only on a limited number of lines, including the line between Berne and Olten in Switzerland, which does not have any junctions and has a limited number of sidings. The problem with Lord Cullen's inquiry is that the learned judge was led to believe that there was a system in Europe that was tried, tested and working and could be installed on trains in this country. That is not the case.

The level 3 system in the long term has a great commercial and safety advantage, as it can operate on trains and monitor their progress. No doubt, one day it will be extremely useful, but the difficulty is that it is not in use anywhere at the moment. The systems put before Lord Cullen have the disadvantage that even the basic level is not in widespread use in Europe and would lead, if used here, to restrictions in the number of trains that we could run. The more sophisticated and advanced level 2 system operates on one line in Switzerland with no junctions—we do not have many lines like that—and level 3, as I said, does not exist in operation. For those reasons, I believe that we are right to ensure that the train protection warning system, which can stop trains travelling at comparatively high speed, is installed. As I told the House, 97 per cent. of trains and 76 per cent. of necessary track have already been fitted with the system.

Alan Simpson: Can the Secretary of State clarify a point about high-speed trains and safety beyond the 70 mph limit of the train protection warning system? What safety protection mechanisms will be put in place on high-speed trains, as we clearly have to plan for their safety as well?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right that the basic train protection system will prevent trains from travelling at more than 70 mph. The train protection warning system plus, as it is known, will stop trains that are travelling at 100 mph. If a train is going faster than that, what happens will depend on a number of things, including signalling. That is usual. The point that I was making to my hon. Friend and to the House generally is that if there was in Europe a system that was better and ready for use, of course the Government would be prepared to consider it. The problem is that when comparing the railways in Britain with railways in continental Europe, we often find that we are dealing with completely different structures and different sorts of railways. It is unfortunate that it was suggested to Lord Cullen during his inquiry that there was an off-the-shelf system ready to be adapted, because it simply does not exist. By contrast, the train protection warning system does exist. Indeed, I can tell the House that the number of signals passed at danger is at the lowest level since records began. That can be attributed to two factors—first, the train protection warning system will simply stop a train and, secondly, drivers, and the industry generally, are paying greater attention to the need to observe the signals and to react appropriately.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I entirely agree with the Secretary of State's decision that it is sensible to wait for ERTMS level 2, rather than to rush ahead with ERTMS level 1. However, can he reassure people that TPWS and TPWS plus, although designed to work for trains travelling at up to 70 mph and up to 100 mph respectively, will significantly slow down trains that are going even faster than that, so that, in the event of their passing a signal at danger, the chance of there being a serious accident is minimised?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman is right—we are in complete agreement on that. If he would like to modify the press release that he put out earlier today to take account of that agreement, I should be grateful to him. That would save me having to put out a rebuttal of the Liberal Democrats' position.

I turn to part 3 of the Bill, which deals with the British Transport police. I hope to be able to cover it in fairly short order, because it is not particularly controversial.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West) *rose—*

Mr. Darling: Or maybe it is.

Mr. Brady: Before the right hon. Gentleman moves on from the powers of investigation, will he address the point that arises in relation to clause 7(1)(b), which appears to provide investigators with a pretty open-ended power of entry to domestic dwellings? Several hundreds of my constituents live alongside railway lines. I cannot see why a provision for a warrant would not be appropriate to protect people's privacy and property.

Mr. Darling: If the hon. Gentleman is lucky enough to be included in the Committee of Selection's nominations for the Committee on the Bill, that is a point that he may wish to pursue. I agree that the granting of permission to enter people's property should be used sparingly. I urge the hon. Gentleman to take the opportunity that will be afforded to him when the Bill is in Committee to ensure that it is sufficiently tightly drawn to avoid unnecessary intrusion but still allows the investigation branch to carry out its work properly. In the past, investigators have sometimes found that their progress and ability to find things out quickly have been stymied because they could not get access. Without saying that that would happen, there are occasions where we must bear in mind that somebody might seek to conceal something, and it is important that investigators should be able to get access as quickly as possible. If the hon. Gentleman is concerned about that, the Committee is the place for him to be.

Lawrie Quinn: Before my right hon. Friend moves on to part 3, I want to ask him a question about part 1. Will he and his officials—if not now, before the Bill reaches Committee—consider the need for definitions as regards what is an accident and what is an incident? As someone who spent 19 years working in the railway industry, I know that that is an important issue. I guess that the branch would declare whether it was an accident or an incident, but it would be helpful to the work of the branch to include such a definition in the Bill.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend will no doubt have looked at the Bill, and will be aware that it gives a fair amount of latitude to the chief inspector as to what he investigates. In some cases it would be mandatory; in others there would be a discretion. A similar situation applies in relation to the air and marine branches, both of which have that latitude. If the chief inspector sees something, or has something reported to him, that suggests that there might be some public interest in investigating it, he can do it. Of course, the Government are open to suggestions as to how the Bill could be improved if necessary.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): Will my right hon. Friend give w[illegible]?

Mr. Darling: Yes, then I shall move on to part 3.

Mr. Clapham: I refer the Secretary of State to the fact that at the present time the provisions of the Health and Safety Executive and RIDDOR—the Reporting of Injuries, Disease and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations apply. Does he believe that those regulations, which call for the reporting of dangerous occurrences, could be a help in defining what is an accident and what is an incident?

Mr. Darling: That is possible, but as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Lawrie Quinn) a moment ago, there is sufficient latitude under clause 6 to allow the chief inspector to take a decision as to whether or not he ought to investigate. The circumstances that might lead to his investigation would depend on the information that he had before him, and existing health and safety legislation would be of help. Again, if hon. Members feel that the situation could be improved, of course the Government are open to their suggestions.

Part 3 relates to the British Transport police, and, as I said, I can deal with it in short order. A modern police service should be accountable to an independent police authority. Clause 17 allows that to be established. At present, the SRA appoints the board, but it would be better if the board were independent, and the Bill makes sure that it is. It also makes sure that the police force no longer relies on contracts with different operators as a basis for its jurisdiction. Clause 29 puts the British Transport police's jurisdiction over the railways in England, Scotland and Wales on a clear and wholly statutory basis for the first time in its history. That is a welcome step forward.

As a matter of principle, we believe that the railway industry should pay the costs of policing services. We also believe that the same approach should apply to the Health and Safety Executive, so the Bill will enable the HSE to levy costs from its rail-related activities on the rail industry. For the industry, that has the advantage that it will know up-front how much it has to pay.

I shall deal briefly with part 2, as the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), who speaks for the Liberals, expressed such great interest in the matter. Part 2 provides that the Office of the Rail Regulator should be restructured. The rail regulator is working well, but we want to take this opportunity to bring the railways into line with other regulated industries, replacing the individual regulator with a regulatory board, which is consistent with the recommendations of the Better Regulation Task Force.

The Bill restructures the existing Office of the Rail Regulator, creates a statutory regulatory board in place of the regulator, building on the existing advisory board

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that he already has, and enables a wide range of experience and views to be brought to decision making. We will not make the change before mid-2004, which will enable the regulator to complete the useful work that he is doing in reviewing access charges.

Parts 4 and 5 deal with drug and alcohol limits in relation to marine and aviation activities

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): What impact does my right hon. Friend expect the provisions of the Bill to have on incidents such as the one currently being investigated by British Airways, in which a pilot who was allegedly affected by alcohol was about to fly a plane over the weekend, but was stopped because of the action of passengers?

Mr. Darling: I am about to explain how the Bill would help. If my hon. Friend will allow me, I shall deal with that shortly, but I shall speak first about marine accidents.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Darling: I shall make some preliminary remarks, then I shall give way.

The principle has long been accepted that we ought to have measures to reduce the effect of drinking on the number of accidents. That has been accepted for many years in relation to road accidents. It is interesting that when breath tests for drivers were introduced in 1967, it was reckoned that fatalities were reduced by about 800 a year. The measure was controversial at the time, but the principle is now accepted without question. I believe that a similar approach needs to be extended to both marine and aviation activities.

I shall speak about marine activities first, so if the hon. Gentleman's question is about marine activities, I shall deal with it. Aviation activities are slightly different, and I intend to return to that topic.

Tom Brake: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. My question was actually on the subject of roads, to which he referred. Given that the Bill provides for prescribed limits on alcohol, why have the Government not considered using it as an opportunity to reduce the limit for drivers from 80 mg to 50 mg?

Mr. Darling: We do not have any plans to reduce the limit below the current limit. That is why the matter is not addressed in the Bill. Instead, we are introducing similar provisions in relation to both marine and aviation activities. Let me explain what we propose to do.

Clauses 75 and 77 implement the recommendations that were made by Lord Justice Clarke in his review of safety on the Thames after the Marchioness disaster. It was also a manifesto commitment of the Government. The Bill will make it an offence for any mariner to operate while impaired by alcohol or drugs. Off-duty professional mariners are included as well if they are on the vessel and they might be needed in an emergency to protect passenger safety.

Clause 77 applies to what are referred to as non-professional mariners—people whose employment is not in the field. We could have extended the provisions that apply to professional mariners to all boats, whatever their size and speed, but we considered that they should be proportionate. There is a difference between what is needed in relation to a large passenger-carrying ship with a professional crew and in relation to a man rowing a boat in a harbour. We will consult carefully on how best to deal with non-professional mariners.

The Bill contains a power to exempt vessels with reference to the power of their motor, size or location. We want to consult on the repercussions, as we need to get the matter right. None the less, we are minded, for example, to exempt rowing boats, sailing dinghies and narrowboats. However, larger, high-powered recreational vessels such as jet-skis would probably be included. We want to strike the right balance to ensure that we get the legislation right. The proposed blood-alcohol limit is the same as that which applies to motoring—80 mg.

David Cairns (Greenock and Inverclyde): I thank the Secretary of State for that explanation. As a Member of Parliament representing a port area, I am amazed that such provisions have not already been introduced. Will he clarify what the research paper says about not extending the provisions to which he refers to non-professional mariners in Scotland? What legislation are they covered by? If the issue is important in England and Wales, how will we deal with it in Scotland?

Mr. Darling: This is a devolved matter, but perhaps it would help if I explained to my hon. Friend why I do not think the legislation needs to be extended in that way. At the moment, if a non-professional mariner is suspected of being responsible for an accident and has taken alcohol—in Scotland, that can be established by the police asking them to take a breath test—that can be an exacerbating factor in the procurator fiscal deciding what charge should be brought against that individual. For example, if alcohol was present at the time of an accident involving a death, it might lead the procurator fiscal to conclude that the charge should be culpable homicide, as opposed to a lesser charge. The reason why we have drafted the legislation in this way is not only that the matter is devolved—if the Scottish Executive want to make changes, they can do so—but that the Government believe that the current powers and law would allow us to deal with someone who was not a professional mariner, but used a boat and caused a death or serious injury for a reason of which drink was thought to be a part. The existing law would allow the courts to deal with such a person.

Moving from the sea to the air, the position is slightly different. Perhaps I can explain what we are doing and then return to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman). The Bill makes it an offence for somebody to undertake safety-critical aviation activities while they are affected by drugs or alcohol. Generally, the limits of enforcement will be on the same basis as for motorists, but there is an exception. As fast reflexes are essential on the part of aircrews and air traffic controllers, a lower limit of 20 mg will be set for those engaged in such activities. For all other aviation workers, however, the limit will be 80 mg.

On the incident to which my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside referred, I do not want to be drawn into the particular details, for reasons that she will understand. The new limit would mean that if somebody in an aircrew, for example, was found to have a blood alcohol content of more than 20 mg, they would be guilty of an offence under the Bill. Many companies have a similar requirement as part of their standing orders, as it were. It is right that the legislation on air and seagoing activities should be brought roughly into line with what has happened for a long time in relation to cars.

Mrs. Ellman: I thank the Secretary of State for his helpful answer. Can he give the House any information about the current situation? Is he aware whether the current position in relation to aircraft and alcohol consumption is causing particular difficulties?

Mr. Darling: I am aware that it has caused difficulties. A private Member's Bill that will be considered shortly adds to police powers to deal with someone who is affected by alcohol or drugs. The Government are well disposed to the measure, which is a welcome addition. However, current police powers, and those that Parliament will grant us in the Bill, mean that the police in this country have the ability that they need to deal with anybody—a member of staff or a passenger—who is drunk and incapable. It is commendable that the courts visit stiff sentences on people who misbehave in aeroplanes because they pose such a danger to everybody else. It is grossly unfair to an aircraft crew if people who are the worse for wear can abuse them. They can expect the courts to deal with them firmly.

I want to deal with London Underground and clause 105. Before I consider the detailed provisions that amend the Greater London Authority Act 1999, it would be helpful if I explained the necessity for them, and where matters stand in relation to the transfer of London Underground to Transport for London. I appreciate that that matter is of interest.

On 4 December last year, I told hon. Members that I did not consider that a transfer of the tube could take place against the background of a challenge by the Mayor and Transport for London to the European Commission's decision that the public-private partnership arrangements did not constitute state aid. I also set out my position on funding, which amounts to approximately £1 billion a year for the next seven and a half years. That position has not changed. However, we made it clear in December that we would reconsider the grant if any major unforeseen needs arose. That remains the Government's position.

In the past few days, discussions have taken place with Transport for London. I spoke to Bob Kiley several times over the weekend. Good progress has been made on discussions to resolve the matter. Transport for London understands that no more money is on offer, except in the case of unforeseen expenditure, as we said last December. That enabled us to discuss with Transport for London a process that would lead to the transfer of London Underground on the clear understanding that all legal challenges are abandoned.

Although an appeal was launched yesterday, the Mayor's office said that the move was technical, to stop the clock on the legal process. Discussions continue. I want the underground to transfer smoothly because that is in everyone's best interests. Of course, I shall keep hon. Members informed of developments.

Let us consider the sections of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 that clause 105 amends and that may work to restrict the operation of some provisions of the PPP contracts when they are transferred to Transport for London. Unless alternative arrangements that are satisfactory to all parties, including those that bid for the PPP contracts, can be made, I do not intend to transfer London Underground until the amended powers are in force, subject to Parliament's consideration of the Bill.

Mike Gapes: As a London Member of Parliament, I welcome the fact that the Government appear to be making progress in persuading the Mayor that it is time to end the legal challenges and take the road of co-operation. I hope that my right hon. Friend and his colleagues will persist in their efforts because Londoners are crying out for a resolution. We should get on with the investment that London's underground needs.

Mr. Darling: The majority of people in London now believe that whatever their differences or difficulties in the past, it is now time to get on with investing the money in the tube. I granted an indemnity to Tube Lines and Metronet because I believed that the time had come to make desperately needed investment in the tube. I am pleased that Transport for London accepts our position. We are not offering more money; we made the settlement last December. However, as we said then, the Government would have to consider unforeseen costs. The agreement, which is a development in the Mayor's past position, means that we can discuss methods of transferring the tube from London Underground to Transport for London. A smooth and orderly transfer is essential and in everyone's interests to clarify who is responsible for the tube.

Those discussions are continuing. As I have said, I have had a number of useful discussions with Bob Kiley of Transport for London. I very much hope that the matters can be resolved, because it must be in the interests of everybody in London that we get this money into the Tube, that management is put on a sound and permanent footing and that we get on with it. I am grateful for what my hon. Friend said.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): The right hon. Gentleman has twice said that he has made it clear to the Mayor that no more money is available. There are, however, media reports that he may be discussing with the Mayor bringing forward to an earlier timeframe some money that was otherwise programmed to be available. Will he confirm whether that is being discussed?

Mr. Darling: There are a variety of reports in the media that are not right, and there appear to be a variety of people telling the media various things for their own various interests.

It is very important that the House understand the situation. I set out in some detail last December the position in relation to the transfer and the funding. I have allocated funding to Transport for London,

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not just for the Tube but for non-Tube activities. As I said last December, the Department made it clear to London Underground and TFL that if something unforeseen came along the Government would look at it, in the same way as we would need to deal with it if the Government were directly responsible. If there is nothing unforeseen, the next time the spending will be looked at is in 2004, in the spending review in that year, which is when we shall look at all spending across the whole of government in the normal way.

Because of what I regard as an extremely helpful development on the part of the Mayor, who I think recognises that it is desirable to make progress, it is now possible to discuss how a transfer would take place.

Two matters that came to our attention in December need to be resolved before transfer by amending the Greater London Authority Act. It was always intended when the Act was drafted that as soon as the PPP was in place transfer would follow immediately. In other words, the drafters had not anticipated that there might be a prolonged dispute or appeals to the European Court, or to anywhere else for that matter.

Therefore, it is necessary to do two things, which clause 105 achieves. First, it allows the contracts to operate as intended and allows the guarantees in place in relation to the PPP to remain. Secondly, there need to be changes to the possible insolvency provisions. At present, on transfer were either of the two consortia running the PPP to become insolvent the assets would come back into the public sector. As the Act is drafted, if there is a delay and there is insolvency, that would not happen. Clearly, Parliament intended that the tube's assets should remain in the public sector. So those two changes are essential to make sure that the PPPs work.

For the sake of completeness I would add that the Tube Lines contract has now been signed. Tube Lines is now operating its three lines. I believe that the Metronet consortia will reach a financial close in March or April this year, which will allow the investment to go into London Underground—something that is desperately needed and long overdue.

The Bill puts in place significant steps to improve safety, not just on the railways, but also at sea and in the air. It is backed by the necessary investment, which is critical, as well as changes in management to ensure a better safety culture. It also makes some minor adjustments to the GLA Act. It will contribute to making sure that money goes into the London Underground railway, which is absolutely essential.

I hope that the Bill is relatively uncontroversial. There will be points of detail, which can be dealt with, but I hope that the whole House can support it without division. I commend the Bill to the House.

3.44 pm

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): I can pick up on the Secretary of State's last comments by saying that I believe that the Bill is largely uncontroversial. Clearly, issues of detail will need to be examined in the Committee, but there are many parts that we welcome. Indeed, they are a worthwhile and important contribution to the cause that I am sure all parts of the House share—the wish to see greater transport safety.

In particular, we welcome the Government's decision to legislate for the creation of a railway accident investigation branch, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) proposed when he was shadow Transport Secretary back in December 1999. It is a sensible modelling of the successful arrangements relating to aviation and maritime accident investigation. While there are again issues of detail—no doubt the industry, practitioners and others will want them to be pursued in Committee—we have no difficulty in principle with the creation of the body. Indeed, we welcome the Government's decision to create it.

More generally, a great deal of the Bill involves the incorporation within new aspects of transport provision of legislation passed by the last Conservative Government. I refer to the extension of the Police Act 1996 to the British Transport police, matters relating to alcohol control and the Road Traffic Act 1988, the Road Traffic Offenders Act 1988 and the Transport and Works Act 1992. Of course, it would be somewhat anomalous if the Conservative party, having introduced such provisions in many other respects, were suddenly to find it difficult in principle to support their extension in the way that the Government propose.

We have no difficulty with that, but issues of detail need to be considered. As the Secretary of State and his colleagues know, there are areas in which the Government—perhaps for sensible reasons, perhaps for less sensible ones—have chosen to amend rather than simply copy over the existing provisions. We want to explore in Committee exactly why they have chosen to do that.

The debate has already proven itself worth while, as it has enabled us to have a wide-ranging discussion on some general principles that perhaps ought to apply to transport safety. I want to comment on one or two things that the Secretary of State said in that context. I very much hope that we can continue to achieve a degree of cross-party consensus, and our starting point should be the fact that a life is a life is a life. Saving a life on the roads or in the air is at least as valuable to society as saving one in any other context.

One aspect that Conservative Members will want to explore in Committee and on Report is whether we should be thinking about moving towards a system whereby the Government seek to save life and to commit resources that are likely to save life on the same basis across all modes of transport without differentiating, as sometimes happens now, between expenditure that would save lives on the railway as opposed to that which would save lives in other contexts.

Mr. Redwood: My hon. Friend is on to an interesting question. Was the Secretary of State too dismissive when I made the point that if slowing cars down makes them safer, surely slowing trains down makes them safer? Are not the Government speaking with forked tongue here? After every serious rail crash, they impose speed restrictions. Does not that show that similar principles apply and that speed has something to do with safety on the railways as well as on the roads?

Mr. Collins: My right hon. Friend and I are absolutely united in that we believe that similar standards and similar beliefs should be applied across modes of transport. That leads me to a particular issue that the Secretary of State touched on. Although I hope that there is no major difference between the parties, it is important to achieve clarification.

The Secretary of State talked about the aftermath of Saturday's serious and worrying incident on the Central line. He made it clear—none of us would disagree with this—that he wants to ensure that London Underground can conduct thorough safety inquiries, which I am sure it is doing. He also wants to ensure that it learns the lessons of the incident and takes whatever steps are necessary to prevent its repetition. Again, I am sure we all agree with that. However, I am perhaps a little disconcerted that he did not demur when the hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mike Gapes) said that the Central line might be disrupted or even shut for weeks.

In that context, we in this place need to be clear about the signals that we are sending out to the railway industry, whether they relate to London Underground or the main line rail industry. It has been widely reported that 500,000 people a day rely on the Central line, so we must consider what may happen if even 10 per cent. of them switch to the roads as a result of its closure or disruption. I declare an interest in that I normally travel to the House on the Central line, but I have been unable to do so for the past two days. I have driven in, and I suspect that tens of thousands of people working in and around London have done the same.

Given what we know about the relative safety of road transport compared with rail transport, it follows that tens of thousands of our fellow citizens are risking life and limb in a way that would not be necessary were the Central line operating. We do not know, but the Central line may be kept out of service for a period of weeks. If it is, Saturday's incident, which no doubt was terrifying for the people involved in it, may lead to actual loss of life. That would be tragic.

I hope that all hon. Members will agree that London Underground should bear that possibility in mind, even though today's *London Evening Standard* is reporting that the rail unions are pressurising it to contemplate taking out of service permanently all the rolling stock currently running on the Central line if it is concluded that some design flaw was involved in Saturday's incident. I remind the Secretary of State that that stock has been used successfully for about a decade, and its removal from service would seem strange.

I hope that the House will agree that London Underground should reach a balanced judgment on these matters. A decision to shut down the Central line for several weeks for reasons of safety should not be taken lightly, if the consequence will be that more people risk their lives travelling by road.

The Opposition also hope that it will be possible to examine some of the other matters mentioned by the Secretary of State. I join the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) in welcoming what the right hon. Gentleman had to say about European train passenger warning systems. The Secretary of State is right to look at the practicality of such measures, and to aim for systems that work. Some siren voices always call for money to be spent on rail safety, even if that might not be terribly effective. Opposition Members will back the right hon. Gentleman if the actions that he takes to enhance rail safety are clearly based on the best science and the most rational case. Those actions should not be taken merely in response to public or media pressure to spend money for the sake of spending money.

In fact, the UK rail system is extremely safe, and becoming more so. It is not as safe as we should like, but there is no doubt that it is getting safer every year. The Transport 2000 spokesman, Mr. Stephen Joseph, has said that, even after recent serious rail accidents, it would be irrational for people to conclude that they would be safer travelling by road. That is entirely sensible: sadly, more than 3,000 people lose their lives, and about 300,000 are injured, on the roads every year. I hope that that statistic will be noted in the Standing Committee's deliberations on the Bill.

I hope too that the Committee takes note of the recent observation by Andrew Evans, professor of transport safety at University College, London. He commented that a person was far more likely to suffer an accident on the way to a railway station than at any subsequent stage of the journey. The Government are right to establish, through the Bill, a rail accident investigation unit, but the message must not be that the rail industry is unsafe in its absence, nor that we need special legislation to protect people from an unsafe system. This country's rail system is basically safe. Measures can be taken to make it safer still, but we do people no favours by perpetuating the myth that travelling by road is easier and safer than travelling by rail.

The Opposition also welcome the provisions relating to the British Transport police. The Secretary of State did not mention it, but at 10.30 pm this evening BBC 1 is showing the first part of a documentary series on the British Transport police. It will show why we have many reasons to be grateful to that force for the work that it does on behalf of so many people. I believe that tonight's episode will focus on the unpleasant but essential tasks that many members of the force perform in collecting objects—and sometimes, horrifically, body parts—from the rail network. That job has to be done and they undertake it with great care and diligence. It is right that they should have the status that will be accorded them in their incorporation under the Bill. They will no longer be treated as second-class police officers but will be recognised for doing an extremely important public safety job.

At a time when the Prime Minister rightly warns of the continuing threat to our national security from international terrorism, and given that on so many occasions in the past terrorists concentrated their attacks on parts of the rail network, it is important for the British Transport police to know that they have the full support of people throughout the country and on both sides of the House for their work. I hope that the Secretary of State's prioritisation of their work in the Bill will also be reflected in the negotiations that he and others hold with the Treasury on the provision of resources for that police service. Conservative Members continue to hold the view that our police, in general, need more backing and that certainly holds as true for the British Transport police as for any other organisation.

We note that the Secretary of State had to be prompted to refer to part 2, which relates to the changes to the Office of the Rail Regulator. He rightly referred—as I suspected he would—to the report of the Better Regulation Task Force in favour of the proposition that

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it is better for regulatory bodies, in general, to be organised as a board rather than as an individual. However, we shall want to explore, if not in this debate certainly in Committee and on Report, the full background to the Government's decision to change the way in which the rail regulator operates. Is it the case, as some people suspect, that the Government were not exactly reluctant to implement that recommendation of their taskforce, given that the current rail regulator, Mr. Tom Winsor, has demonstrated that he is capable of being independent not only of individual concerns within the rail industry but also of Her Majesty's Government? Some Members will recall the occasion when the regulator gave evidence to the Select Committee on Transport about a difference of opinion, or of recollection, between him and a former Secretary of State. It would be a matter of great regret and some seriousness if the Government's decision to change the whole nature of the operation of the Office of the Rail Regulator were to stem from their frustration at the regulator's actions on that occasion. We hope to be able to establish clearly that getting their own back played no part in the Government's motivation.

The Secretary of State also referred to the relatively short but none the less significant provisions towards the end of the Bill on the London underground. In his evidence to the Select Committee on 18 December, the right hon. Gentleman explained why the Bill took so long to produce, even though, when it was announced in the Queen's Speech, it was welcomed by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition as a measure that we were unlikely to oppose. The Secretary of State said that the main reason was because even by 18 December he had not reached final conclusions about whether the regulations on the London underground and Transport for London should be dealt with by primary or secondary legislation. I do not invite him to comment on that point, but I suspect that it was the main reason for the hold-up in our debating the Bill.

Earlier, the Secretary of State said that we should not believe everything that the media reported about the state of negotiations between him and the Mayor—indeed, I think that we should not believe everything in the media on any subject. However, I welcomed his comments on the tone of those negotiations and his optimism that progress is being made. It would be helpful if the Government could indicate in the Standing Committee whether, if they reach an agreement with the Mayor that incorporates the provisions to which the Secretary of State referred—that is, a binding undertaking by the Mayor not to return to legal challenge or legal action—the provisions in the Bill would be otiose and could be struck out of the draft. We shall wait to see whether the Government get into that position, but it would be helpful to know perhaps hypothetically what their view on that would be.

Transport for London does not agree with the Secretary of State that the provisions in the Bill are intended simply to carry out the original wishes of Parliament as set out in the Greater London Authority Act 1999. After all, TfL in its memorandum to the Select Committee dated 11 December points to the rather unanswerable argument that the primary purpose of the Act was to transfer responsibility for the London underground to TfL and the London Mayor. It is perfectly true, as the Secretary of State says, that other intentions were inherent, lay behind, were implied and in some cases were stated, but the primary purpose was to transfer responsibility to Transport for London. That is something that the Secretary of State does not at present propose to do.

In its memorandum TfL states:

"It is also certainly possible that these changes, once enacted—"

it refers specifically to clause 105 of the Bill—

"would permit the Government to retain control of LUL for an indefinite duration."

That, no doubt, is not the Secretary of State's hope or wish. He has made it clear that that is not his intention, but he would find it difficult to argue but that TfL is right in its assessment of the legal consequences of that clause. We will wish to explore, perhaps in depth, in Committee whether the Government are prepared to consider some self-denying ordinances or perhaps even some legal restrictions to ensure that the provisions in the Greater London Authority Act, which envisaged that long before now London underground would be the responsibility of TfL, will be implemented rather than continually frustrated by disagreements between the Mayor, the Secretary of State, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chancellor. I do not seek to arbitrate between those individuals. I happily take the view that they are all as bad as each other, but it seems to me that Londoners and those travelling in and out of London are suffering from the inability to reach agreement. It would be helpful if they could reach some form of consensus sooner rather than later.

The legislation will on the whole have a positive effect. Its intention is clearly to address serious and important issues in a serious and proper way. We will wish to examine points of detail. We shall in particular want to examine the way in which the welcome restrictions on the use of alcohol or drugs by aviation and maritime personnel will be implemented. The Secretary of State did not state otherwise, but he will acknowledge that legal safeguards already apply. It is an offence for someone in charge of an aircraft, for example, to be under the influence of alcohol, but he is right to say that the courageous measures introduced by Barbara Castle, who received an enormous amount of criticism for introducing the breathalyser for motorists, are not now an issue of serious public controversy or debate. It seems to me highly likely that that will also be the case once similar procedures are introduced for pilots of aircraft and maritime vessels. We will examine the detail of that in consultation with the industry, but we do not have any difficulty with it in principle.

Mr. Bercow: Hitherto the British Transport police have operated on the basis of a part-statutory, part-contractual jurisdiction over the railways. The proposal in the Bill is to give them the status of a fully statutory body—a status that my hon. Friend welcomed. Can he confirm for me and for the benefit of the House that in addition to enjoying greater esteem as a result of their increased status they will enjoy a corresponding increase in practical powers?

Mr. Collins: Until the very last moment, I thought that my hon. Friend was going to note that, of course, greater accountability is one of the principal advantages of bringing the British Transport police within the regime that applies to other police authorities under the Police Act 1996. We should certainly welcome greater accountability, and it should be seen as a strength.

Yes, it is my understanding that the changes that the Government intend to introduce will regularise the position of the British Transport police and, certainly for all purposes relating to its management, control, accounting and accountability, they will be treated essentially like any other police authority, while recognising that they are, of course, a national organisation, not based on a county structure that would otherwise be the case.

The powers of the British Transport police will not be significantly altered by the Bill, but, as I said earlier, we would all recognise that, given the security considerations that perhaps apply more to railway stations and lines than to almost any other public structure, or series of buildings or public spaces, it is indeed appropriate that the force should have the full range of powers that they need to discharge their duties, which are likely to become more, rather than less, important in the years to come.

I was saying a word or two about the provisions that relate to alcohol testing. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman)—I am afraid that she has just left her place—referred to the highly publicised incident in Stockholm. I understand that the legal authorities are still considering that matter, so we must not comment in detail on the case, but it certainly indicates that there is a topicality in the Government's proposals. That is in a sense commendable, but they cannot claim any credit for it, as they could hardly have known what was about to happen.

However, it was notable that—I hope that this does not intrude into the detail of the case—it was reported that the person concerned was breathalysed. Of course the incident occurred in Sweden, not in the United Kingdom, but it is interesting to note therefore that perhaps Sweden is slightly ahead of us in such provisions and that we are dealing with something that the international aviation business is unlikely to find particularly controversial.

It is the Conservative party's view that the Government are right to introduce legislation on transport safety, but our view is that, from time to time, it would be more appropriate for the House also to consider road safety issues, given that travelling by road is by far the most dangerous form of transport in this country. Sadly, it is by far the form of transport in which the largest number of lives is lost. Indeed, there are some very alarming statistics, not only the often-quoted figures in relation to the number of motorists or their passengers who are killed on the roads, but almost 1,000 people a year are killed even though they are pedestrians or pedal cyclists, many of whom are children. It is not easy to suggest that there are simple legislative solutions to those issues, but they need to be put on the public record and discussed in the House every time that we talk about transport safety.

When the media talk about transport safety, they almost invariably dig out the stock footage of rail crashes. There have been some very horrific rail crashes, but the media seem to ignore the fact that, tragically, 10 people die in this country, on average, on the roads every day, week in week out, and it might help if, from time to time, they gave that fact a little more publicity to balance out the reality, instead of giving a slightly misleading impression.

I had hoped that the Secretary of State might have said a word about the relationship between the railway accident investigation branch, which he proposes in the Bill, and the work of Railway Safety, which, as he will know, has been set up by Network Rail and succeeds the previous arrangements that applied to Railtrack. The Minister for Transport is nodding. Perhaps he will say a word or two about that in his closing remarks.

Railway Safety says on its website that its 2003 railway group safety plan

> "adopts a long-term goal of reducing to zero the number of events with the potential to cause a collision or derailment and that are under the direct control of Network Rail and the train operators."

That is clearly a worthwhile and welcome target, but I hope that we will not make the mistake of taking the view that, somehow, the rail industry fails if it does not deliver a reduction to zero instantly or overnight. A lot of work will have to be done before that can happen, but there is no doubt that a great deal of very hard work is being undertaken.

We do not propose to oppose the Government on this legislation for the sake of opposition. When they are doing something that we broadly welcome, we will tell them so, which is what we are doing on this occasion. We will want to explore points of detail and points that the Government have perhaps not fully thought through. On the whole, however, the Bill will and should command cross-party support, and is likely to be welcomed by all those involved in travelling when it reaches the statute book.

4.10 pm

Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): It is a pleasure and an honour, as someone who spent 19 years working in the railway industry, to contribute to this important debate. Before I entered the House, this subject occupied my every waking hour, and sometimes my sleeping hours. On many occasions, in the middle of the night, I was rung by control to be told that there had been an incident or accident somewhere. As I result, I had to respond in the manner to which the Secretary of State alluded in his opening remarks by trying to ensure that the system was safe and that any injured people were dealt with appropriately, and moving as swiftly as possible to restore the railway.

In relation to some of the interventions by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) about speed and the necessity sometimes to place speed restrictions or other restrictions on the railway system, those are, of course, a result of railway group standards and the safety standards that apply to the industry. Not applying a speed restriction or a temporary signalling arrangement to a particular section of track would not only be foolhardy but very dangerous. It would add considerable risk, and defeat the whole object of what is Britain's safest transportation system.

I welcome the comments of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins). This is a first for the Conservative Front-Bench team, but he seemed to have great knowledge that reflected research

[*Lawrie Quinn*]

undertaken in preparation for the debate. He and I recently attended a useful and helpful reception—I in my capacity as co-chairman of the all party-group on railways, and he in his as the Opposition transport spokesman—and he was very welcoming to those in the railway community who do so much to keep our railways safe.

With those few remarks to establish my credentials to speak in this debate, I want to bring to the House's attention one or two concerns about the Bill. I tried to deal with one of them in an intervention on the Secretary of State earlier: the question of the definition of what is an accident and what is an incident. Again, I listened carefully to the thoughtful contribution from the Opposition spokesman, who continually described the accident—as I would put it—that occurred on the Central line as an incident. I do not know whether the fact that there were no fatalities was a consideration in relation to his definition. It illustrates my concern, however—and that of many who work in the railway industry—that the important question of definition should be clarified. Even if that point cannot be dealt with on the face of the Bill, I hope that the issue will be focused on in Committee.

In terms of my railway experience, a signal passed at danger—a SPAD—is an incident. It would be an accident if, as a result of that SPAD, a further collision occurred, and people were injured or substantial damage was done to the equipment and engineering systems of the railway infrastructure. I hope that that starts people thinking about what we should do to address the important problem of defining the difference between an accident and an incident.

Mr. Clapham: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the need to determine the difference between an incident and an accident. Some industries have a long history of doing that. In the mining industry, Her Majesty's inspectorate of mines would be called to incidents or occurrences. I referred the Secretary of State to RIDDOR as a pointer for such a definition.

Lawrie Quinn: My hon. Friend is right. His former industry of mining and my former industry had similar safety cultures. Some of their regulations have parallels. We learned from previous mistakes, built on the regulations and put safer systems in place.

Mr. Don Foster: I accept that we need the definitions and I have drafted an amendment that might satisfy the hon. Gentleman on that count. I hope that it will be selected for debate in Committee. Does he accept that, for the rail accident investigation branch to develop its intelligence, it will need to deal not only with accidents but the incidents that he describes, just as the air accidents investigation branch considers near misses as well as actual accidents?

Lawrie Quinn: I agree. In fact, the categorisation would allow the accident investigation branch to apply the appropriate resources and to define the specialist technical resources that it will need to decide how quickly attention should be given to an incident. For example, an incident that involves a SPAD might be the result of a problem with the signalling. It might be possible to put a temporary operating mechanism in place, such as a speed restriction, and fix the problem the following weekend to allow the tracks to be run at full line speed. Obviously, the process would be different in the case of an accident and might necessitate the closure of a line, railway diversions and so on.

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the Bill differentiates between a serious accident and an accident? On the face of it, an accident may not appear serious, but the investigation could discover a fault in equipment or track that would have repercussions in other parts of the railway. A problem might not be immediately apparent when an accident occurs. Is not there a problem with the definitions?

Lawrie Quinn: There is a distinction between the need to have a definition in the Bill and the reality of the good safety culture in the railway industry. I cannot stress too strongly how safety conscious and committed to safety the people who work in that industry are.

Let us consider the perspective of the driver of the train on the Central line at the weekend. His instinct was to report the fact that there was a problem with the train. That reaction is instinctive for anyone who works in the railway industry. A clearer definition would aid the important work carried out by the new organisation and, as the hon. Gentleman said, add to the categorisation of lessons learned to ensure that we do not repeat the same mistakes.

I have a personal concern that relates to my private Member's Bill, which I hope will obtain its Second Reading on Friday. The Bill seeks to revitalise and bring up to date the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974. From my personal experience of dealing with accidents and incidents during my railway career, I have great respect for the Health and Safety Executive and its inspectors, particularly those in the railway inspectorate. I regard them as the colleagues of anyone who works in the industry.

Clause 102 proposes a new railways safety levy. My concern is that, by clever movement of public moneys, it would introduce an opaque bureaucracy that may be unnecessary. At the end of the day, the passengers and those who move freight by rail will pay, perhaps through subsidy from the Government. In an early bid to my colleagues in the Treasury, I ask them to consider the resources being given to the HSE and ensure that it is properly funded from the public purse, rather than by the merry-go-round financial arrangement that I think I detect in clause 102. I hope that the Standing Committee will consider that point.

I turn now to an issue of confidentiality that arises from clause 8(4). I have worked on many construction sites close to the railway; they are very dangerous places to be. On one site, we had a series of minor incidents, and the clerk of works placed the letters "PTB" on his hard hat. When people inquired what that meant, he replied that the letters stood for "person to blame".

People who work in the railway industry share the goal of having a safe, working transport system. They need to be confident that confidentiality will be maintained when they report a mishap and that they will not be reported to management or the police. I detect a clear consensus on witness confidentiality not only among employees in the railway industry such as my former colleagues but among employers. That is part of the system used by the air accidents investigation branch and investigations into other forms of transport, and it should be enshrined in the Bill.

Mr. Hopkins: Will my hon. Friend take that principle further and agree that there should be encouragement and support for employees who report to senior management when they see things being done incorrectly? There should be whistleblowing when corners are cut that may lead to problems later on. I understand that there is fear in the industry about whistleblowing in those circumstances.

Lawrie Quinn: On most of the sites that I looked after when I was a railway civil engineer, I was responsible for holding fortnightly safety meetings. I used to open every meeting by reflecting on the fact that if we had a safe site with good communications, and people shared knowledge of problems, such as an untied ladder or problems with overhead electrical systems, as soon as they saw them, we would prevent accidents that might have resulted in serious injury or fatality.

We must bear it in mind that we are dealing with not only those who work on the railways but the travelling public and dangerous chemicals and substances that are transported on the railways. There is a wider public obligation to make sure that information is given to the people in charge as quickly as possible, and that must be enshrined in the general safety climate of any transport system.

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): On the confidential reporting of concerns, is my hon. Friend aware that, two or three years ago, some railway companies introduced a confidential reporting system on a pilot scheme basis? In the airline industry, a confidential reporting system does indeed exist, particularly in respect of air traffic control. Should that not be rolled out throughout the whole transport industry, including the railways?

Lawrie Quinn: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done with the Transport Committee, which reflected on exactly that point in 1998. In my experience, such an idea would certainly help to create a general climate of good practice and a safe transport system; indeed, that is good practice in terms not only of protecting people, but of enhancing the safety reputation that any transport system should have. It is unfortunate that, because of the pressure of trying to get the job done, such a consensus is perhaps not reached throughout the entire organisation. The provisions included in strengthened health and safety legislation and in this Bill will encourage the establishment of the safe systems that we want.

I shall be brief as I am conscious that many colleagues want to get in. On clause 8 and learning from past investigations and mistakes, it is essential to ensure that the Secretary of State gets regular feedback from the track-side about any problems. We have started to move away from the fragmented situation to which privatisation led, whereby a more legalistic framework was put in place, and people stopped talking and wanting to share information openly.

Everyone connected with the industry always has something to learn from such investigations—from the Secretary of State to the linemen at the track-side and the people on the platforms. It is absolutely essential that the rail accident investigation branch have a statutory duty to report to the independent railway safety and standards board, which in turn should have a duty to disseminate such reports throughout the railway industry. What happened in the west country could occur in the north-east or in the north of Scotland, and it is crucial that we establish a transparent approach. Clauses 8 and 9 and clause 6(4) deal with that point, and I hope that the Standing Committee will examine in detail what can be learned from past investigations.

Last week, the all-party group on rail had the privilege and pleasure of visiting the British Transport police control room at Victoria, and it proved very useful for representatives of both Houses to witness the complexities involved. I very much welcome the Bill's proposal to enshrine a railway policing authority in British Transport police. It is important that all communities can talk directly to police forces, but I make a plea to the Secretary of State, and to the Ministers who will take the Bill forward, to look again at such provisions. The industry that I used to work in delivers many journeys and moves much tonnage every day of the year. It is important that we do not forget the staff—the people who work day in, day out—and give them an opportunity to participate in the important governance work of British Transport police. Again, I hope that Members can take a look at that in Committee. I wish the Bill well, and hope that its progress through Parliament is speedy so that we can make sure that we get an even safer railway fit for the 21st century.

4.30 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Lawrie Quinn), who demonstrated in his speech, as he does in everything that he does for the all-party group, his deep knowledge and concern for the railways. No doubt, Members on both sides of the House will regard him as yet another contender for membership of the Committee considering the Bill.

As other hon. Members have mentioned, last Saturday's accident on the tube throws into stark relief the importance of vigilance on safety in public transport. Liberal Democrat Members have long argued that public transport should be safe, reliable and affordable—the most important of those three considerations is safety. Like the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins), I wish to make it clear on the record that, as the Bill includes a number of measures that will drive forward the issue of safety in our transport systems, we shall certainly support it on Second Reading, notwithstanding the fact that we want to explore a number of areas in Committee and propose some changes.

As hon. Members have said, the Bill is limited in scope. Like the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale, I find it particularly disappointing that there

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is little reference to the vital issue of road safety. I have already noted that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, no doubt doing yet another stint in Westminster Hall at the moment, has hinted on a number of occasions that the Government intend to introduce a road safety Bill in future. If that is the case, I hope that we will receive confirmation of the Government's intentions later, as such a measure is vital, not least because we are already three years into a supposed 10-year road transport safety strategy.

Like the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale, I think that it is important to put on the record our view of how safe the railways are already. Indeed, despite Southall, Ladbroke Grove, Hatfield and Potters Bar, our railways are five times safer than they were back in 1975. The sad truth is that those improvements have not been mirrored on our roads. In fact, the statistics are stark. Since 1997, fewer than 150 people have died on our railways, but a staggering 17,000 people have died on our roads. There is therefore much to be done to improve safety on our roads, and it is a pity that the Bill is almost silent on that issue.

Tom Brake: Does my hon. Friend agree that, in relation to road safety, the Government could look at a problem with car auctions highlighted by Families Bereaved Through Car Crime, a Belfast organisation? It is possible for an 11-year-old to purchase a car, get together with friends, then go joyriding.

Mr. Foster: My hon. Friend has made an important point. I was horrified to learn that it was possible for children as young as 11 to go to an auction, buy a car then, tragically on some occasions, go off joyriding—a euphemism, as it is certainly not joyful. I hope that the Minister of State and the Secretary of State have taken note of what my hon. Friend said.

The Bill is limited in scope. We welcome many of the measures that it includes, but it is important to set it in the context of other issues that, surprisingly, it does not cover. The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby will know only too well how complex the issues relating to safety on the railways now are, especially following privatisation. Anyone who has read the excellent briefing, "Railway Safety and Accidents", which was published earlier this month by the Library, will get a flavour of the degree of complexity that exists. Far too many bodies are involved in railway safety. For example, authorising a new railway carriage involves three different bodies—one to authorise the safety arrangements for the interior of the coach, one to deal with the exterior, and another to say whether it is safe to go on to the track. It was therefore appropriate that Lord Cullen recommended that there should be a single rail industry safety body that would take on many of those responsibilities and reduce the need for such a large number of bodies.

The rail regulator's proposals in that respect are far less radical than those of Lord Cullen. Nevertheless, they are receiving a great deal of support and it is possible that such a body—a more limited body—will be established within the next few months. I hope that the Minister will tell us that it has the Government's approval and that the only reason that it is not mentioned in the Bill is that its establishment does not require primary legislation.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): I echo the comments about the desirability of streamlining systems, structures and organisations. Given the hon. Gentleman's reference to privatisation, does he agree that it is important to put on the record that Lord Cullen's report said that there has been no deterioration in overall rail safety since privatisation, and that the tragedies that have taken place on the railway are the result of internal system failures. He was keen to stress that privatisation has not made the railways more dangerous.

Mr. Foster: We could start quibbling about interpretations of Lord Cullen's report, which I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has studied carefully, as I have. I could find other parts of the report that refer, for example, to the problems created by the fragmentation of the industry. It is increasingly clear that problems in the rail industry have arisen as a result of years of neglect and underfunding, which arose partly because of the obscene conflicts between shareholder profits and passenger safety. That is why we were keen that measures should be introduced to change the arrangements for Railtrack.

Mr. Hopkins: Might Lord Cullen have made a different comment had his report been written after Potters Bar and Hatfield, rather than before, given that contractors were clearly implicated?

Mr. Foster: I do not want to comment on that particular issue, although I shall touch on Potters Bar in a moment.

There is an urgent need to simplify the safety regulatory structure on our railways. Personally, I would much rather that those arrangements were similar to those that exist for the Civil Aviation Authority, whereby there would be a safety regulator and an economic regulator within the overall structure of the Strategic Rail Authority, but with the operation of appropriate Chinese walls. Complexity is compounded by the involvement, as is proper, of the European Union. Who, within this jungle of regulatory bodies, will be responsible for telling us which takes precedence in the event of a conflict between the operation of technical specifications for interoperability and our own railway group standards?

Mr. Clapham: As the hon. Gentleman says, there is an issue about the boundaries of the various agencies that are responsible for safety. With reference to a safety regulator, the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 applies to the railways, so the Health and Safety Commission becomes the safety regulator advising the Secretary of State.

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman is right. He is aware that there are a number of other bodies, some of which are about to change their names and their functions, which are also involved in these matters. The complexity is similar to that relating to who is responsible for carrying out investigations into accidents or incidents. One of the good features of the Bill is that it will provide greater clarity.

On the aspects that are not covered by the Bill, the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby mentioned the importance of learning lessons from things that have gone wrong. He is right. It is a great pity that the Bill does not contain a specific requirement for the Secretary of State to report to the House at appropriate times on the progress that is being made in implementing recommendations arising from inquiries and investigations into accidents and incidents.

For example, 33 of the recommendations of Professor Uff and Lord Cullen are still outstanding, well after the recommended date for implementation. It may be sensible for the Secretary of State and the industry to argue that some of those recommendations are inappropriate and should be changed. We have discussed ERTMS, for example. It may be deemed appropriate not to proceed with certain recommendations, but there should be regular reports to Parliament about the progress of recommendations, with an explanation about why some are to be ditched.

There is also a concern that some investigations are taking far too long. If we are to learn the lessons, we need clear answers, as others have said. We are still waiting for the final report on the train derailment at Hatfield, which took place in October 2000. We were told some time ago that the final report would be published by the end of 2001, yet we are still waiting.

Notwithstanding the matters that have been omitted, the Bill contains many welcome measures. The establishment of an independent body responsible for rail accident investigations—a move recommended by Lord Cullen, which should have been in place by now—is proposed, and we welcome that. We are concerned that too much of the detail is to be provided in regulation rather than in the Bill, and that there may still be a number of conflicts to be resolved—for example, between those who want to carry out an investigation to find out what has happened, and those who are keen to ensure that we get the railway running again as quickly as possible.

There will be tensions between other bodies—for example, the transport police, who want to establish whether anyone is culpable, and the accident investigation body, which is interested in identifying the cause of the accident, and may not be concerned with liability and responsibility. Others, such as insurance loss adjusters, will also have an interest in the investigation. If an inquiry is subsequently set up, there could be a conflict between the inquiry, the rail accident investigation branch and the various other bodies.

I am well aware that clause 7 proposes primacy for the RAIB, but there will be situations where that is inappropriate, as happens now. We need to explore with Ministers in Committee how all those potential conflicts will be resolved.

There is also concern about the resources that will be provided for the new body. It is worth remembering that Her Majesty's rail inspectorate currently aspires to investigate 3.5 per cent. of all incidents and 20 per cent. of train accidents. To do that work, between 19 and 28 inspectors are at least notionally available in any week. It will be vital for the new body to at least match that level of activity to maintain its basic intelligence, but it is a little difficult to see how it will do so with the 10 inspectors that it is likely to be given.

There is further concern about the level of support and resources, as has been mentioned. For example, will the Health and Safety Executive's laboratory at Buxton be made available to the new body? As the Minister will know, that laboratory is capable of carrying out forensic examination of large sections of track or even whole carriages. If it is to be made available, will there be a charge? Given how expensive such a charge would be, is £400,000 a year in running costs an appropriate figure?

The changes to the Office of the Rail Regulator are also welcome. After all, they take one step further the moves already introduced by Tom Winsor in setting up his own advisory body. The Secretary of State is right that the office is now the only regulatory body that does not have its own board; at least, a board is being set up and it is appropriate to bring it in line.

The sad thing about the proposal is that it does not go further. On 15 October 2001, when the then Secretary of State announced plans to turn Railtrack into a not-for-profit organisation, he said that it

> "would need far less intense regulation. We therefore intend to streamline the existing structure".—[*Official Report*, 15 October 2001; Vol. 372, c. 956.]

The Select Committee on Transport, Local Government and the Regions, as it then was, talked in its first report of 2001–02, which was published in January 2002, about the need for a review of the respective roles of the regulator and the Strategic Rail Authority after the change in status of Railtrack. The Bill merely establishes a regulatory board, but fails to take forward either the promise of the previous Secretary of State or the advice of the Select Committee.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman and others might remember that the previous Secretary of State intended not only to streamline the powers of the rail regulator, but pretty much to abolish them by introducing an Act of Parliament that would have removed the regulator's powers entirely. I suspect that his ambitions were even more draconian than the hon. Gentleman suggests.

Mr. Foster: Perhaps we can now persuade the former Secretary of State to become a member of the Committee, so that we can quiz him about those issues.

Many issues need to be questioned still further, but one of the welcome measures is the new arrangements in respect of the British Transport police, which not only put them on to a statutory footing, but give them their own authority. Like so many of the things done by this Government, however, that has been a long time in coming. Looking back at the history books, one finds a departmental press release from 31 July 1998 entitled "British Transport Police to get independent control." We have therefore been waiting since then for the proposal to be implemented. Belated though the measure may be, it is none the less welcome.

A couple of issues surprise me in what is being proposed. Given that the model for the new British Transport police authority is based on the Police Act 1996, I find it surprising that there will be an

[Mr. Foster]

arrangement in which the Secretary of State will appoint the chairman. All other police authorities make the recommendation themselves.

Finally, I turn to aviation and shipping in respect of alcohol and drugs. Last Saturday's incident in Stockholm has been mentioned. It is important to place on record the fact that it was clear from what happened subsequently and the actions that were taken by the airline how seriously British Airways takes the issue. The sad truth is that for far too long we have had no alcohol limits or linked testing regimes for mariners and those who work in aspects of the air transport industry that are critical for safety. We have waited a long time for such measures.

Back in 1992, the Hayes report that followed the Marchioness disaster made recommendations for shipping. We are considering them 10 years later. The air accidents investigation branch made similar recommendations on air travel. Measures for which we have waited a long time are nevertheless welcome and we look forward to discussing some of the details in Committee.

When the Secretary of State answered the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) about whether he could reduce the acceptable amount of alcohol from 80 mg to 50 mg for drivers, he replied that he had no intention of taking action. It is therefore surprising that the Department for Transport has consulted on the matter for several years. Paragraph 13 of the consultation document that was first published in February 1998 states:

> "This strongly suggests that drinking by drivers in the 50-80 mg range is a significant and largely hidden cause of accidents."

I hope that the Secretary of State was listening to that. Clear research evidence supports a reduction to 50 mg. If that is right for drivers, it is a more appropriate amount than the 80 mg for which the Bill provides.

We understand the reasons for clause 105, which amends the Greater London Authority Act 1999. It exists to help the Secretary of State dig himself out of the hole of part-privatisation of the London underground. The poor drafting of the Act and the Government's failure to think through the details and implications of the daft part-privatisation proposals led to the provision. If the infraco goes bust between now and handing over the three tube lines to Transport for London, the liquidator is likely to use public assets to pay off the banks or other creditors. The British people would thus lose an asset through the Government's incompetence. So much for sound planning. At last, the Government are trying to put matters right. We will therefore support clause 105 because it makes sense to protect a public asset.

The Bill contains many provisions that are long overdue. Although much needs to be done to tidy it up, we broadly welcome it and we therefore support Second Reading.

4.53 pm

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): I support the Bill. It is another example of the Government's determination to put safety, especially in transport, at the top of our agenda. However, I want to tease out several matters for clarification by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State.

The proposal for a rail accident investigation branch has elicited a general welcome. However, I wonder whether the Government's approach to that important issue has been sufficiently radical or courageous. I am particularly bothered about the powers of the rail accident investigation branch, which will have a duty under the Bill to investigate serious accidents. My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Lawrie Quinn) spoke of the distinction between accidents and incidents, which is extremely important. I do not intend to labour that point. It has been well made.

The part of the Bill that deals with the branch's powers says that with regard to less serious accidents the branch will have a discretion. Indeed, the Secretary of State may by regulation enact ~~that dis~~cretion. The point that needs to be made is that if the tragic criterion for a serious accident is the number of people killed or injured, that means that less serious accidents are those that, thankfully, do not result in death or injury, as was the case with the recent incident on the underground, bad as it was. Then we are in danger of losing a real opportunity of learning the lessons from what might be termed relatively minor accidents. Even though they did not result in people being killed or injured, their lessons could be very important in developing measures to prevent possible future accidents.

That distinction bothers me considerably, because there seems to be a determination to deal with serious accidents—those defined by the number of people tragically killed or injured—while there will be discretion with regard to those bad accidents that luckily did not result in serious injury or death, and therefore opportunities may be lost to learn lessons from them.

Next, I seek clarification on what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said about the rail accident investigation branch being based on the air accidents investigation branch model. We all understand that. Lord Cullen referred to it in his report. Let us look at what the air accidents investigation branch actually does. Regulation 4 of the 1996 regulations relating to it says that

> "the sole objective of the investigation shall be the prevention of accidents and incidents."

I emphasise "prevention".

The rail accident investigation branch, which is supposed to be based on that model, is, as I read the Bill, reactive and not proactive. That is an extremely important point. Lord Cullen made it clear in his report that he supported the approach taken by the AAIB. If I read the Bill correctly, we have a reactive situation on serious accidents, a discretionary situation on what are deemed to be less serious accidents, and no preventive responsibility at all, such as the air accidents investigation branch has. I should like my right hon. Friend the Minister of State to give us some clarification on that.

With regard to the regulatory board and the Office of the Rail Regulator, I had some sympathy with what the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) said. The proposals are based in part on the Better Regulation Task Force recommendations. A comparison of the House of

Commons brief on what the task force says with what the Government propose gives rise to some areas of concern.

For example, the Better Regulation Task Force says:

> "The advantages of a board structure were felt to include:
>
> Ensuring a wide range of expertise within the decision making process."

Fine. There is also this reference to

> "Increasing continuity of decision making".

That is also fine. There is this, too:

> "Greater transparency and accountability of decision making."

Now, as I read the Bill's proposals on the regulatory board, I can see the first two of those crucial objectives being achieved—the Better Regulation Task Force refers to that, or at least to their having a good chance of being achieved—but I see no indication that transparency and accountability will be achieved. Indeed, if I read the proposals correctly, the Government are effectively proposing to transform the advisory body to the rail regulator into a statutory board. That is as far as it goes, so I ask my right hon. Friend the Minister to consider the extremely important issues of transparency and accountability.

I welcome the proposal on the British Transport police, which is very sensible as it has been explained to us. However, I want to raise two or three concerns with my right hon. Friend. A main objective of the proposals is to base British Transport police on the tripartite or triumvirate system—involving the Government, the police authority and the police—under the police Acts, which, effectively, are the framework in which our policing works. Fine. We can all support that, but the industry will continue to fund British Transport police.

There is always a little unease when an industry that clearly has a direct interest in what a body such as British Transport police is doing provides the funding for it. I do not want to labour that point, as I want to make another. People say that the British Transport police will be funded by the industry, but we should consider the fact that the industry is 80 or 90 per cent. funded by the public purse, as are Network Rail, 80 per cent. of the train operating companies and the Strategic Rail Authority.

What is really meant by the idea of the industry funding British Transport police? In truth the public purse is funding British Transport police. We should consider that alongside the tripartite or triumvirate system that the Government want to apply to the force. I also wonder how public interest and accountability will be safeguarded in that system. As I read the proposals in the House of Commons Library brief, it is anticipated that the police authority would be made up of perhaps four representatives of passenger interests and four representatives of the industry. Fine. I do not know how much expertise would be involved there.

Mr. Don Foster: Before the hon. Gentleman leaves that point, does he agree that it is important for the representatives of the rail industry to include people who are employed in it?

Mr. Stevenson: That is a valid point, but the main thrust of my remarks is that the public purse is paying.

Mr. Foster: In a roundabout way.

Mr. Stevenson: No, not in a roundabout way. The public purse is involved very directly. It is misleading to think that the industry is providing the funding. Without the public purse, none of this would be happening. Again, accountability is extremely important, and whoever sits on the British Transport police authority should reflect such accountability and transparency.

I turn briefly to the question of alcohol and drugs, and to the proposals relating to air crew and to what are called safety critical staff. I am somewhat worried about the distinction being made between air crew—that is, pilots—and other staff. Air crew will be subject to a maximum of 20 mg of alcohol per 100 ml of blood, on the basis that they need quick reactions. I understand that, but crew working on engines will face a limit of 80 mg per 100 ml of blood.

What sort of message does that give? I understand the effects that alcohol could have on someone piloting an aircraft, but is it any less important that people doing the critical safety work on engines should also be subject to the stricter regime? One could argue in the public interest that, for flight crew in particular, there should be no tolerance of alcohol content in the blood whatsoever

Finally, I turn to a matter that has not yet been mentioned—the incorporation into UK law of the 1999 convention on international carriage by rail, COTIF. The Government say that that will take account of the changes in railway management and the separation of operation and infrastructure. This raises an important safety issue. The fragmentation of the industry has been a factor in the serious loss of confidence in railway safety in this country. I am delighted that Network Rail has understood that in-house maintenance of the railways will be not only cheaper, but far safer. I congratulate it on taking back in house some of the Great Western railway.

Mr. Clapham: Does my hon. Friend agree that outsourcing undermines the safety culture? That is true in the nuclear industry, as well as in the railway industry. Only 18 months ago, inspectors reported on safety standards in the nuclear industry and their report showed that the privatised utility, British Energy, undermined the safety culture. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is good to see Network Rail bringing back in-house maintenance?

Mr. Stevenson: I welcome the point that my hon. Friend makes. I do not want to reopen the debate about the chaos of privatisation, but a previous chief executive of Railtrack placed on record the fact that the company was unable to reconcile the interests of shareholders with those of safety. I hope that the incorporation of COTIF into UK law does not mean that the Government intend there to be more fragmentation of the industry. The lessons are there to be learned, and Network Rail is to be congratulated. I hope that the Government will encourage as much as possible the very welcome process that puts the public interest first when it comes to safety, and the move to bring maintenance back in house. Not only is in-house maintenance safer, but the present system is three times more expensive than was the system under British Rail.

My final point is a plea to my right hon. Friend concerning mark 1 slam-door carriages. They were due to have been phased out or replaced by January this year, but that is not going to be achieved. I hope that my right hon. Friend will say something about that.

[Mr. Stevenson]

I hope that my right hon. Friend will deem my observations to be positive rather than critical. I very much welcome the Bill.

5.10 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) who, through his work on the Select Committee on Transport, can bring expertise to bear on this subject. I also appreciated the speech made by the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Lawrie Quinn), who worked in the transport sector before he became a Member of the House and can thus bring to life what is sometimes a rather dry subject.

I very much welcome the Bill, which has as its theme the promotion of safety for the travelling public, and I wave it a metaphorical handkerchief as it passes through the House.

I note the view of the Council for the Protection of Rural England and some hon. Members that the Bill contains nothing on road safety. I hope that the Minister can assure the House that that does not mean that the Government accord road safety policy less priority but, rather, that it is travelling at least as quickly in a separate but parallel lane.

Travelling by rail is already much safer than travelling by road. We need to remember that point as we deal with the safety provisions in part 1. If we drive up safety on the railway and place all the costs on the tickets of the travelling public, we price people off a safer system and on to the roads, which are already less safe and which will then become more congested.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) suggested that we should make the trains slower. The difficulty with that is they would become less competitive compared to road travel. That is the wrong way to promote a coherent transport policy.

It is important for the Government to send the travelling public a clear signal that their policy is to ensure that the costs of travelling by bus or rail will not rise faster than the costs of travelling by car. That is a key component of a coherent transport strategy, which the Government risk abandoning.

With reference to part 1, safety must be paramount on the railways. Safety was improving under British Rail and has continued to improve since, but one death on the railways remains one death too many. It is not the case, as has been asserted sometimes—and, indeed, this afternoon—that a disaggregated or fragmented transport system is inherently more dangerous than an integrated one.

The most disaggregated transport industry is civil aviation. The airlines do not run the airports or air traffic control. They do not own or maintain the planes: they lease them. Just about everything from baggage handling to meals is contracted out. There are many different airlines and owners of airports.

The industry is highly fragmented, but flying is the safest means of travel. Air travel is extremely popular. Furthermore, in response to the arguments of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South, I remind the House that the industry is entirely profit-driven. I reject the argument that there is conflict between fragmentation and safety and private ownership and safety. The record disproves that.

Mr. Don Foster: I have listened with interest to the comments of the right hon. Gentleman, for whom I have great respect. Is he not fundamentally wrong on this issue? Surely he accepts that there is a difference between monopoly and competition. In the airline industry, there is competition and that automatically drives up safety standards; no one wants to fly in an unsafe plane. In the rail industry, Railtrack was a monopoly so there was a conflict between passenger safety and shareholder profit.

Sir George Young: I entirely reject that argument. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South deployed the argument that a fragmented industry was less safe than an integrated one. However, the safety record for civil aviation is even better than it is for the railways, yet the industry is the most fragmented that one could possibly find. It is subcontracted and specialised, yet it works. A comparison of civil aviation with rail substantiates the argument that there is nothing wrong with a privately owned disaggregated industry running a transport system.

Mr. Stevenson: If the right hon. Gentleman is not prepared to take my word for it, I am sure that he will look at the documented evidence from the former chief executive of Railtrack who said that fragmentation had been bad for the industry, and from the train operating companies and so on. It is not my argument; it is documented throughout the industry.

Sir George Young: Sadly, the statistics do not support the hon. Gentleman's argument. Safety has improved since privatisation. The railway is now safer than it was before privatisation, but we have to make it even safer. The hon. Gentleman's own Government have kept roughly the same structure that they inherited from the Conservatives. There is Railtrack, or Network Rail; there is a series of train operating companies with franchises; there are people who own the rolling stock; and there is a regulator. I did not intend to be so partisan, but I was driven to it by interventions.

I am attracted by the policy of replicating the well-tested air accidents investigation branch and marine accident investigation branch models. When I was at the Department of Transport, I was impressed by the AAIB at Farnborough, which puts together after an accident a jigsaw puzzle with pieces missing and pieces damaged. It is painstaking and methodical professional work against a background of tragedy, and I commend the AAIB for what it does.

The AAIB does not face the potential conflicts of interest that confront Her Majesty's railway inspectorate. As the AAIB does not validate any particular design of aircraft or system of air traffic control, it is completely impartial in investigating what goes wrong. So I see the attractions of that model.

It is possible to develop the opposite case, as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South did, for what one might call an integrated approach, with constant contact between those investigating accidents and those monitoring safety on a daily basis. Under the proposals, the rail accident investigation branch will not receive all the reports that HMRI used to receive on signals passed at danger, severe congestion and so on. It will not have day-to-day contact with the operation of the railways, but against the background of the problems at Ladbroke Grove one can see the conflict of interest under the current regime. At the moment, the Health and Safety Executive must both discover the cause of the accident and decide whether to prosecute under the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 for any breaches of safety regulations. It is a public prosecution body; it can bring cases to court. Supposing, for the sake of argument, it has at a previous stage validated a particular layout of signals: one can see the potential conflict of interest.

The proposed regime allows the RAIB to concentrate on discovering the cause of an accident without worrying about conflict of interest or about prosecuting, but that means that another body has to go round the course to see whether there has been an infringement of the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act. I have just three questions about this part of the Bill. What happens during the transitional period during which the new RAIB is set up and responsible only for inquiries but during which presumably many of the personnel come from HMRI and may have given advice under the previous regime? How are we to prevent the conflict of interest that is at the heart of the Bill in the short term?

The explanatory notes tell us that the running costs of RAIB will be £1.85 million. Is that a net increase, or are the costs offset by reductions in the costs of HMRI, which will presumably no longer do the accident work? How does the new regime interface with the criminal justice system? The RAIB will be involved after an accident. HMRI will presumably decide whether to prosecute. If there has been a fatality, the British Transport police will be involved. The railway operators will be wanting to get the system up and running again. Some rather complicated choreography will have to be worked out if we are not to have duplication, lack of co-operation and delays in getting the railways up and running again.

Turning to part 2, I have no difficulty with replacing the regulator with a board, which I gather will have four members. In considering who to appoint, the imperative for the Government must be to attract private capital back into the railways and restore confidence in railway investment following the demise of Railtrack. So I hope that the board will comprise people who understand how to attract private capital and retain investor confidence. Those on the board must not be agents of the Government, but as the responsibilities overlap to some extent with those of the Strategic Rail Authority, they need to be on roughly the same wavelength.

The regulatory task will be different with the publicly owned Network Rail, rather than with Railtrack. There will be less emphasis on preventing excess profits and more on maintaining an income stream for private capital. The wisdom of Solomon will be required in fixing the track access charges, which are at the heart of the system; they are the main costs of the train operating companies on one hand and Network Rail's main income on the other.

It is a good idea to try to depersonalise the Office of the Rail Regulator. There had been signs of an ego trip. Sadly, there have been some personal vendettas in the past and a lack of empathy with Railtrack when it existed. I hope that there will be slightly less of that with a board because the relationships between the industry's various components are crucial.

There is a risk of losing the progress made in the past 10 years in gaining access to private capital. If we go back to the previous position whereby investment in the railways was constrained by what the Government could afford, we will have lost a lot of the advantage of the past 10 years. Since 1997, and until quite recently, one of the problems that the railways did not have was that of raising capital. Railtrack was able to spend every penny that it could raise. Then we had the débâcle, and now the industry cannot borrow what it needs from the private sector.

I hope that the new board will build some bridges to re-establish investor confidence in the railways, so that, on top of what the Government are putting in, it can have a substantial injection of private capital. *[Interruption.]* The Minister for Transport is exhibiting some agitation. If he wishes to relieve it by intervening, I should be happy to give way.

The Minister for Transport (Mr. John Spellar): I am finding some difficulty with the model that the right hon. Gentleman seems to propose. He seems to suggest that in a situation where money kept being pushed at an inefficient company that was certainly not able to provide the service cost-effectively, a board of the regulator would have taken a more approving view of that company's coming around with the begging bowl—to use the regulator's words—to be relieved of the consequences of its inefficiency. That might work in the very short term in a bubble economy; it is no model for effective investment or a sustainable private enterprise.

Sir George Young: It is not the case that the problem was solely an inefficient company; there was an inefficient Minister and the relationships broke down. That was at the heart of the Railtrack débâcle .

Mr. Spellar: As the basis of the right hon. Gentleman's argument is that there was a conflict between the regulator and Railtrack—indeed, the begging-bowl speech took place within a few days of the last general election—in no way can any argument be made that the regulator had been influenced by a Minister. The regulator's views had been determined by his judgment of the company's management. How could a board rationally have taken a different view of that company's efficiency?

Sir George Young: The Government pulled the rug from under Railtrack because they wanted it to fail. *[Interruption.]* I hope that, at some point, there will be a full inquiry into Railtrack's demise, including into the Treasury's role, which was absolutely crucial in the weeks before the rug was finally pulled from under Railtrack. We saw the scene of the Secretary of State for Transport leaning over the patient, trying to encourage him back to health at the same time as he put his foot on the oxygen pipe, ensuring that the patient would expire.

[Sir George Young]

I want to make progress and move on to part 3, on the role of the British Transport police. After rail privatisation, the British Transport police were parked with the Secretary of State for Transport. As a matter of interest, it would be helpful if the Minister could say in his winding-up speech whether the Home Secretary's published figures on crime and on the number of police include or exclude the British Transport police. Some 75,000 crimes a year are reported by the British Transport police, and there are 2,100 police officers. Such figures are regularly published by the Home Office, but do they include the British Transport police?

Will the Minister say whether British Transport police officers are armed, or whether they have to look to some of the other forces for that degree of specialisation? Will it be policy to have a separate brand for the British Transport police? At the moment, if one sees a policeman on a railway station, one does not know if he is in the ordinary police or the British Transport police. It may be policy to have both looking the same, or it may be that there is a desire to develop a different identity and culture for the BTP. Will the Minister shed light on that?

When the Minister winds up, will he explain the relationship between the Secretary of State for Transport and the Home Secretary on responsibility for the BTP. Clearly, most of the expertise in that area rests with the Home Office, whereas it is a small part of the Department for Transport. The consultation paper states that the Secretary of State for Transport would

> "have regard for the Home Secretary's primary role in policing matters."

It continues:

> "The Secretary of State would undertake his duties alongside the Home Secretary."

What exactly is the relationship? Is the Department for Transport simply a conduit for Home Office initiatives on law and order, or is there a separate and independent element of advice in the Department for Transport that it adds to advice from the Home Office?

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I endorse almost everything that the right hon. Gentleman has said, which is unusual but, for me, very good. Is it not the case that one of the things that the Minister must do tonight is reassure those in the British Transport police who work on the London underground that they will not be absorbed into the Metropolitan police, which would be unhelpful for them and for the travelling public, and which I understand is under consideration at present? I am certainly against it.

Sir George Young: Although the hon. Gentleman posed the question to me, I am smart enough to see that he aimed it at someone else. I am sure that the Minister will address that issue. As I understand it, the purpose of the Bill is to establish the BTP as a separate authority and not to integrate part of it into the Metropolitan police. The words of assurance that he seeks, however, had better come from someone else.

To conclude, this is a worthy if unexciting Bill, and, as far as I am concerned, it can have a green light.

5.27 pm

David Cairns (Greenock and Inverclyde): Like all Members who have spoken, I support the Bill, and I commend the various expert speeches that we have heard by Labour Members and the one that we have just heard by a distinguished former Secretary of State for Transport.

I want to commend the speech by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins) particularly with regard to his wise injunction that we do not exaggerate the level of accidents in the rail industry. It is a comparatively safe industry, and although we all aspire to make it safer, we should not scaremonger among the public about how dangerous it is. An analogy exists in relation to crime. We know that the fear of crime in people's minds is far higher than the reality. The fear of crime, however, has a knock-on effect on people's behaviour in relation to whether they go out, which has a knock-on effect on the streets and the environment in which they live. Similarly, if the fear of an accident on the railways far outstrips the likelihood of it happening in reality, people will be put off from using the railways, which will have a knock-on effect on their long-term viability.

I therefore applaud the comments of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale and those of the Secretary of State—people might say, "He would say that, wouldn't he", but it is true. We should send out the message that although we are taking steps to set up this accident investigation branch, it is not because of some enormous crisis that needs to be addressed. It is because we are learning from best practice, learning the lessons that we need to learn from tragedies, and moving forward to make the railways even safer. There have been tragedies, however, and lives have been lost. It would be glib and offensive to say that there are no problems on the railways and no lessons to be learned. A balance must be struck.

The current arrangements are fragmentary and are in need of improvement. Lord Cullen identified in his report the need for a single investigatory body, which will act quickly and transparently. He was also looking for a body that would have the force to make recommendations that would be implemented and followed through, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson)—who has just left the Chamber—was advocating in his well-argued speech. The existence of lacunae in the system was borne out by evidence to the Cullen inquiry. The joint rail unions spoke of their concern about the relatively low number of investigations. Counsel for the bereaved and injured of the Southall and Ladbroke tragedies were worried about the lack of transparency in the system. Passenger groups expressed repeated concern about the lack of machinery to implement the recommendations of investigations and inquiries. The Bill is to be applauded if it addresses those problems.

Several hon. Members noted that the air accident and marine accident branches have existed for many years. By all accounts, they work well. However, the railways are complex. I listened with interest to the exchanges between the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) and the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) on the fragmentation of the rail industry compared with the fragmentation of the aviation industry. Those are complicated matters.

Unlike the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), I would be happy to serve on the Committee, which I suppose is a pitch to whoever makes that decision. The complexity of the different regimes would repay scrutiny in Committee so that we learn lessons from them and decide what is appropriate.

The paramount consideration is the need for the independent rail accident investigation to work closely with the regulator, the Strategic Rail Authority and, ultimately, the Government. Lord Cullen had to balance those factors. In establishing an independent body, he had to decide whether to run the risk of removing it from the decision-making structures to such an extent that he weakened its impact. In the inquiry, he said:

> "I have to weigh the potential disadvantages, the most significant of which is the loss of direct connection between the investigator and the regular contact with the operation of safety systems. However, on balance I consider that the stronger arguments are in favour of change, and I accordingly recommend that the responsibility for the investigation of accidents should be entrusted to an independent body which is set up for the purpose."

Lord Cullen is flagging up a warning note that when the policy is implemented the independent body does not spin off too far from the mainstream where the decisions are made.

Hon. Members said that 10 professionals will work for the branch with eight support staff. As a complete layman, I have to say that that sounds a small number, but perhaps the reason for it will become clear in Committee when we receive an outline of their duties and responsibilities and know how they will co-operate with other agencies.

The decision to replace the single regulator with a board has been universally welcomed. It is sensible and in line with practice in other privatised utilities. The Bill makes it clear that the board will be slimline, independent and focused, with a majority of non-executive members. Is it too much to ask that they know something about the railways? The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire spoke about the need to have people who attract private capital. That is undoubtedly true. I appreciate that the board will not be same as the Strategic Rail Authority. I have been impressed by the knowledge, experience and commitment to the railways that the new faces at the SRA have demonstrated. It must have people with experience of the private sector and the railways, which it regulates, who would be suited to serving on the board. I know that the branch board primarily has an economic regulatory function, but I would welcome people with experience of the railways serving on it. Of course we know that that was not always the case with the people who took key decisions at Railtrack.

The board will have a variety of tasks. It will have to juggle viewpoints and experiences. There will undoubtedly be stresses between the need to keep it small and tightly focused, and the need for its members to have a wide variety of experience.

There is specific mention of the need for Scotland, Wales and the various English regions to at least be represented. I shall be looking at how that can be done. Would individuals each have a remit to represent the views of a region, or would that representation be drawn from the experiences of the people appointed to the board? That can be discussed in Committee.

I want to say a few words about other safety implications that are not related to accidents on the railways. I have in mind the safety of stations. This argument may seem esoteric, and I appreciate that there have not been any major disasters connected with station buildings, but this is a live issue in my constituency. Railtrack decided that Gourock station was unsafe and, with no regard to anybody else and completely against everybody's opinion, it set about spending millions of pounds to make it safe. That money could have gone towards a larger and better development proposal to benefit the entire community.

Despite the wishes of myself, the Member of the Scottish Parliament, the local council and the developers, who have all met Railtrack, and the views expressed by the local community that the station is not unsafe and that millions of pounds should not be spent on a Victorian white elephant, Railtrack has gone ahead and spent the money. I have been wondering how I could appeal that decision. The Strategic Rail Authority said that the matter was not its concern, and as, thankfully, no accident has happened, the matter does not fall within the remit of the various accident investigation boards.

Mr. Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith): Does my hon. Friend agree that a better use for the millions of pounds to which he refers would have been to employ more British transport police officers? One way to improve passenger safety in stations and on trains is to have more policemen and women on the beat. Would my hon. Friend like the extra strength and authority given to the British transport police in the Bill to be followed up by extra funds?

David Cairns: I agree, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will make those points if he is fortunate enough to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker. Of course, I am speaking about safety connected with the fabric of the building, and not the endangerment of the public by criminal activity.

This matter is vital to my constituency. In the spurious guise of tackling safety considerations, Railtrack has squandered millions of pounds of public money propping up a Victorian white elephant and doing work to the sea wall beneath the station, which is completely unnecessary—it could not be justified by any independent assessor. However, as the issue showed up on Railtrack's radar as one of safety, we have no avenue of appeal.

The money has been spent, the contracts have been signed and a brilliant redevelopment opportunity in my constituency has been squandered. Although I am delighted that that terrible company, which was incapable of giving a straight answer and had a "now you see it, now you don't" attitude to funding, no longer exists, my constituency has lost out badly. I hope that Members of Parliament will be able to approach the new regulator and appeal such decisions before contracts are signed.

I turn briefly to part 4 on shipping and alcohol. As a Member of Parliament for what is still a busy port, although not as busy as it once was, I welcome the Government's plans to regulate alcohol consumption in the maritime industry. I have to confess that I was

[David Cairns]

slightly surprised that regulations, which apply to other modes of transport, do not already apply to shipping. People in charge of passenger ferries are every bit as liable on safety grounds as those who drive cars and buses, and they should be subject to the same breath test regime.

Although the Secretary of State greatly helped me when he responded to my earlier intervention, I am still slightly confused as to the role of non-professional maritime activity in Scotland, as opposed to that in England and Wales.

Let us consider the example of someone who is operating a jet-ski on Loch Lomond while under the influence of alcohol—although one has to be rich to own a jet-ski, it is a very popular past-time on Loch Lomond—and whose behaviour prompts a call to the police on the suspicion that they are under the influence of alcohol, even though no accident occurs. Will the new regime apply to that person in the same way that it would apply if they were using a jet-ski on Lake Windermere? My right hon. Friend told me that if an accident occurred and the procurator fiscal was looking to bring a case against the person concerned for that reason, the fact that they were under the influence of alcohol could be taken into consideration in the procurator fiscal's contemplating the level of charge.

However, I am not talking about cases where an accident occurs. Many of the people who are done for drunk-driving have not in fact caused accidents; they are pulled over because they were weaving all over the road. If the new regime will not apply in Scotland, I should like some assurance—now, in writing or in Committee—as to the measures that law enforcement agencies in Scotland could pursue to ensure that the same tough and rigorous laws that apply south of the border are also applied north of the border.

I want to finish with a quick word on the London underground. The idea that what happens on the underground is of interest only to London Members of Parliament has always amused me: that is simply not the case. Many hundreds of thousands of people travel into London from outside the Greater London area and use the underground, and the underground and the vitality of the London economy are tremendously important to the rest of the UK. We are talking about taxpayers' money that is waiting to be invested in the underground, and it is as much money paid by my constituents as it is money paid by London constituents. I am very pleased that the Mayor of London is at last seeing the sense of allowing the Government to continue with their policy, but I am disappointed that it has taken so long. Reform of, and investment in, the London underground are vital not just for London but for the whole of the British economy. So I encourage my colleagues on the Front Bench to ensure that the investment that the Government have committed to the underground, but which has been held up by the Mayor of London's dogmatic attitude, is delivered into the system to make those improvements.

On that final, slightly controversial note, I welcome the Bill and I hope that it has a speedy passage through both Houses.

5.42 pm

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns), and I am particularly pleased to see the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson), in his place. Two weeks ago, he and I had a very profitable debate on transport safety in Wiltshire, and I intend to touch on that issue once or twice in the next few minutes.

I welcome the Bill, for which there has been a great deal of cross-party support. There are of course omissions, however, and I want to touch on them in my speech. I have a very fond recollection of the Health and Safety Executive. Before being elected to this place, I was involved in safety for one of the largest industrial complexes on the south coast, and I worked very closely with the HSE in that role. I grew to appreciate its expertise and dedication, and to know very well how under-resourced it was, and how difficult it was for it to carry out the functions required of it. Indeed, it was difficult for it to do anything more than the scratch the surface—a fact that left a great impression on me. I also learned that there was a slight lack of specialisation within the HSE, which it itself recognised. It is very difficult to spread the discipline of safety across the field. Certain areas have specific needs and specific quanta of expertise, and I imagine that that is why we have the air accidents investigation branch and the marine accident investigation branch. Rightly, we are now to have a rail accident investigation branch as well.

I do not want to deal principally with rail but rather to address one of the major omissions that my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) alluded to, and which relates to roads. Shortly after I was elected, I was present at the scene of a road traffic accident on the A36. A police constable—the constable with whom I was supposed to be visiting areas in my constituency that suffer from petty criminality—was summoned to the scene, and it rapidly became apparent that this was a major incident. It transpired that a family of four had lost their lives when a lorry crossed on to the wrong side of the road. That was deeply traumatic for all concerned, not least the emergency services who attended. My regard for them, already high, went up by leaps and bounds.

I mention that because we need a sense of proportion when considering accidents that occur on our transport network. As other right hon. and hon. Members have said, the accident rate on our roads vastly exceeds that on other forms of public and private transport. At Potters Bar, seven people tragically lost their lives, and 31 people died at Ladbroke Grove. However, day in, day out, 10 people a day lose their lives on our roads. Since 1997, there have been 136 rail deaths, but well over 17,000 deaths on our roads. Clearly, one's chances of sustaining a serious injury or dying on our roads greatly exceed one's chances of suffering a similar catastrophe on other forms of transport. We need to get that across, not least because we do not want people to desert public transport to use the roads and paradoxically, as other Members have said, drive up the sum total of road deaths.

Mr. Greg Knight (East Yorkshire): My hon. Friend is making a good point; we need to keep a sense of proportion. Does he accept that the Health and Safety

Executive has not always exercised a light touch on the railways? For example, I understand that if the speaker system does not work in one carriage in a train, it is grounded and cannot run until the public announcement system is replaced. Does he think that a heavy-handed approach?

Dr. Murrison: My right hon. Friend has made a good point. Indeed, that may be one of the drivers behind the creation of a rail accident investigation branch, which would take over many of the HSE's functions. I feel very strongly, however, that there should be no latitude on safety on public transport. We all know of near misses—many hon. Members have referred to near misses in various guises this afternoon—where things have developed from apparently trivial slips or omissions. I therefore counsel caution before trivialising cases of the sort to which my right hon. Friend referred.

Rob Gifford of the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety—PACTS—corresponds with most hon. Members and has said:

> "Someone needs to do some hard thinking and ask why we are prepared to invest so heavily in rail safety and so little in road safety, which offers much better value for money per life saved."

That sounds harsh—when talking about lives saved we do not necessarily want to talk about the cost. However, in public health terms, we must.

In 1997, the Government established a ministerial responsibility for public health. I have argued elsewhere that the post has not been a great success, particularly in driving down the number of casualties on our transport system. However, that area, I respectfully suggest, is of legitimate concern to a public health Minister with cross-cutting responsibility who is surely tasked with driving down mortality and morbidity. I fear, however, that the intervention of the relevant Minister has not produced that result, which is a pity. I am disappointed that the Bill does not mention road safety, given the emphasis on safety in other forms of transport. I very much hope that Ministers will address that omission in Committee.

I represent a rural area, and it is incumbent on me to mention the problems of the countryside. In the rural White Paper, the Government rightly said:

> "Public concern about road safety in rural areas is growing. Levels of traffic are increasing faster on rural roads than on urban roads . . . Road accidents on rural roads are more likely to be fatal, for all types of road users, than in towns."

The Government's road safety strategy says:

> "We are therefore proposing to develop a new hierarchy of roads defined by their function and quality, which would combine flexibility at local level with consistency nationally."

The road safety strategy made it clear that primary legislation was required for the rural road hierarchy to be implemented. I have to say, however, that the Minister's response to my debate on road safety in Wiltshire earlier this month was somewhat lukewarm. I hope that he will dispel that impression today. It was particularly unfortunate given that the debate took place on the same day that the Bill had its first outing.

It is a great pity that Ministers have not acted on the Transport Committee's criticism of the Government's lack of urgency in introducing a rural road hierarchy. That criticism was made in June 2001. Here we are in January 2003, yet we have heard nothing beyond blandishments and the promise of things to come. I hope that the Minister will be able to correct me if that is a misapprehension.

The grim reaper is particularly fond of inappropriate speed as an immediate way of dispatching people on rural roads, but speed acts in more subtle ways than that. It intimidates walkers, cyclists and horse riders, and generally degrades the enjoyment of the countryside for those who live there or visit it for leisure purposes. The Government's failure to incorporate their hierarchy of roads into the Bill, where it would fit very well, is a missed public health opportunity.

In dealing with accidents on roads, it is important to deal only with the evidence. A firm evidence base is essential because there are many paradoxes in transport safety, and paradoxes lead to the potential for political opportunism. The Minister will remember that we discussed examples of that in a lighter moment during the debate two weeks ago. One paradox concerns the removal of white lines on roads where one would intuitively imagine that that would make them more dangerous, not safer. In fact, the early evidence in Wiltshire suggests that that is not the case. A great deal in this field is surprisingly counter-intuitive.

A road accident investigation branch would help to introduce some rigour into the investigation of road traffic accidents, both collectively and individually, and could make suggestions on how they can be prevented. For example, the 54 per cent. reduction, from the 1981 to 1985 baseline, in those killed or seriously injured in accidents on roads in Wiltshire, compared with a 47 per cent. reduction nationwide, requires explanation. It should be the function of a road accident investigation branch to shed light on that and determine how best practice, if that is what it is, in Wiltshire can be applied more generally.

Clearly, the Bill will involve costs. The regulatory impact assessment identifies a staffing level of 22 for the rail accident investigation branch. There is some controversy as to the exact number, but we can agree that it will be fairly small. A staff of 22 is pretty lean and mean. An equivalent body for roads, given the unremitting nature of road accidents, day in, day out, would not be able to do anything with that number of staff. The cost of road traffic accidents runs into many billions of pounds a year, and the potential savings to the public purse and to others would dwarf any outlay.

I warmly welcome the Bill, but I regret the omission of the promised hierarchy of rural roads and of a road accident investigation branch, which would complement the rail accident investigation branch extremely well. I urge the Minister to think again.

5.54 pm

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): I welcome the chance to speak on Second Reading, as I broadly support the Bill, like other hon. Members who have spoken. I speak as a rail commuter of 34 years' standing. I have never yet driven to the House of Commons. I have travelled by train every day, and I feel much safer being driven by my splendid ASLEF driver than I would if I were driving, even at a relatively low speed. That is a comment on my driving, as much as on the safety of the railway system. We have spoken glowingly this afternoon about how safe rail travel is, but we should

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remember that the genesis of the Bill was a number of serious railway accidents. Before we are all swallowed up in the warm glow of consensus, we should remember the things that have gone wrong and those that are still not right.

I offer the House a personal anecdote. Just over three years ago, it was suggested through a third party that I might take photographs of the state of the track north of Hadley Wood tunnel, an area that I know quite well, on the east coast main line, and send the photographs to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime [illegible]ster, who was responsible for transport at that time. I did not do that, because I did not have time and I was not minded to do it, but it was a serious suggestion. Some time later, there was an accident at Hatfield, and some time after that, an accident at Potters Bar. Potters Bar is the next station north of Hadley Wood, and Hatfield is another three stations further along on the same stretch of the east coast main line. I suggest that there might have been some good purpose in my photographing that track, and sending it to the Deputy Prime Minister at the time, although of course I take no responsibility for the terrible things that happened later.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) suggested that we should study accidents that did not result in serious injury or death, but which illustrate the problem. I shall describe such a case, which occurred at a siding in Yorkshire, where the nose of the points was removed—that is, the central metal part of the points, where they join. Six months later a train was directed over the points and was derailed. It was a coal train and no one was hurt, but it was still a serious derailment. Why did it happen?

First, the points should have been clipped—that is, they should have been clamped together on one side so that they could not be moved. Secondly, fuses controlling the signals should have been removed. Thirdly, reminder appliances should have been placed over the operating switch in the signal box. Fourthly, notice detailing the non-availability of the points should have been issued to all drivers and signals in the area. None of that was done. The responsible contractor was Jarvis, the contractor responsible for the track at Potters Bar.

There is a problem with contracting and the contracting culture in the railway industry, and I do not stand alone in saying that. I refer to the comments by Stanley Hall, who spent a lifetime with British Rail as a senior signalling and safety officer at the highest level, who stated in "Rail" magazine this month:

> "One of the worst decisions of those who designed the privatisation structure has proved to be the reliance of the industry on outside help . . . No one wants another organisational upheaval but the present system is unsafe and expensive."

This month we saw Network Rail take maintenance in the Reading area in house, with the promise of two more areas being taken in house. That is to do not only with cost but with safety as well.

We should remember that even though travelling by rail is safe, and even though railway travel has become safer, it is still potentially very dangerous. One accident on a railway line can cause a horrendous number of deaths. I am old enough to remember the Harrow and Wealdstone disaster, which was terrifying and awesome.

I have made my point: the Bill goes in the right direction, but to be effective it must affect what happens on the railway track now. I could relate one or two more anecdotes told to me by staff who work in the railway industry—for example, about contractors who dispense with the use of a look-out when they are working at night. There have been fatalities of railway workers, who are as important as passengers in matters of life and death. The contracting record is not good. I look forward to the contractors being taken over progressively by Network Rail, and a much safer railway environment for the foreseeable future.

6 pm

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): On behalf of the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru, I also wish to give a general welcome to the Bill. I think that that gives the Minister a full set of parties supporting the Bill.

Much has been said in this debate about safety on the railways, and the Secretary of State said that safety was paramount. Many of the current worries about rail safety have undoubtedly been exacerbated by the privatisation of the railways, which has ensured that a multiplicity of organisations are responsible for rail safety, including train operating companies, Railtrack—now Network Rail—the Health and Safety Executive and others. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) pointed out, Network Rail has recently demonstrated the case by renationalising part of the line between Reading and Paddington to keep prices down and ensure the quality of the work. Victims of the Potters Bar crash have blamed Jarvis, the contractor responsible for maintaining the tracks in the area, for failing to carry out its work to the required standard, leading directly to the crash.

Those worries continue on the railway and also in respect of the London underground proposals. Much has also been said about the derailment of a train on the Central line on Saturday. The RMT has expressed serious concerns about what is happening as London Underground heads towards the PPP. Indeed, one of the weekend newspapers reported it as saying that a Piccadilly line driver had recently expressed concern about a banging noise, but was told that if he refused to drive the train and it was found to be safe, he would have to "face the consequences". If that is true, it is a terrible indictment of what is happening on the London underground. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) made a very good point about how safety should be pre-emptive as well as reactive. That must be considered as the situation progresses.

It seems to us self-evident that privatisation has exacerbated the problem through the profit motive and the dispersal of responsibility. We believe that only by running the rail network on a not-for-profit basis can we ensure that safety is put before profit. The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) cited the airline industry in support of his argument, but I am not sure how that position can hold water, given the perilous financial straits of many airlines. Some airlines are running on a state subsidy, while many large American ones have sued for chapter 11 protection because of their financial position.

Much was made of high-speed rail links, especially in Japan. However, its Bullet trains were brought into being with specifically designed new lines. One of the problems of the rail system in this country is that there has been no investment for many years, which makes it much more difficult to upgrade lines so that they can take new high-speed trains. That has been demonstrated by the difficulties encountered on the west coast main line.

We are pleased that the Government have decided to implement the recommendations of the Cullen inquiry and accepted that Her Majesty's rail inspectorate could not adequately perform the dual role of safety regulator and accident investigator. We accept that the new body will be better placed to deal with investigations into rail accidents.

Like many hon. Members, however, we have some concerns about the specifics of the Bill. In an intervention on the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Lawrie Quinn), I referred to the definition of accidents. While the Bill requires the new body to investigate serious accidents, it allows it discretion over whether to investigate non-serious accidents. In my mind, a problem therefore immediately arises about what constitutes a serious accident, as the Bill gives no definition. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South asked whether a serious accident was one in which people lost their lives. How is such an accident defined? In many cases, it will be obvious that an accident is serious, but there could be a fairly large grey area, so it would be helpful for the Minister to clarify his definition.

There is a potential problem of accidents that may not superficially be serious—whatever the definition—but have grave implications for safety in other parts of the system. It is worth remembering that large parts of the east coast main line were effectively closed for a long time after the Hatfield accident because of worries about equipment on the rails. The Bill does not adequately cover that.

A relatively minor accident that disclosed a fundamental flaw in some aspect of equipment or use might have a serious effect on the whole rail system. It would have been helpful if the Government had laid the regulations before the House and included definitions in the Bill. That could have assured us that the new bodies were committed to undertaking a range of investigations into all sorts of accidents rather than allowing the system to slip back into its old ways of investigating only obviously serious accidents.

I am not clear about the way in which the new body links with other organisations, especially the Health and Safety Executive, which might have a role in investigating apparently minor accidents. How would it cross-check with the rail accident investigation branch? For example, how would evidence taken by the Health and Safety Executive be used if a further matter came to light that would encourage the new body to investigate the incident further? Would the new body be informed automatically of findings during investigations into apparently minor incidents that might have wider implications? Would it be able or obliged to take over that investigation if the issue affected the rest of the rail network?

The Transport Salaried Staffs Association raised anxieties in its briefing for the debate about confidentiality, especially about clause 8(4). The briefing states:

> "It is expected that regulations will provide that a witness statement given to the RAIB may not be disclosed to a third party (such as the police or the Health and Safety Executive) without consent, or a court order. For RAIB to be effective it is absolutely essential that operational staff have confidence in its integrity and expertise. Confidence in RAIB is dependent upon employees being assured that these statements . . . are treated as confidential."

It argues that those matters should be specified in the Bill. I understand its point and agree in principle.

However, what would happen if the position were reversed, and an investigation by the Health and Safety Executive unearthed information that made it more appropriate for the RAIB to take it over? Could statements to the Health and Safety Executive be passed to the new body, or would the RAIB have to start from scratch?

Other hon. Members have mentioned clause 102, which gives details of the railway safety levy. There appears to be confusion about that because one briefing suggests that the provision relates to the RAIB, but it appears to refer only to the Health and Safety Executive. It is not clear who will pay the levy because that is to be stated in regulations. Subsection (5)(b) simply provides for the Secretary of State to determine

> "the persons by whom the levy is to be paid".

Disputes have occurred in the past between various parties, such as Railtrack, the train operators and the contractors about responsibility for rail accidents. That has been mentioned especially in the context of Potters Bar. At whom does the Minister intend to aim the levy? Will contractors such as Jarvis, as well as the train operating companies and, presumably, Network Rail, be obliged to contribute to the levy? It has already been said that much of the money in the rail network is public money, but there should be fair sharing between all the agencies for the levy.

The Secretary of State skipped perfunctorily over part 2, which relates to the establishment of the Office of the Rail Regulator. We would generally welcome that. The hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns) mentioned the responsibility of members of the body for Scotland, Wales and the English regions.

It may not entirely surprise the Minister to be told that we would urge upon him the need to ensure adequate Scottish and Welsh representation on the Committee. Indeed, there may be a case for a separate Scottish Committee to consider matters relating to Scotland. The right hon. Gentleman smiles, but this is as much a practical as a political point. He should be aware that the structure and control of the railway system in Scotland is not identical to that in the rest of the United Kingdom. In particular, the Scottish Parliament has some powers in these areas.

Rail journeys that commence and end in Scotland are within the ambit of the Scottish Parliament. Those that begin in Scotland but cross over the border are within the ambit of this House. The result is that control of most of the commuter traffic in Scotland, and in particular commuter traffic going into Glasgow and Edinburgh, is devolved, while control of intercity rail

[Mr. Michael Weir]

travel is essentially reserved. That leads to some strange anomalies. In my Angus constituency, which is on the main east coast line, many services that are effectively local services for the people in the area are intercity trains reserved to Westminster.

Therefore, I urge the Minister to give careful consideration to this matter, and not simply to dismiss this request for separate Scottish representation. It is important that the Scottish Parliament be fully involved in discussions on all aspects of the railways that relate to Scotland, particularly within the boundaries of Scotland, for which it is responsible.

Andrew Mackinlay: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. However, a substantial part of the Bill relates to the British Transport police. Under clause 74, Scotland is included. This will now be the primary Act for the British Transport police; it is not amending legislation with regard to it. On the face of it, much of the Bill relates exclusively to England and Wales.

Mr. Weir: The policing of the railways would presumably be a devolved matter for the Scottish Parliament, as the normal police process is devolved. That is another example of the need to make sure that there is separate Scottish representation. That must be taken on board, because otherwise not only will the Scottish Parliament have no input in respect of devolved rail services, but, as the hon. Gentleman rightly says, it will have no input into their policing.

6.12 pm

Linda Perham (Ilford, North): Like the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young), I was pleased to listen to the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Lawrie Quinn), speaking with great knowledge and experience of the railway industry and as an engineer. We in this country do not value our engineers enough. I have been married to an engineer for more than 30 years and I certainly value him.

It is very important for Parliament to make laws to improve transport safety, so I extend a general welcome to the Bill, in particular its provisions to enhance and modernise the functions of the British Transport police. I spoke this afternoon to the chief constable of the British Transport police, Ian Johnston, whom I have known for a number of years, since his time as an assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan police. The service that he commands is very supportive of the Bill's provisions.

The British Transport police occupy a unique place in the world of the emergency services. It is a flexible service that facilitates and adds value to the work of other emergency services, while carrying out its own priorities of crime control and accident prevention. We are not always aware of its presence, but, as the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire said, last year it dealt with 75,000 crimes and 40,000 minor offences.

The BTP have developed particular expertise in controlling graffiti, policing sports fans and handling major incidents, including terrorist actions. While I am on the subject of major incidents, I am sure that the House will join me in sending our best wishes to those involved in dealing with the frightening accident on the Central line at Chancery lane on Saturday. As I mentioned when I intervened on my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, 800 people were involved and over 30 were injured. Large numbers of people in my London borough, including me, travel on the Central line and I have eight Central line stations in my constituency. The Central line around Bank is the busiest part of the underground, and losing the Central line service for any length of time is a huge inconvenience to my constituents as well as all commuters and visitors to the capital.

As soon as the incident was reported, the BTP responded, along with colleagues from City of London police, the Metropolitan police, the fire brigade and ambulance services. London Underground also provided a rapid specialist response. The first BTP officer was on the scene within seven minutes of the call, and assisted the other emergency services in evacuating the passengers from the train.

The role of the police service in the early stages of a major incident is to facilitate the actions of the rescue and medical services. A major incident was declared by the BTP duty officer following a quick assessment at the scene. In such cases, it is imperative that a quick assessment is made, as there is potential for terrorist incidents in the current climate. The BTP has the expertise and training to make a rapid assessment of incidents on the underground and the railway network, and it should be praised for having done so in this instance. About 30 BTP officers attended the scene, and the co-operation between the services at Chancery lane was very good indeed.

Setting up a new police authority for the BTP should be widely welcomed—indeed, it has been in the House this afternoon. That will be helpful in putting BTP officers on an equally constitutional footing to those of Home Office forces, which is important in a number of ways—for example, helping to get powers similar to those of Home Office forces to employ community support officers. An independent authority will help to address perceptions of partiality in terms of the force being too weak or too tough on the industry.

The establishment of an independent authority will address issues of confidence, trust, accountability and transparency, which were mentioned by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) during his intervention on the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins). It is disappointing, however, that the opportunity has not been taken to formalise the BTP's extended jurisdiction, which has been secured temporarily by anti-terrorism legislation.

At present, the BTP run the risk of losing their extended powers, not because people do not believe that they should have them, but because, in the eyes of the legal purists, they were secured by the "back door" of the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001. The Bill's placing of jurisdiction on a statutory rather than a contractual footing is a satisfactory arrangement. Placing BTP pay and conditions in a regulatory framework governed by the Secretary of State is a helpful move in the force in modernising and achieving comparability with the Home Office forces.

I shall briefly discuss other provisions. I welcome the measures relating to alcohol limits for mariners and aviators, but I am one who happens to believe that the alcohol limits should be reduced from 80 mg to 50 mg for drivers and mariners. The hon. Members for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and for Bath (Mr. Foster) referred to that.

Finally, the introduction of the rail accident investigation branch will provide greater clarity of responsibility and a speedier understanding of the cause of accidents. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State covered that and said in response to my intervention that, had the Bill been in place, the chief inspector of the RAIB would have been involved in considering the Central line accident. If the RAIB is to be effective in determining primacy at an accident site, it must benefit from legislative backing in resolving potential conflicts between safety and criminal justice requirements.

I would have liked the Bill to achieve a greater exploration of the scope and powers of the RAIB, but I hope that those issues will be covered in Committee, where I hope to serve.

6.19 pm

Mr. Boris Johnson (Henley): It is a great pleasure to be called at last. I would have found sitting here throughout the debate as some people find enduring the railways under this Government were it not for the fact that that has been alleviated by some good speeches, not least that of the hon. Member for Ilford, North (Linda Perham), whom it is a pleasure to follow.

Of course, I agree with the vast bulk of the Bill. It is sensible to set up a special body to investigate accidents, particularly if that will lead to fewer fees for lawyers when such things happen. Also, I of course think it important that skippers of ships should not be inebriated. One can but approve the provision about drunkenness on ships, but I hope that the Minister will assure the House that it will be confined to ships, and that he will apply a light touch to the tiller when it comes to those who enjoy the very lavish hospitality at events such as the Henley regatta. Drunken oarsmen should not be subject to excessively draconian enforcement, as they are not intended to fall within the dominion of the Bill.

I echo what my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young), a former Secretary of State for Transport, said about the role of the British Transport police. Their duties could be alleviated if it were made absolutely clear whether it was an offence to take a bicycle on a train. I know that my right hon. Friend is a keen cyclist, as I am. I hope that the Minister will recognise that bikes are clean, green and far safer in regard to other road users than cars. Their use should be encouraged. I should like the law to be applied uniformly. Everyone should have the right to take their bike on the train.

I am interested in one particular element of the Bill—what the Secretary of State called, in his opening remarks, the restructuring of the Office of the Rail Regulator. That is a euphemism: the regulator is going to be abolished, not restructured. The single regulator will be replaced by an office with at least four people appointed by the Secretary of State. There will be a separate chairman and chief executive, at a cost, according to the explanatory notes, of at least £200,000. However, that is the least of my objections to the proposal. I want to probe the Government's motives in abolishing the rail regulator in that way. Is the proposal the best thing for the rail industry and, above all, the travelling public?

It is easy to see why the Government have chosen this option when one remembers the murky events of 7 October 2001. That was when Railtrack was done to death by the Government, and when shareholders, who included my valiant, Labour-voting secretary, were despoiled. That led to a further deterioration in railway performance, and to a huge extra burden on the taxpayer. We must not forget that, in 2000, Railtrack was able to raise £2 billion on the market.

Moreover, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire pointed out, safety improved throughout the period of privatisation. Last summer, the proportion of trains running on time fell from 83 per cent. to 81 per cent. That compares with the 90 per cent. achieved under Railtrack.

To understand the disaster that the Government have wreaked on the railways, one must go back to the moment when the former Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, the right hon. Member for Tyneside, North (Mr. Byers), decided to ignore the regulator and destroy Railtrack. It was technically in the power of the regulator, Tom Winsor, to increase the funding to Railtrack by raising the fees payable by the 25 train operating companies. It was also possible for the regulator to order an interim review of Railtrack's funding and to save the company. In retrospect, we can see that such a move would have saved the taxpayer a great deal of money, and obviated the need to pay out £500 million or £1 billion in compensation.

Not only was the regulator circumvented, but he was threatened by the former Secretary of State with the legal extinction of his powers. The Government were less than candid about that threat, which eventually cost the former Secretary of State his job, although he made seven heroic attempts to hang on to it. It would be fair to say that the refusal of the regulator to lie down and die incurred the deep displeasure of the Government and, I suspect, that it led Ministers not merely to abolish him but also his office and to repose his powers in the hands of at least four other people appointed by the Government.

Do the Government care at all about the independence of the successor office? My case is that they should care and I shall set it out briefly. The regulator should be free to safeguard the economic health of the railways and that means operating in the interests of the travelling public and of the potential investor in the railways, and not merely acting on behalf of the Treasury.

Anyone who has flown over Britain, as I did on Saturday, can see the need for that investment. There are plenty of new prisons all over the country and plenty of shut Beeching railways, with grassed-over lines. It is fascinating. Everywhere one looks, however, one sees snarled-up, choked-up traffic—testimony to the failure of the Government's transport policy. We need an independent rail regulator not only to decide how much Network Rail needs, as he will by the end of the year, but

[Mr. Boris Johnson]

also because he can stand up to the Treasury and reassure passengers as well as those who are thinking of investing in rail.

Rail needs massive investment and we need someone who will not be needlessly—*[Interruption.]* The Minister of State speaks from—what is it called? [HON. MEMBERS: "A sedentary position."]—or sitting down, to put it in Anglo-Saxon.

We need a regulator who will not deter investment by being subject to political manipulation and abuse. We need someone who will not be pointlessly controversial or on an ego trip, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire has pointed out, but who will be firm with the Government in the interests of the travelling public and the potential investor.

I hope that the Minister can reassure me, but I am not convinced that the new office proposed in the Bill will have that independence. Is the Government's intention that the new office of rail regulation should be composed of poodles and lap dogs, or will it be genuinely independent? The City was truly shocked by the way in which the Government rode roughshod over the present regulator and seized control of Railtrack. By that action, they undermined the confidence of potential investors in rail and we are all paying for it.

The Government have a bad record for trying to nobble regulators. We saw their scandalous behaviour recently in the matter of Sir William Stubbs and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. The net result, tragically, was not only to frustrate the legitimate expectations of thousands of hard-working A-level students but also, staggeringly and very sadly, to undermine confidence in A-levels themselves, which have served this country well for the past 50 years and—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. Is the hon. Gentleman's point germane to the Bill?

Mr. Johnson: You will divine that the point is wholly germane, Madam Deputy Speaker, as it relates to the Government's ruthless abuse of regulators.

In conclusion, I hope that the Government will guarantee that the replacement Office of the Rail Regulator will be truly independent and that they will reassure the travelling public of that. The new office should be allowed to guarantee the economic health of the railways and to protect passengers and future investors from disastrous political interference of the kind that we have seen. If the Government can give us those guarantees, I shall be more than happy to support the Bill.

6.29 pm

Mr. Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith): I have four brief comments. The first is about the British Transport police. Will my right hon. Friend the Minister of State use this opportunity to deal with the extended jurisdiction of the British Transport police that was provided under anti-terrorism legislation? As he knows, under the provisions of that legislation, that jurisdiction is time limited and will expire. We can scrutinise the Bill in the Standing Committee and we should take this chance to deal with that matter. Will he also confirm that the British Transport police provisions will apply to Scotland? I notice that the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Weir), in his normal knee-jerk reaction to anything that seems to break up the United Kingdom by stealth was happy to welcome the suggestion made by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay). I hope that the Minister will clarify the Government's position.

On the question of what I call the interface between the UK and Scottish legislation—the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns) and the Secretary of State covered—in one or two areas the division between the responsibilities of the Westminster Parliament and the Scottish Executive might be too inflexible in practice. I can certainly see the logic of some of the divisions of responsibilities, but it seems strange, for example, that the position of non-professional mariners and the power to enter certain places are to be left to the Scottish Parliament, but the Westminster Parliament will deal with powers to arrest on ships and aeroplanes. In the attempt to be logical, an inflexible arrangement may have been established. I hope that we can examine that matter in Committee.

Like every other hon. Member who has spoken, I welcome the Bill in most respects. However, I wish to make two further suggestions. I support the abolition of the Office of the Rail Regulator, but I do not support its replacement by an office of rail regulation. I take the view that now that we have a Strategic Rail Authority, which is rightly operating in a much more proactive fashion, we do not need so many regulators. Is it not time to simplify the regulatory system, just as we have simplified the system of ownership and train operating companies, rather than coming back in a few years with another proposal, this time to abolish the system of rail regulation?

The debate has inevitably concentrated on railway issues, but, as several hon. Members have pointed out, the debate is not only about railways but about transport safety. It is not in rail, sea or air transport but road transport that the vast majority of deaths and injuries occur. Hon. Member after hon. Member has pointed that out. Given that the Government have decided to include some measures relating to road traffic in the Bill—I refer to clause 103, which deals with road traffic penalties—could we not use this opportunity to address road safety issues? Could we not implement some of the long-awaited recommendations of the road traffic penalty review, which has been going round the circle of Departments for about five years?

Here is an opportunity to do something about road safety. I hope that the Government will consider tabling amendments in Committee or on Report, especially given the emollient words of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins). If the Government do not wish to table amendments themselves, may I suggest that it would be a good idea to indicate that they would give a fair wind to any Back-Bench Members' moves to that effect in Committee or on Report? I know that on one or two recent issues the Government have been happy to accept amendments on controversial issues from the Back Benches. Perhaps Back-Bench Members could assist the Government in their objectives on this matter, too.

6.34 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I remind the House of my interests: my husband is an airline executive and I have personal interests in the RAC, Railtrack, Eurotunnel, British Airways, BAA and First Group. I recognise the importance to the United Kingdom economy of all the industries that the House is discussing this evening—especially rail, air and shipping—and I recognise in particular the contribution that the railway industry makes to North Yorkshire and my constituency of Vale of York.

This is big and significant Bill. It already runs to 110 clauses and 7 schedules, with scope for many implementing regulations, which might not be open to full scrutiny by all hon. Members. The Conservative party welcomes much of the Bill. As my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins) said, much of it reflects Conservative party policy and draws on Acts of Parliament passed during the years of the last Conservative Government. As my hon. Friend also said, we find the Bill largely uncontroversial, although we shall seek to explore some issues of detail.

As a number of hon. Members have stated during this excellent debate, it is interesting to note that there are no provisions relating to road safety. Will the Minister take note of our concern that safety should be treated equally across all modes of transport? In the words of my hon. Friend, a life is a life is a life. So have the Government considered introducing similar provisions to those contained in STATS 19 to cover railway accidents? Will the Minister respond positively to the plea from my hon. Friend the Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison) for the creation of a road accident investigation branch similar to the arrangements for rail that we are discussing now?

We welcome the setting up of an independent rail accident investigation branch, as first proposed by the Cullen inquiry and publicly backed by my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) shortly thereafter. We will carefully consider those provisions, and it would be helpful if the Minister could confirm this evening whether the RAIB will have the power to investigate accidents in the channel tunnel. The task of investigating any accident in the tunnel should be given to a suitable bi-national body.

Will the Minister further clarify with the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly the relationship between the reserved and devolved powers in the context of the Bill? The hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Weir), among others, referred to that issue.

We recognise the relative safety and increasing safety status of our railways. To his credit, even the Deputy Prime Minister recognised that rail privatisation was not a contributory factor and said:

> "Safety was not better under the public sector in that industry."

and

> "I have never accepted 'public good, private bad'".—[*Official Report*, 9 May 2000; Vol. 349, c. 714-15.]

The statistics bear out the Deputy Prime Minister's remarks. In October 1979, five people were killed and 52 injured at Invergowrie. In April 1979, seven people were killed and 67 hurt near Paisley. In June 1975, six people were killed and 38 hurt at Nuneaton. In February 1975, 43 people were killed and 74 hurt in the Moorgate underground disaster. In December 1973, 10 people were killed and 94 hurt in the Ealing accident, and in August 1973, five people were killed and 50 hurt in Glasgow. So the statistics dispel any myth that the numbers involved in rail accidents have increased since privatisation; on the contrary, the record has improved.

The Secretary of State was reluctant to be drawn on part 2, under which the office of rail regulation will be created. If replacing the rail regulator with a board is such a good idea, why was it not introduced in the Transport Act 2000? I was privileged to be involved when the Transport Committee took evidence from the then rail regulator, who was very forthcoming about the untenability of his position when he might have been minded to act in a certain way on Railtrack's demise and when the Secretary of State told him that he was prepared to put emergency legislation through the House to prevent the rail regulator from acting in that way. The Conservative party wishes to strengthen the office and role of the rail regulator, not to weaken it. I ask the Minister what position the present rail regulator will hold on the board under the new provisions.

On part 3, under which the British Transport police will be put on a statutory basis as a separate authority, I simply note that, as was underlined by my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) and the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay), it is not entirely clear what the status of that force will be. Surely, the Bill should clearly state that the British Transport police are separate from the Metropolitan police or any other local police force. We believe that the Bill could make that clearer.

On part 4, which extends to shipping provisions on alcohol and drugs, I am curious about the exemptions put to the House this evening. We would prefer important items such as the power of the motor, the size of the ship and the location of the accident to be defined in the Bill rather than in regulations under clause 77(5)—a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) in his intervention. That also prompts the question of how broadly the provisions in clause 76 relating to professional staff who are off duty will be applied. Surely the Government must have in mind a rota, with first on call for emergency duty, second on call for emergency duty and so on. In general, though, the provisions in part 4 are welcome in resolving situations such as that which arose in the Marchioness disaster.

Many would say that the provisions in part 5 on alcohol and drugs in relation to aviation are not just welcome but long overdue. Will the Minister confirm that those provisions apply to airlines and crews of all nationalities using UK airports? We have observed, as have several hon. Members who have raised these concerns this evening, that the differentials in the prescribed limits as between pilots and flight navigators, engineers, radio telephony operators, flight attendants, air traffic controllers and aircraft maintenance engineers are confusing. We believe that the provisions are unnecessarily complicated, and that uniform prescribed limits for all personnel would be much easier to apply. It would help our understanding of the Bill if the Minister would explain why different prescribed limits have been set.

Mr. Spellar: That is a strange position for a Conservative: wanting to over-prescribe when there is

[Mr. Spellar]

no requirement, for safety reasons, for undertaking such measures. I should have thought that the most sensible approach would be to have different levels according to the level of criticality and the nature of the job, so that we are not over-prescribing or imposing over-onerous provisions on people at work.

Miss McIntosh: Those Members who are fortunate enough to serve on the Standing Committee will have plentiful opportunity to explore the matter in detail. I firmly believe that the rules are drafted in a misleading and confusing way, which will not lead to an easy application.

Lawrie Quinn *rose—*

Miss McIntosh: The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Lawrie Quinn) made an intelligent and positive contribution. The House benefits from his knowledge and experience of the industry, and he has made a strong bid to serve on the Committee. Regrettably, owing to the time available, I will not be able to accept an intervention from him at this stage. He raised a serious point relating to how we define accidents and incidents.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) also raised a genuine concern that minor incidents should not be blown up into major ones. The Opposition are concerned about the very sweeping nature of powers of investigation under clause 7, such as the right to enter land, including a dwelling house adjoining or abutting railway property. We shall call for the rail accident investigation branch to make an annual report to the House, which will be debated annually by the Transport Committee, to enable the House to monitor its work and the execution of its powers by its investigators.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire and his contribution to transport policy over the years. He eloquently pointed out the potential conflict of responsibilities between the personnel of the rail accident investigation branch, Her Majesty's railway inspectorate, the Health and Safety Executive, the police and the train operating companies. Will the Minister inform the House what will be the exact relationship between those bodies in the context of this Bill?

We shall also consider closely provisions in clause 1, to which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South again referred—regrettably, he has not returned to the Chamber—relating to the convention on international carriage by rail, separating the functions of train operating from the management of track. I remind the hon. Gentleman and other Labour Members that a former leader of the Labour party who is now a European Commissioner in Brussels first proposed such a separation. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire said, there is a similar separation operating in aviation policy, where it works well and profitably.

I also note that there is a huge scope in schedule 6 for an open-sesame approach to statutory instruments. The Conservative party regrets the influx of statutory instruments and regulations that are not exposed to full scrutiny either on the Floor of the House or in Committee. We note the provisions in clause 105 for the transfer of powers relating to railways in London and the history behind those.

We are delighted to give the Bill a fair wind on Second Reading. We support its main thrust, much of which is based on sound Conservative policies and on Acts of Parliament adopted under a Conservative Government, although we shall seek to explore certain aspects of it, including any omissions, in detail.

6.45 pm

The Minister for Transport (Mr. John Spellar): I am grateful to hon. Members for contributing to a useful debate. Unlike Question Time, however, no inducements were offered to Ministers to accept various amendments. There was also the contribution by the hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Johnson), but I shall come to that later. You will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I have been responsible for responding to other debates, and I find it slightly unusual to make a winding-up speech both in this atmosphere and at this hour.

Before I respond briefly to the points made, I want to remind hon. Members of the Bill's significant aspects, many of which will be discussed in Committee. The Bill includes a wide and diverse set of measures ranging from the creation of a new and independent body to investigate accidents on the railways to giving British Transport police an accountability structure that we all recognise is appropriate for a modern police force. I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins) and others for their contributions on the British Transport police and the excellent role they play. They are increasingly successful in the fight against crime on the transport system. The Bill also introduces alcohol limits for shipping and aviation.

The creation of a body to investigate rail accidents was a main recommendation of Lord Cullen's report into the Ladbroke Grove accident. He recommended that it should be modelled on the existing investigation branches for air and marine accidents. He also recommended that its sole task should be to determine the cause of accidents. The Bill creates just such a body. Unlike existing rail accident investigators, the RAIB will be independent of the rail industry and those responsible for regulating the railways. It will carry out its investigations free of any conflicts of interest, either real or perceived. That is an important point in light of comments made in the debate. The reports will be published promptly, which deals with one of the significant criticisms of the current regime, and victims of accidents will be kept informed of the progress of investigations, a problem that has been mentioned in the past year in particular.

The Bill will also create a police authority for the British Transport police and a police force for Britain's railways. That will be modelled closely on existing authorities for local constabularies.

Andrew Mackinlay: Existing legislation provides for the British Transport police to police ports. The option is not being exercised now, but it has been in the past. Some small ports, including Tilbury, Felixstowe, Tees and Hartlepool, and all those in Scotland are not policed by dedicated police forces. Will the Minister keep that option open so that the Government can put the police back into many of our sea ports, perhaps for security reasons?

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend alludes to the fact that many of the major ports have dedicated police forces. Discussions take place with county constabularies on the policing of a number of minor ports. As I have said to him privately, I take his point on board. We will consider it further and get back to him. I realise that he represents the port of Tilbury and is in touch with such issues.

The British Transport police will gain a wholly statutory jurisdiction, which they currently lack. The other railway measures include the restructuring of the Office of the Rail Regulator. We propose that it now be headed by a board rather than a single regulator. I point out that that is in line with the recommendations of the Better Regulation Task Force, and I hardly think that it can be argued that it in any way undermines the position of the regulator, precisely because it is being applied throughout the regulatory regime. As far as I am aware, that has general approval from hon. Members on both sides of the House. It was unfortunate that the measure was taken out of that context in one or two contributions today.

The Bill allows the UK to ratify the new text of an international rail treaty. It provides for the introduction of a levy to fund the Health and Safety Executive's rail-related activities and to replace the overly bureaucratic system of charging by the hour. The Bill will also amend certain sections of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 regarding the London underground. It will ensure that the Act operates as intended, and I certainly assure the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale that it does not provide a position in which its implementation can be postponed indefinitely. The Bill deals with circumstances that probably could not have been envisaged when the GLA Act was passed. There is a hiatus because there is still a legal appeal by Transport for London, which could undermine the purposes of the Act. The Bill is intended to remedy that.

The Bill seeks to improve safety at sea and in the air. We propose the introduction of alcohol limits for mariners and certain aviation personnel whose role is critical in safety. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) did not clarify why she believes that where certain groups require stricter limits, those should apply to everyone else even though such limits are not required by the nature of their job.

Lawrie Quinn: My right hon. Friend is probably aware that I was trying to intervene on the hon. Lady on that very point. Will he confirm that at the moment the railway industry designates safety-related posts, and the existing legislation for that industry works very well? Indeed, if the hon. Lady seeks a model to demonstrate that it works well, she should look no further than the railway industry.

Mr. Spellar: Once again, I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I hope that the hon. Lady took those points on board. She may reflect on her position before the Bill goes into Committee.

As hon. Members will know, the introduction of legislation to control alcohol misuse by mariners was one of the recommendations made by Lord Justice Clark's inquiry into the Marchioness disaster. A new offence will apply to all on-duty professional mariners who exceed the set limit and to any off-duty mariners who would play a role in evacuating passengers in an emergency. The limit will also affect some, but not all, recreational mariners.

In reply to the hon. Lady, the reason for dealing with some of those matters by regulation is to allow us to have much fuller discussion and consultation with those who will be affected. Frankly, if we do not get the provisions right, it will also allow us to amend them more easily than we could through primary legislation. There is a useful debate to be had about the appropriate limits. We have to balance the general convenience of the public with the need to maintain safety. I am sure that the hon. Lady will come to appreciate our position during the Committee proceedings.

On the aviation side, the limits will apply to aircrew, air traffic controllers and licensed aircraft engineers. The police will be responsible for enforcing the limits, and they will be able to test mariners and safety-critical aviation personnel for alcohol where they have reasonable suspicion that an offence may have been committed.

I turn now to the points made during the debate. The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) and a number of other hon. Members raised the question of road safety, which is very important. However, it would have been helpful if they had prefaced their remarks by pointing out that our roads, along with those in Sweden, are the safest in Europe. Under Governments of both parties—I say this with a former Transport Minister on the Opposition Benches—there has been a steady decline in road deaths. Indeed, in respect of the carnage on the French roads and the measures that need to be taken in France, only a couple of months ago the President of France held up the British record as an example.

Steady progress has been made in a number of areas, and we are looking at where the next moves can be made to improve road safety. For example, we have the best record in Europe for car deaths, but our record on child pedestrian accidents—although it is improving, and although we have gone from the bottom to the middle of the European league—still has further to go. There is a very heavy geographic concentration of such accidents, particularly in the north-west. That is precisely why, in the autumn of last year, I announced some £17 million to £18 million to fund not just a study, but the undertaking of various projects in those boroughs, in order to ascertain the reason for, and the remedies for, the much higher incidence of child pedestrian accidents in those areas.

In the same way, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary has launched a consultation on the use of mobile phones. Again, we will introduce secondary legislation to deal with what is widely perceived as a problem and as a threat to safety on the roads. That is the way to deal with that problem.

On the ownership and driving of vehicles, hon. Members will have encountered advertisements for the V5 registration form for cars, which will prevent people

[Mr. Spellar]

from obtaining licences so easily, particularly for stolen vehicles. Frankly, if a car auction is allowing someone to drive off a site without insurance, by definition, we should be looking at such behaviour. However, in general car, auction companies are becoming increasingly co-operative in dealing with illegal vehicles such as untaxed and uninsured vehicles. Either the Under-Secretary or I will write to the hon. Member for Bath with some of the relevant details. I hope, too, that hon. Members on both sides of the House will get the message out in their constituencies, and get their local authorities, police forces and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to work together to deal with the problem of rogue vehicles and rogue drivers, and steadily to eliminate many of them from the roads. The hon. Member for Bath also mentioned the Office of the Rail Regulator's consultation on safety. In fact, it is almost finished, and we hope that it will come to a conclusion in the not too distant future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson)—he is chairing a Committee elsewhere in this building, so he is unable to be here for the wind-ups—raised the question of accidents and incidents, which we shall need to discuss in Committee. However, I counsel a degree of caution in terms of the danger of over-emphasising this issue. We could arrive at the position that was reached in the nuclear industry, whereby a previous Secretary of State with responsibility for energy said that he wanted every incident, however small, to be reported to him. That led to an utterly nonsensical situation. We therefore need to look at levels of significance and prioritisation, and to keep a sensible difference in definition.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South also asked about the reason for the delay in the implementation in respect of the mark 1 trains. I am not sure whether he was present for Transport questions, when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made the reason for this problem very clear. Between them, the train operator and Railtrack totally failed to undertake the necessary work, or to realise that work was necessary to provide the electricity supply that would enable new trains to be brought on stream.

The Government are committed to delivering a transport system that is modern, reliable and safe, and central to quality of life. This Bill will be an important part of that change. It will improve safety and improve public confidence in the safety of the transport industry, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

RAILWAYS AND TRANSPORT SAFETY BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Orders [28 June2001 and 29 October 2002],

That the following provisions shall apply to the Railways and Transport Safety Bill—

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee.

Proceedings in Standing Committee

2. Proceedings in the Standing Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 11th March.

3. The Standing Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on consideration are commenced.

6. Sessional Order B (programming committees) made on 28th June 2001 shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

7. Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or any other further messages from the Lords) may be programmed.—*[Mr. Caplin.]*

The House divided: Ayes 346, Noes 95.

Division No. 68] **[6:59 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Baker, Norman
Barrett, John
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, rh A. J.
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Hilary
Bennett, Andrew
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, rh Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom *(Carshalton)*
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Mrs Annette L.
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burnham, Andy
Burstow, Paul
Byers, rh Stephen
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Dr. Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Crausby, David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, rh Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, rh John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Doughty, Sue
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*

Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul *(Newport W)*
Follett, Barbara
Foster, rh Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
George, rh Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gidley, Sandra
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Heath, David
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Holmes, Paul
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil *(Corby)*
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan *(Braintree)*
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda *(Hampstead & Highgate)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric *(Falkirk W)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Keetch, Paul
Khabra, Piara S.

Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green & Bow)*
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, rh Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
Lyons, John *(Strathkelvin)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
MacDougall, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahmood, Khalid
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Morris, rh Estelle
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan *(Wansdyke)*
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Diana
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick

Pearson, Ian
Perham, Linda
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Prescott, rh John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Quin, rh Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd *(Portsmouth N)*
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan *(Enfield N)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Siôn *(B'ham Erdington)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, rh Chris *(Islington S & Finsbury)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Southworth, Helen

Spellar, rh John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E & Lochaber)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Thurso, John
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Touhig, Don *(Islwyn)*
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
Webb, Steve *(Northavon)*
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Williams, Roger *(Brecon)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James *(Glasgow Baillieston)*
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and
Mr. Fraser Kemp

NOES

Amess, David
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Barker, Gregory
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burt, Alistair
Cameron, David
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher

Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Conway, Derek
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham & Stamford)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Duncan, Peter *(Galloway)*
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Ewing, Annabelle
Fabricant, Michael
Field, Mark *(Cities of London & Westminster)*
Flook, Adrian
Forth, rh Eric
Fox, Dr. Liam

Francois, Mark
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Grayling, Chris
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hammond, Philip
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Hendry, Charles
Hermon, Lady
Hogg, rh Douglas
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, rh Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, rh Oliver
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Llwyd, Elfyn
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, rh David
May, Mrs Theresa
Mercer, Patrick
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Randall, John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Salmond, Alex
Simmonds, Mark
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Watkinson, Angela
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wishart, Pete
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Cheryl Gillan and
Mr. Mark Hoban

Question accordingly agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Motion relating to the Committee on the Lord Chancellor's Department in the name of Mr. John McWilliam may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

Question agreed to.

RAILWAYS AND TRANSPORT SAFETY BILL *[MONEY]*

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with Bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Railways and Transport Safety Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State in consequence of the Act,

(b) expenditure incurred by the Office of Rail Regulation in connection with the performance of its functions, and

(c) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money so provided under any other enactment.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

Question agreed to.

RAILWAYS AND TRANSPORT SAFETY BILL *[WAYS AND MEANS]*

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with Bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Railways and Transport Safety Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(a) the imposition of railway safety levy on persons who provide railway services, and

(b) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

Question agreed to.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Orders [28 June 2001 and 29 October 2002],

That, in accordance with the Resolution of the Standing Committee dated 21st January 2003, the programme order of 7th January 2003 in relation to the Local Government Bill shall be amended as follows—

In paragraph 2 of the order (proceedings in standing committee to be brought to conclusion no later than 6th February), for '6th' there is substituted '13th'.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 5th February, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents)—

(1) the Speaker shall put the Question on the Motion in the name of Mr Secretary Blunkett relating to Police Grant Report (England and Wales) not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion, and

(2) the Speaker shall put the Questions on the Motions in the name of Mr Secretary Prescott relating to Local Government Finance (England) not later than six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Mr Secretary Blunkett relating to Police Grant Report (England and Wales); and the proceedings may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption, and the Orders of the House of 28th June 2001 and 29th October 2002 relating to deferred Divisions shall not apply to them.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6)(Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Access to Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 19th December, be approved.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

Question agreed to.

Lord Chancellor's Department

7.15 pm

The Chairman of the Committee of Selection (Mr. John McWilliam): I beg to move,

That Mr A. J. Beith, Peter Bottomley, Mr James Clappison, Ross Cranston, Mrs Ann Cryer, Mr Jim Cunningham, Mr Hilton Dawson, Mr Mark Field, Mr Clive Soley, Keith Vaz and Dr Alan Whitehead be members of the Committee on the Lord Chancellor's Department.

Let me make it plain at the outset that this is not a question of whether the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is not an active, able and respected Member of the House or of the respective merits of her and the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith). It is about maintaining the ratio in the selection of Committees in this House.

The Committee has 11 members, which gives us a ratio of seven Labour members, three Conservative and one other. The one other member is, of course, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, a Liberal Democrat. That reflects the composition of the House, which the Committee of Selection calculates to three decimal places.

If the hon. Member for North Tayside (Pete Wishart) is again suggesting that we move away from a system that selects Committees that reflect the composition of the House, I suggest it is wrong to do that on a Committee that does not cover the whole United Kingdom. I also suggest to him that it is not a good idea anyway. What is more, I suggest to him that getting other parties involved in the selection of members of their own parties to allocated places on Select Committees could lead to all sorts of difficulties.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): May I remind the hon. Gentleman of the words of the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, who is now on the Front Bench? He pointed out that, on Select Committees,

"the Liberal Democrats are currently over-represented by two".—[*Official Report*, 21 November 2003; Vol. 394, c. 883.]

If that is the view of the Minister, why is it not the view of the convener of the Committee of Selection?

Mr. McWilliam: That may be the view of the Minister on the basis of his sums, but my sums are probably rather more accurate.

Including the Select Committee that we are dealing with, which changes the ratio, there are 464 places on Select Committees. If there were a Committee with 464 places, it would break down as follows: Labour 292; Conservative 116; Lib Dem 38; UUP four; DUP four; SNP four; Plaid Cymru three; SDLP two; and independents one. However, we are dealing with a Committee of 11.

To pick up on the point made by the hon. Member for North Tayside, because of the situation in respect of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs and the need to ensure adequate representation from Northern Ireland, the Ulster Unionist party is over-represented in its membership of Select Committees. The amendment that he has tabled would exacerbate that enormously, as one can see when looking at the figures that I have just given.

Mr. Salmond: If the amendment would exacerbate the over-representation of Ulster Unionist Members, why would not the motion exacerbate the over-representation of the Liberal Democrats?

Mr. McWilliam: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. The Labour party as well as the Liberal Democrat party is over-represented. However, that happens because the size of the Committees is rounded. [HON. MEMBERS: "That's all right then."] Is it all right? I remember intervening on the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) in the debate on the Committee of Selection to ask who would be cut in half. We are considering decimal points and parties that are represented by fewer than 10 Members. The Labour party and the Conservative party are represented in hundreds; the Liberal Democrats are represented in multiples of 10—there are nearly 40 Liberal Democrat Members.

Mr. Greg Knight (East Yorkshire): Who represents the interests of the minority parties on the Committee of Selection? Liberal Democrat Members always used to try to represent not only their party but the other minority parties. There is a problem only because it appears that the Liberal Democrats have failed to represent the other minority parties. *[Interruption.]* Let me finish. That is also true of other members of the Committee.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. That was a rather long intervention.

Mr. McWilliam: As Chairman of the Committee of Selection, I act as independently as possible. I have a reputation for that. The minority parties made representations to me some time ago. They were dissatisfied with the Liberal Democrats and they made an agreement with the Government that the Government would represent them. We are dealing with that now. Nominations were tackled in the usual way.

Nominations are routinely made to the parliamentary Labour party and approved before they are put to the Committee of Selection. The other parties have their systems for nominating members. The minority parties operate through the Government Whips Office, and that happened in the case that we are considering.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): My hon. Friend rattled off a load of numbers. I was waiting for the next part of his contribution because he told us the allocation but not the entitlement on a strict pro rata basis. He said, for example, Labour—292; Conservatives—160. To how many members is each party entitled? I support the underdog. We should discriminate in favour of the smaller, minority interests in such a massive Parliament.

Mr. McWilliam: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's contribution. The House agreed last night that the

[Mr. McWilliam]

Committee would have 11 members. I explained earlier that the ratio is seven Labour, three Conservative and one Liberal Democrat—

Mr. Salmond: One other.

Mr. McWilliam: One other. However, on a strict ratio that should be a Liberal Democrat. We try to stick to that fairly.

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight): The hon. Gentleman said earlier that the Committee deals with a Department that does not operate in all parts of the United Kingdom. I was waiting for him to explain why that observation was relevant to the debate. Will he now do that?

Mr. McWilliam: Yes. Scotland is part of the United Kingdom that the Department does not represent. I therefore subtract from the figures that I gave earlier the Scottish National party entitlement of four and conduct some redistribution. However, that would not result in another party receiving a different number.

Mr. Salmond: If the hon. Gentleman is pursuing that point, he will have to subtract all the Labour Members from Scotland and redo his calculations. The amendment proposes the nomination of a member of the Committee from Northern Ireland, so why is the point relevant?

Mr. McWilliam: Even if I subtracted the Labour Members, it would not change the ratio by anything that would allow an extra member from Northern Ireland. In fact, as I have said, the Ulster Unionists are over-represented in their total membership of Select Committees.

I do not want to detain the House any longer. It has been done fairly; it has been done clearly; and it has been done openly.

David Burnside (South Antrim) *rose—*

Mr. McWilliam: I have been overly generous in giving way, but I give way to the hon. Gentleman, who is from Northern Ireland.

David Burnside: I read Quintin Hogg's "The Dilemma of Democracy" when I was at school. He warned of the threat of an elective dictatorship. In the short time since I entered the House, it has surely been right to have over-representation of minority parties, whether Unionist, nationalist or whatever, to try to bring the Executive to account. Since the Committee legally covers the Union of England and Northern Ireland—there might not be much left in the future—it would be—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the hon. Gentleman bring his intervention to a close?

David Burnside: My hon. Friend the Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) should be on the Committee.

Mr. McWilliam: I caution the hon. Gentleman about using his source as an authority on the Committee that we are selecting tonight, since that source was the reason why it is only now, after 20-odd years, that we are appointing a Select Committee on the Lord Chancellor's Department. The hon. Gentleman's source, the former Lord Hailsham, insisted that if the new Select Committee system was to go forward in 1979 he would vote for it only as long as it did not cover his Department. Therefore, it seems to me that the hon. Gentleman's source is tainted.

We have gone on long enough. It is obvious that we want to get on with this. We have waited 20-odd years for a Committee that should have been set up 20-odd years ago.

I commend the nominations to the House.

7.27 pm

Pete Wishart (North Tayside): I beg to move, To leave out "Mr. A. J. Beith" and insert "Lady Hermon".

I begin by assuring the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) that there is nothing personal in this. Our amendment is purely political, moved in order to address the continuing exclusion of the minority parties from the vast majority of Select Committees.

We particularly enjoy these debates. They are always quite convivial and are always quite entertaining. I particularly liked the bravura performance of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) last night on the establishment of the Committee under consideration. Such debates also allow us to draw attention to the wonderful world of Select Committees.

We have had a number of debates about Select Committees in the past year, most of them very much to the dissatisfaction of the minority parties. I particularly recall the debate on modernisation, in which we tabled what we thought was a very reasonable and sensible amendment, suggesting that one place should be set aside for the minority parties in each departmental Select Committee. We thought that that was reasonable and fair. We argued for the amendment and divided the House on it. We were overwhelmingly and comprehensively drubbed in the vote. We admit that and we expected it. We accepted that that was the will of the House.

However, we returned with an even more reasonable suggestion: that each of the minority parties should have one representative on one departmental Select Committee over and above their nation or region of interest. I do not think that it is possible to be fairer and more reasonable than that. I am disappointed that we have made no progress on what is not an outrageous demand.

What also disappoints us is that it seems to be only the Select Committees that deny this access. We are able to participate in all the other institutions of the House. We can participate in debates if we are fortunate enough to catch Mr. Speaker's eye. We are involved in question sessions and we participate in questions on statements. But for some reason, Select Committees are impervious to change. They remain out of bounds to the minority parties. Surely it is time for that to change.

We have tried patiently and consistently to put the case that Select Committees must reflect not just the crude arithmetic that seems to be bandied back and forth in these debates, but the political reality of a multi-party House in a multi-party United Kingdom.

Mr. McWilliam: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making, but will he reflect on the situation before 1997? The Government had a majority of one on Select Committees because of the ratios. We are trying to deal with a situation in which Governments may not always have such a huge majority. Therefore, under his proposal and in a situation such as that before 1997, the Government of the day would not have a majority at all. That would cause a problem for the Select Committees.

Pete Wishart: I find the hon. Gentleman's intervention incredible. Surely, in these circumstances—the Government have a massive majority—we have an excellent opportunity to involve the minority parties in the functions of the House and there is nothing to be lost in allowing us to participate in Select Committees. Sometimes, we have to remind many Members that there are more than just the three main establishment parties in the United Kingdom, and they would find that out if they ventured across the borders of Scotland or Wales.

Jim Sheridan (West Renfrewshire): For the sake of clarity, when the hon. Gentleman talks of minority parties, is he including another minority party—Sinn Fein?

Pete Wishart: I serve as a joint Whip for two minority parties when we deal with the Government, but we are talking about minority parties including the Scottish National party, Plaid Cymru, the Democratic Unionists and the Ulster Unionists. That does not include Sinn Fein.

Mr. Salmond: And the Social Democratic and Labour party.

Pete Wishart: Yes, and the SDLP.

I agree with the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) that minorities should be over-represented. That is entirely right and it is how we achieve equality in such situations. We must over-represent the minority parties in the House to reflect the political reality of the UK. On this Bench sit Members from the SNP, which is the second party in Scotland. Our party is the principal Opposition in the Scottish Parliament and it may soon form the Government of Scotland.

Here also sit Members from Plaid Cymru, which is the second party in Wales and the principal Opposition in Wales. It will soon form the Administration in Cardiff. Behind us we have the hon. Member for South Antrim (David Burnside) and behind Labour Members sit Members from the SDLP. When Stormont sits, members of those two parties effectively form the Government of Northern Ireland. Surely departmental Select Committees should reflect and acknowledge that reality.

The proposal to establish the Committee was made, but when the nominations for membership were made—lo and behold and surprise, surprise—there was nobody there from the minority parties. That is what we expected, and there was as much chance of a minority party being represented on the Committee as there is of me being made Lord Chancellor, heaven forbid.

Mr. Salmond: Good idea.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that suggestion—who knows?

Mr. McWilliam: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that he cannot be Lord Chancellor because he is a Scot. The Lord Chancellor is a Scot.

Pete Wishart: I am not in the business of ruling myself out of any particular task, but perhaps Lord Chancellor may be a job beyond me.

Our amendment would replace the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed with the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon). The House must agree that one could not find a more appropriate and suitable candidate for the Committee than the hon. Lady. A more gentle and fragrant alternative to the gruff and bellicose voices of Ulster, which we usually hear from hon. Members who sit behind us, could not be found. Indeed, she has already impressed the House with her polite yet tenacious approach in debate and in Committee. She is also something of an authority in legal matters, which one would think an advantage in the Committee.

Before taking a seat in the House, the hon. Lady spent 10 years as a lecturer in European, international and constitutional law at Queen's university. Surely such specialised knowledge and experience would increase the influence and status of Select Committees, inside and outside the House. She is an asset who should be employed in the Committee. Indeed, she should have been one of the first ports of call when the Committee was being established.

The hon. Lady is a suitable choice, and we would hope that she becomes Chairman of the Committee. It is no great surprise or secret that that chairmanship is intended for the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed. I have spent too long in the usual channels and the Whips Office not to know that that is the case, but we are offering the House a choice—a proper election, not an election made behind closed doors in the Whips Offices where there is the whiff of smoke and a carve up between the Whips. We want the decision to be taken here on the Floor of the House. We are extending the franchise to Members here, who have a choice as to who will be Chairman of the new Committee—the hon. Member for North Down or the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed. I hope that they exercise that choice and support our recommendation that the Chairman should be the hon. Member for North Down.

If the amendment is successful, if we manage to get the hon. Member for North Down on to the Committee and into the Chair—I realise that that is a lot of "ifs"—the minority parties would have their first-ever member on the Liaison Committee. Of the 34 members of that Committee, the Liberal Democrats, with 47 Members of Parliament, already have two—

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): We have 53 Members of Parliament.

Pete Wishart: I take that correction. With the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, there would be

[Pete Wishart]

three Liberal-Democrat members of the Committee. The minority parties have 23 members, but no place on the Committee. The House should put that iniquity right and make a strike for fair representation by minority parties on the Liaison Committee.

We watched the Liaison Committee in action last week, when members had the opportunity—

Mr. McWilliam: I have no idea what the hon. Gentleman is talking about. The chairmanship of the Select Committee is a matter for the Select Committee, when it is formed. Neither I nor the Committee of Selection know who the Committee might select.

Pete Wishart: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman makes that contention genuinely, but it is not much of a trade secret that the most likely Chair of the new Select Committee is the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed.

Mr. Salmond: The solution is obvious. The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) is in his place. All he has to do is intervene and say that he has no ambition to chair the Select Committee. The matter could be cleared up here and now.

Pete Wishart: I thank my hon. Friend. The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed declines to give that categorical pledge. That does not surprise me.

The minority parties are increasingly being excluded from the Committees of the House. I gave the example of the lack of access to Select Committees, and the same applies to the Liaison Committee. We are also worried about the Joint Committees of both Houses. We believe that they will be used as a form of pre-legislative scrutiny. We are effectively debarred—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman was on track when he spoke about replacing one hon. Member with another. That is the proposal to which he should be speaking.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My point was that the minority parties seem to be excluded from the Committee structure of the House, and from the Joint Committees of both Houses. If we are excluded from pre-legislative scrutiny, that would be unacceptable. I hope that the House does not go down that road. The minority parties have to be involved in pre-legislative scrutiny. We need an assurance that we will not be left out.

The Leader of the House has given us warm words over the past few months. We have taken them at face value. He is aware of our concerns, and is trying to find solutions. In the previous two debates on this matter, I have said that I believe that the Leader of the House and the Government have been trying to find a solution. They have been constructive and we appreciate the assistance and support that they have given the new arrangements for the minority parties. All aspects, other than access to Select Committees, have worked well.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a lot of talk about modernisation, and that the proposal would be a good move in that respect?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the hon. Member for North Tayside (Pete Wishart) that we are not talking about modernisation of the House. He must confine his remarks to the amendment.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful again, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I conclude by acknowledging the assistance of Conservative Members, who believe that we have a reasonable case. I hope that we will be able to enlist their support for the amendment.

It is time to make progress. We want some results. We could start with hon. Members supporting the amendment. We are not asking for much—one place in a non-regional departmental Select Committee for each of the minority parties in the House. It is a reasonable request. I hope that the House supports it, and the amendment before it this evening.

7.39 pm

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): The hon. Member for North Tayside (Pete Wishart) said that the amendment applies to a non-regional departmental Committee. That is so, but the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties are all guilty of not seeking representation in Northern Ireland, with the result that people from that region cannot join our parties. All hon. Members in those parties should reflect on the fact that we contribute to the disenfranchisement of people in Northern Ireland in that respect.

Is it really acceptable that such a major Committee, dealing with the portfolio of the Lord Chancellor's Department, should have no representation from Northern Ireland? Our Lord Chancellor also undertakes functions that historically belonged to the Lord Chancellor of Ireland. He is currently in charge of the courts, the appointment of the judiciary and all other constitutional issues relating to Northern Ireland. That is another powerful argument for accepting the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon).

I hope that the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) will not take my remarks personally as I hold him in the highest regard.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): But my hon. Friend will not vote for the right hon. Gentleman.

Andrew Mackinlay: No, I shall not vote for the right hon. Gentleman because, to his credit, he is now a member of one of the principal political parties. Indeed, the Liberal Democrat party has reached critical mass and is probably the most effective Opposition party in this place. In the past, the right hon. Gentleman could have referred to himself as a member of a minor party, and I am sure that he did so. He is not challenging me because it is on the record that he referred to himself in that way. However, he is no longer a member of a minor party but of a substantial party, which could form the principal Opposition after the next general election.

Mr. David Laws (Yeovil): The hon. Gentleman says that the Liberal Democrats are a major party in Britain, so would it make more sense if a Member from a minority party swapped with someone from the Government or the Tory Benches, rather than with the only Liberal Democrat Member proposed as a member of the Committee?

Andrew Mackinlay: That is a good point and all the big parties should reflect on it. One of the strengths of the House of Commons is that there has always been a place for the minor voice—*[Interruption.]* Members may laugh, but the point is important. The office that you hold, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is charged with the protection of minorities. In a legislature of 659 Members, there is a powerful case for discriminating in favour of the smaller interest, whether geographical or political. That is one of the strengths of a democracy.

We go around the world telling new legislatures to build in safeguards and ratchets for minor interests. We should do the same in this case. I do not want to labour the point, but there is a powerful regional case to be made for Northern Ireland representation on the Committee.

Jim Sheridan: My hon. Friend makes a powerful argument that a representative from a Northern Ireland party should be a member of the Committee. Some of those parties hold this House in high esteem and want it to be retained, but is my hon. Friend arguing that Members from parties that do not value this place and want to undermine it should also be able to serve on the Committee?

Andrew Mackinlay: I am pleased that my hon. Friend made that point. Our mandate does not come from the constitution but from the folk who sent us here, so I am disappointed that the hon. Member for Belfast, West (Mr. Adams)—the Sinn Fein Member—does not contribute to our debates. The good folk of his constituency sent him here. That is their right—they gave the mandate and they can take it away. As regards my hon. Friend's intervention, there are Members with whom I fundamentally disagree but they have been sent to this place with a mandate and they have a right to be heard.

The overriding consideration is the regional dimension, so we have to recognise that we cannot have more members from the mainstream parties. It would be disingenuous of the three main political parties if we were not prepared in this case to support the nomination of the hon. Member for North Down.

7.44 pm

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): I shall not pay a lot of tributes to the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith). When I saw the amendment, I determined that I should vote for him rather than the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), because, as I am a reasonably senior Member of the House, I might have been at risk of becoming Chairman and it is not one of my ambitions to become a member of the Liaison Committee.

The Government, or the Labour party, should have learned lessons from the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges in the last Parliament. When there was a vacancy, the Conservatives proposed that Martin Bell join the Committee. He had direct experience, was a one-term Member of Parliament and served with some distinction. It is also worth recognising that Select Committees seldom have contested votes that matter. There may be times when they want to make a point, and there may have been times in the previous Parliament when there were serious contested votes, but at present that is not likely to happen, and if it did, it is not likely to matter a great deal.

So the best advice that I would offer the House is to accept the motion unamended, but see whether the Labour party will consider following the precedent set by the Conservatives in the previous Parliament and whether it might put right a point that has been well made, which is that it would be suitable for Northern Ireland to have a member of the Committee. Perhaps we can meet the point without doing the slightly offensive thing of challenging the Committee of Selection, which does a pretty good job honourably and pretty effectively.

7.45 pm

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): It would be a matter of challenging the Committee of Selection if the people who were challenging it were represented on it, but, given that they are not, it is legitimate to bring the matter to the Chamber for general debate.

May I summarise in support of my hon. Friend the Member for North Tayside (Pete Wishart) some of the key arguments? We know from the debate that this is not about arithmetic. If it were, a Liberal member of the Committee would not be proposed, because as we know from the remarks made from the Government Front Bench, in mathematical terms the Liberal party is over-represented on Select Committees.

The reason the figures given by the Chairman of the Committee of Selection do not stack up with regard to minority parties was stated by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay). The three major Westminster parties do not stand in Northern Ireland, so the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee by definition has to include all the representatives of Northern Ireland parties, and that skews the arithmetic for the Select Committees overall. In the rest of the Committees, the minority parties are well under-represented, as the Liberals are over-represented.

This should not be a matter of mathematical representation. When the late Donald Dewar and I were engaged in discussions about setting up the Committee system of the Scots Parliament, it was clear in mathematical terms that the three independent Members—the Green Member, the Scottish Socialist Member and Dennis Canavan—were not entitled to representation on the Scottish parliamentary Committees. Yet we agreed that they should have that representation, regardless of the mathematics, because we felt that any minority voice should have all the opportunities to be heard that the Parliament offered.

[Mr. Alex Salmond]

There was not even an argument or a debate about it. It was the right thing to do. It was not a matter of arithmetic. The right thing for this House to do is make sure that minority parties are properly represented through all the mechanisms of the House.

The request articulated by my hon. Friend the Member for North Tayside is not unreasonable. He asks for three additional Select Committee places across all the Select Committees. That would allow each minority party to have one place on a departmental Select Committee over and above the place that they must have on the territorial Committee. That is a de minimis demand. It is a perfectly acceptable and reasonable position.

Mr. Alan Reid (Argyll and Bute): I agree with the hon. Gentleman about additional places for minority parties, but surely his argument should have been made last night when we set up the Committee with 11 members. Surely he should have moved an amendment then to add an extra person, rather than supporting the amendment tonight, which would remove all Liberal Democrat representation from the Committee.

Mr. Salmond: My hon. Friend the Member for North Tayside is perfectly capable of making our argument, but the over-representation of the hon. Gentleman's party is caused by the Liberal Democrat insistence on being represented on every Committee, regardless of whether the arithmetic justifies it. I agree that a way round the problem is to expand the size of three Select Committees. Several Select Committees already have expanded to allow the minority parties to be represented, but in all fairness, when the Liberals were charged with the responsibility of representing the minority parties, they did not fulfil it ethically. Their idea of representing the minority parties was to replace a minority party place on a departmental Select Committee with a place on the towering heights of the Catering Committee and other such Committees of the House, which are interesting and in which we enthusiastically participate, but are not quite the same as challenging Secretaries of State and Departments.

I had the enormous pleasure of doing a television piece for an event that is going on elsewhere this evening—the Channel 4 political awards—with the very hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon). She is one of the finalists for the Opposition politician of the year award. She has extensive legal experience, so it would be reasonable to accept the amendment.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) knows full well that I have the highest regard for his abilities. I have supported him for other offices in the House, but I am slightly surprised that someone of his calibre has not seen this argument coming and insisted that his party should do its bit in being fair to the minority parties.

The hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) says that the Liberal party has approached critical mass. Things usually approach critical mass when they are about to explode. None the less, even if the Liberal party has approached critical mass, its members should remember when they were in a minority party and therefore be fair to the minorities parties, which do not have that number of hon. Members.

My final argument is one of unity. Where else on the face of this planet would an amendment be supported by the Scottish National party, by the Ulster Unionists, who are diverse in their political views, and even by the Democratic Unionists, who are extremely diverse and, even more so, by the Social Democratic and Labour party? That is unheard of. The amendment has unified the minority parties, and my hon. Friend the Member for North Tayside represents the minorities parties. They have never been prepared to argue their case together before, but they have come together on questions of fairness, parity and having access to the channels of the House. The House would be less than gracious if, either in the vote later this evening or, alternatively, through the Minister's means, it were not prepared to concede to those perfectly reasonable demands.

7.51 pm

David Burnside (South Antrim): I wish to make a parochial comment on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for North Down (Lady Hermon). I am not experienced in the procedures of the House or the Select Committee system, so I do not want to walk over ground about which I feel unsure.

Criminal justice has undergone a major review in Northern Ireland since the Belfast agreement, as has policing. There are many concerns, some of which are not shared across the political spectrum in Northern Ireland, and different points of view. I believe that Select Committee membership lasts for the lifetime of this Parliament, so it is personally appropriate that an Ulster Member should sit on the Select Committee. My hon. Friend the Member for North Down is experienced in legal matters, so it would be very appropriate in this case that she serve on that Committee at a time when many more changes have been proposed to criminal justice in Northern Ireland and there is the debate about our constitutional position in relation to the Belfast agreement and the Lord Chancellor's reserved powers in our legal system.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I simply want to place on record the fact that the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is playing a very important role on the Standing Committee that is considering the Criminal Justice Bill, as I know from my experience of serving on that Committee. She is a great help to the whole Committee. I would strongly support her membership of the Select Committee if that were not in replacement of my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), who would be an even better advertisement for that Committee.

David Burnside: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that praise for my hon. Friend the Member for North Down.

The possible transfer—I think it highly unlikely—of justice and policing to a re-established Stormont Executive will also occupy the House during the lifetime of this Parliament. That strengthens my opinion that this is an appropriate one-off appointment for my hon. Friend the Member for North Down. That is all I wish to say on this subject.

7.54 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): May I apologise in advance to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to the House? I am wearing a loud tie today in celebration of cancer research week, as that is what Members have been requested to do. When I rose to speak in Westminster Hall this afternoon while wearing the very same tie, the sound system promptly collapsed and the sitting had to be suspended for quite a long period. I hope that my tie will not have the same effect this evening.

The point made by the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) is appropriate and I hope that, in the long term, the Government will take it into account. I want to make it absolutely clear that my colleagues and I are sympathetic to the point of view of the minority parties because we have been in their position. For many years, we had precisely the same problem that they have now encountered. I very much regret that they decided that we were not their best advocates: they now look to the Government, as has been made clear this evening, to act on their behalf. If the case is made for an additional representative from the minority parties for this or any other Committee, they should look to the Government to find a place for them, and to substitute one of their Members for a Labour Member. That is not a matter for us.

What I want to make clear is that there was no discrimination—to take up the word used by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay)—in favour of minority parties in the past. When I was my party's Chief Whip and previously, there was no such discrimination. We did not look for it—we would have loved it if it had happened—but we understood the arithmetic of this place. As the Chairman of the Committee of Selection, the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr. McWilliam), has made only too clear, the arithmetical equation is difficult. Often, for a comparatively small Committee, it is a very difficult task to try to find representation from all parts of the House, geographically as well as by party.

It is disappointing—I put it no stronger than that—that the minority parties have chosen this occasion to seek to remove a Member from a Committee and to put on one of their own. There have been plenty of opportunities previously that would have been more appropriate and that covered all parts of the United Kingdom represented by those parties. I accept their point, however, that it has been difficult in the past for them to obtain seats on several Committees.

The hon. Member for North Tayside (Pete Wishart) referred to two examples. I know that positions have recently been sought on various Bill Committees: for example, on that considering the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill. A place was requested and a Member was nominated to take up a position on that Committee, but he did not attend.

Mr. Llwyd: Before the hon. Gentleman develops his point further, a Government Whip put forward my name without my knowledge or permission, and I did not take part in that Committee. I removed my name via the Chief Whip's Office, so there is nothing in what the hon. Gentleman says.

Mr. Tyler: I find that very interesting, as it underlines my point. If the negotiations between the minority parties and the Government Whips are not working, that is not a matter for my party, and we should not be penalised. On that occasion, we were denied a second place on the Committee because those parties did not take it up, which was very regrettable. They also insisted on a place on the Local Government Bill Committee, but they could not find a Member to take it up, although that Committee involved important issues affecting Wales. It is therefore regrettable that they should attempt to take out their grievance on my colleagues.

Pete Wishart: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not insinuating that we are not doing the work on Standing Committees. That is not the case. We are prepared to do that work—we have served on several Standing Committees previously. We have no problem with places offered on Standing Committees. The issue is Select Committees.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are again starting to stray way beyond the terms of reference for this evening.

Mr. Tyler: My point is that the minority parties cannot cherry pick. If they wish to take a full part in the business of the House they cannot simply opt for the most attractive Committees. If they were so keen to increase their representation, they should have sought to amend the size of this Committee. They had an opportunity to do that last night, when there was an open-ended debate. I regret very much that the minority parties decided to use this opportunity, and that they attempted to remove my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed from the Committee. With 53 Members of the House, we are clearly entitled to one Member on this Committee. If the minority parties wanted an additional Member, they should have negotiated directly with the Government or they should have sought to increase the size of the Committee. My colleagues and I will support the motion tonight.

7.59 pm

Mr. Greg Knight (East Yorkshire): I pay tribute to the work of all members of the Committee of Selection. It is testimony to how well they do their task that we rarely debate their recommendations.

There are two issues to consider. The first is the principle of whether the Select Committee should be established. We decided that yesterday. The second is the narrow issue of its membership. My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) is right: it would usually seem offensive to challenge the recommendations of the Committee of Selection, but in this case something has gone wrong and the House is being asked to make an important decision on something that has caused controversy. We are entitled to ask why the minority parties are unhappy with the recommendation and have felt moved to table an amendment.

When my party was in government, the member of the Committee of Selection who represented the largest minority party spoke up for the interests not only of his or her party but for the interests of all other minority parties. For many years, that job was discharged very well indeed by the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Sir Archy Kirkwood). During my time in

[Mr. Greg Knight]

the Government Whips Office, the only dispute that I recall was over the appointment of a Conservative member to a Committee and the omission of another Conservative member. I cannot recollect any time when the minority parties had a gripe, and the system worked well.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) took on the task in 2001. He has subsequently relinquished it, and it does not matter whether that was at his own request or because others were dissatisfied with his decision making. The transfer of responsibility, supposedly to a Labour member of the Committee of Selection, has not worked satisfactorily. The Committee is composed of nine members—six Labour members, two Conservatives and one Liberal Democrat. As the Government are taking on the role of looking after the minority parties, there is perhaps a case for giving the minority parties a place on the Committee of Selection so that they can have a voice. It has never been the case that the members of the Committee have represented all shades of opinion, but they have always tried to reflect accurately the views in the House. That is clearly not happening.

The impression that has been given, certainly in recent months, is that the Liberal Democrats are getting more than their fair share of plum places, such as the nomination to the Select Committee on the Lord Chancellor's Dept. We all know about the usual channels agreement, and I understand that this Committee chairmanship will go to the Liberals if the motion is approved unamended. They have two places on the important Modernisation Committee. Minority party Members do not have a voice and, as the hon. Member for North Tayside (Pete Wishart) said, they do not have a place on the Liaison Committee either. One cannot justify that merely by reference to the arithmetics. The operation of the House and its Committees has always been based on an element of compromise. There is a perceived injustice here, and I hope that the Government and the Committee of Selection will be prepared to reflect on that well beyond the conclusion of this debate.

I have some sympathy with the arguments of the hon. Member for North Tayside. We should not view the selection as a beauty contest between Berwick-upon-Tweed and North Down. Both the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) and the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) have qualities that would be of use and benefit on the Select Committee, but there is a feeling that we have been here before and that the voice of the minority parties has not been heard when matters of selection have been discussed. For that reason, although the amendment is not ideal, I ask my right hon. and hon. Friends to support it in the Division Lobby.

8.4 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): I begin by associating myself fully with the remarks of the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight), who paid tribute to the work of the Committee of Selection. As he pointed out, it does its difficult job so well that we rarely have to have debates such as this.

The Chairman of the Committee has assured the House that it seeks to ensure party balance and fair representation for the smaller parties, but we are being asked to debate, and possibly vote on, an amendment to the Committee's motion tabled by the hon. Member for North Tayside (Pete Wishart) that would replace the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), from the Liberal Democrats, with the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), from the Ulster Unionist party. There is not a single Member of the House who does not think that the hon. Lady would make an admirable member of the Committee. Indeed, I think I speak for all hon. Members when I say that, in her short time here, she has won our affection and admiration. However, I urge the House to follow the judgment of the Committee of Selection and to reject the amendment, and I shall explain why.

First, let me address the point made by the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire about the Government's role in defending the interests of minority parties. I do not want to intrude too deeply on private grief between the Liberal Democrats and the other smaller parties, but we have been here before. Last time we debated these matters, the point was made clearly by the smaller parties—here I do not include the Liberal Democrats—that since the Government had taken on responsibility for their interests, the arrangement had been working much better. I see that the hon. Member for North Tayside is nodding in agreement. That slightly contradicts the point made by the official Opposition spokesman that the Government are not doing the job properly or, at least, they are doing it no better than the Liberal Democrats. I shall go on to address that case in a moment.

The Government are aware that the smaller parties are concerned about their representation, and no one has done more to try to press their case than my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who this evening is at the same event as the hon. Member for North Down, and, I hope, also receiving an award.

Mr. Salmond: I had something to say about the right hon. Gentleman on the same programme, which no doubt is being shown as we speak.

The Minister says that things have improved, and that has been conceded by my hon. Friend the Member for North Tayside (Pete Wishart). However, there is an exception in the case of Select Committees and, in particular, the Liaison Committee, where there has been no progress or improvement. If there can be improvement in one direction, cannot the Minister find it in his heart to improve the situation with Select Committees as well?

Mr. Bradshaw: The hon. Gentleman anticipates what I am about to say.

As I was saying, the Leader of the House has acknowledged that the smaller parties, particularly the Scottish National party, have a grievance in this matter. We have said that the Committee of Selection is aware of those concerns and that it should make every attempt to be as fair as possible when proposing Committee membership.

Perhaps I can help my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay), who asked in vain for the figures on Committee membership. I have given these to the House before, but it may be helpful to the House if I repeat them. If there were strict proportionality in dishing out membership, the Labour party would have 292 places; we currently have 295. The Conservatives would have 116, and they have 115. The Liberal Democrats would have 38, and they have 40, while the Ulster Unionist party would have four, but it has five, so both those parties are slightly over-represented. The Democratic Unionist party would have four seats, but currently it has only three. The Scottish Nationalist party would have four, but it has two. The Welsh nationalists would have three, and they have three. The SDLP would have two, and it has two.

My hon. Friend said that we should fight hardest for the smallest, and that principle is right. According to strict proportionality, the independents would have no seats, but they have one, so they are the most over-represented of all the groups in the House.

Peter Bottomley: If the number of places is more than half the number of MPs, how can the Minister say that an independent Member does not justify a place? Surely one rounds up from half a place.

Mr. Bradshaw: Having had this conversation with officials earlier, I think I am right in saying that, given strict proportionality, the independents would have half the number of places. Obviously, that is impossible, but my point is that, statistically, the independents are generously represented in having one post.

In an intervention, the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) objected to the fact that, in their attempt to improve the representation of smaller parties, the Government bounced him into membership of the Standing Committee on the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill. I should say that I am in possession of an e-mail from the hon. Member for North Tayside, who is responsible for looking out for the interests of the smaller parties. According to that e-mail, he is requesting a place for that very Member on that Committee, so it is clear that there has been a breakdown of communication between them. When the Government try to do the right thing, we get it thrown in our faces.

Mr. Salmond: I hear that there are currently breakdowns in communication even within the Cabinet, never mind between anyone else. Let us get back to the key point of the arithmetic and the figures that the Minister read out. I want to introduce him to a little in the way of percentages. As I understand it, he said that the Liberal Democrats are over-represented by two—they have 40 places, instead of 38—and that the Scottish National party is under-represented by two: it has two places, instead of four. Does that not constitute a 50 per cent. under-representation for the SNP and a marginal over-representation for the Liberal Democrats? Let us accept for the sake of argument that the Minister's figures are correct. Does he not understand that, where a small number of places are involved, it is rather important to make sure that the party concerned has at least its full quota, if not considerably more?

Mr. Bradshaw: I have been totally up-front about this. I have made it absolutely clear that the Liberal Democrats are currently over-represented and that the nationalists are under-represented. In fact, the SNP is the most under-represented of all the small parties, but I agree entirely with my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr. McWilliam) that this is the very worst example of the case to be made for extra SNP representation—I understand that that is not what the amendment is asking for—because the nature of the Select Committee on the Lord Chancellor's Department means that, to a large extent, it does not deal with Scotland. Time and again, we have accepted the point that the SNP is under-represented.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the Minister for accepting that point, but does he also accept that the only reason the Democratic Unionist party, the Ulster Unionist party and the Social Democratic and Labour party are close to, or above, their accorded arithmetical representation is that they have to fill places on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee?

Mr. Bradshaw: The DUP is actually under-represented, even given that fact. Regardless of how one does the arithmetic, I was simply trying to give the House the figures on proportionality, and on representation on Committees.

Mr. Greg Knight: May I take the Minister back to the point made by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay), who said that there is a case for the over-representation of minorities on Select Committees? Does the Minister not accept that a Government with a majority such as his ought to be a little more generous?

Mr. Bradshaw: As I have already pointed out, we are being much more generous than the right hon. Gentleman's party ever was when it was in power. If he will allow me, I was about to say how we hope to be even more generous in the future.

The hon. Member for North Tayside raised the specific issue of membership of Joint Committees. As he is involved in these discussions, he will be aware that the balances of such Committees are particularly complex, and that they must be approached case by case. However, discussions are under way through the usual channels, and although they are not complete, and although I would not want to pre-judge their outcome, the Government are confident that, in the right context, we can come up with a formula that can provide better representation for the smaller parties, while preserving those necessary balances. Such Committees might indeed need to be larger than normal, in order to achieve that.

I hope that the hon. Member for North Tayside will therefore feel reassured that the Government are trying to address the grievances that he raised. With that, I leave it to the Chairman of the Committee of Selection, if he wishes to, to reply to the debate.

8.14 pm

Mr. McWilliam: With permission, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall reply.

I have little to say save that it is a problem in a House of this size to make sure that everybody is represented, when some parties have four, three or two members here. As I said, we take it to three decimal places, and try

[Mr. McWilliam]

our best to make sure that the ratios are accurate. We do our best to make sure that when representations are made to us, as they have been, we listen.

Regrettably, on occasion, we have to table a motion, but unless the House wants to overturn the system that it has used for a long time and introduce a system that may work in this Parliament but perhaps not in future, I suggest that it vote for tonight's motion. If it does not do so, what has been suggested could turn and bite if parliamentary proportions change dramatically.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 62, Noes 233.

Division No. 69] **[8:16 pm**

AYES

Amess, David
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Barker, Gregory
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Burnside, David
Burt, Alistair
Chope, Christopher
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Djanogly, Jonathan
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Ewing, Annabelle
Flight, Howard
Flook, Adrian
Gale, Roger *(N Thanet)*
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodman, Paul
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Greenway, John
Hayes, John *(S Holland)*
Hogg, rh Douglas
Jack, rh Michael
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorkshire)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter *(M-Worcs)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mercer, Patrick
Moss, Malcolm
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Price, Adam *(E Carmarthen & Dinefwr)*
Prisk, Mark *(Hertford)*
Randall, John
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Mrs Iris *(Strangford)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion
Ruffley, David
Salmond, Alex
Simmonds, Mark
Spink, Bob *(Castle Point)*
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, John *(Solihull)*
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Watkinson, Angela
Weir, Michael
Whittingdale, John
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Pete Wishart and
Hywel Williams

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Bob *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Anderson, rh Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale & Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, rh A. J.
Benton, Joe *(Bootle)*
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Borrow, David
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Breed, Colin
Brown, rh Nicholas *(Newcastle E Wallsend)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burnham, Andy
Burstow, Paul
Cairns, David
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian *(Brigg)*
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Mrs Helen *(Peterborough)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann *(Cynon V)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, hon. Ross
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, rh Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim *(Heywood)*
Donohoe, Brian H.
Dowd, Jim *(Lewisham W)*
Drew, David *(Stroud)*
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff *(Barnsley E)*
Farrelly, Paul
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, rh George
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike *(Ilford S)*
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
George, rh Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Green, Matthew *(Ludlow)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford W & Abingdon)*
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow Cathcart)*
Havard, Dai *(Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney)*
Heath, David
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heyes, David
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Holmes, Paul
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N & Sefton E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Humble, Mrs Joan
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham)*
Khabra, Piara S.
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby)*
Kirkwood, Sir Archy
Knight, Jim *(S Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom *(High Peak)*
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian *(Wrexham)*
Luke, Iain *(Dundee E)*
Lyons, John *(Strathkelvin)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
MacDonald, Calum
MacDougall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McNulty, Tony
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mann, John *(Bassetlaw)*
Marris, Rob *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Merron, Gillian
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moonie, Dr. Lewis
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Oaten, Mark *(Winchester)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
Organ, Diana
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Picking, Anne
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter *(Burnley)*
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris *(Gravesham)*
Pope, Greg *(Hyndburn)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purnell, James
Quinn, Lawrie
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Alan *(Argyll & Bute)*

Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank *(Motherwell)*
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Shipley, Ms Debra
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns & Kincardine)*
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stringer, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark *(Alyn)*
Taylor, rh Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre F)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark *(S Derbyshire)*
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul *(N Cornwall)*
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Claire
Watson, Tom *(W Bromwich E)*
Watts, David
White, Brian
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D. *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Jim Fitzpatrick and
Mr. Fraser Kemp

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That Mr A. J. Beith, Peter Bottomley, Mr James Clappison, Ross Cranston, Mrs Ann Cryer, Mr Jim Cunningham, Mr Hilton Dawson, Mr Mark Field, Mr Clive Soley, Keith Vaz and Dr Alan Whitehead be members of the Committee on the Lord Chancellor's Department.

Compulsory Retirement Ages (MoD)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Charlotte Atkins.]*

8.28 pm

Mr. David Laws (Yeovil): I am pleased to be able to raise this extremely important issue on behalf of a number of my constituents, although it will also be very relevant to many other people across the country.

The compulsory retirement age for people working for the Ministry of Defence was raised with me at my advice centres in Yeovil by a number of constituents who were employees working in the Ministry of Defence in the constituency area. I was surprised when they first told me that they would be forced to retire at the age of 60 because that appeared to go against the thrust of Government policy, including the Department for Work and Pensions Green Paper that was published recently. I told the individuals who came to see me that I would check matters with Departments but that I would be surprised if the Ministry of Defence was not about to change its view.

The Government's position is that we should no longer have a compulsory retirement age of 60 and that we should consider not only increasing it to 65 but giving people the option to work beyond that age if they wish. I refer hon. Members and the Minister to a statement that the Minister of State, Cabinet Office made to the House of Lords on 22 November 2000. He clearly said that:

> "it is Government policy that there should be no unfair discrimination in the Civil Service on the basis of age."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 22 November 2000; Vol. 619, c. 807.]

The Treasury confirmed that policy as recently as this month in response to a question from me about compulsory retirement ages. In a written answer, it stated:

> "Government policy as set out in last year's pensions green paper is to encourage people to work up to the age of 65 and beyond if they wish. Public service employers are reviewing their retirement policies to take account of that."—[*Official Report*, 23 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 429W.]

The Department for Work and Pensions underlined the position of the Treasury and the Cabinet Office in a Green Paper in December and in a parliamentary written answer to me on 15 January, in which the Minister for Pensions clearly stated:

> "The Government will continue to encourage all employers, including those in the public sector, to review their retirement policies to allow people who want to work beyond normal retirement age, and should they wish, beyond state pension age, to do so."—[*Official Report*, 16 January 2003; Vol. 397, c. 667W.]

Government policy in all the Departments that have primary responsibility for pensions—the Cabinet Office, the Treasury, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Trade and Industry, which is conducting a review of the matter—is reinforced by the trend in European Union legislation. The Under-Secretary knows that the Green Paper that the Department for Work and Pensions presented last month confirms that the Government are developing proposals to outlaw age discrimination in employment and vocational training by December 2006.

[Mr. David Laws]

The Green Paper states:

> "This accords with the EU Employment Directive on equal treatment. It will bring sharper focus on changing culture and attitudes regarding older workers, and offers us a significant opportunity to address wasteful discrimination that is damaging to the well-being of so many people in their fifties and sixties."

The Government confirm that, under the directive, which is due to be introduced at the end of 2006,

> "compulsory retirement ages are likely to be unlawful unless employers can show that they are objectively justified."

In the light of clear Government policy, it is surprising and disappointing that the Ministry of Defence has declined to make any movement in its direction. I hope that I do not anticipate too much of the Under-Secretary's contribution from his letters to me on the subject in the past month or so. I should like to believe that he has had an opportunity to reflect on the powerful arguments that my constituents presented. Perhaps he will tell us that the Ministry of Defence will inch towards general Government policy.

I was disappointed to receive a response from the Under-Secretary in his letter of 23 January 2003. It suggested that, following a recent Ministry of Defence review,

> "we had decided for the moment not to change our retirement policy . . . we believe we must strike the right balance between the business needs of the Department, the interests of our workforce as a whole, and the aspirations of those who wish to work for longer."

It is difficult to ascertain how that balance has been struck when the Ministry has so clearly rejected the trend of Government policy and EU law and declined to give people the opportunity to work beyond the age of 60 if they wish.

That is particularly surprising in the light of the fact that the Minister himself recognises in his correspondence with me that there is an EU review in this area and that under that review the Department will be forced to look again at this issue and probably to change its practices.

When we consider the reasons for the Ministry of Defence rejecting the Government's position in this area we find some even more surprising arguments being deployed by the Minister. I refer him to his letter of 30 October 2002 to me on this point, in which he appears to set out the policy of his Department and explain why it is different from that of the Government as a whole.

The Minister refers to four reasons for rejecting the movement of the Government as a whole towards giving people more choice in this area. The first is that there is, according to the Minister,

> "no compelling business reason for us to retain people who currently have a normal retirement age of 60 beyond that age. Recruitment and retention in these grades is not generally a problem".

There are very many reasons to reject that line of argument. They are clearly set out in the pensions Green Paper. When I put that specific argument yesterday by telephone to one of my constituents and quoted the Minister's statement that

> "Recruitment and retention in these grades is not generally a problem"

my constituent told me that he did not find that particularly convincing, since he is being paid a recruitment and retention premium precisely because he is in a job where the Ministry of Defence needs his skills. Yet there is no presumption that he will be allowed to work on when later this year he reaches the age of 60. That seems completely irrational and unfair to him.

The second reason the Minister gives for sticking with the Ministry of Defence existing policy in this area is that, according to him,

> "our review has highlighted the age structure imbalance in the MOD's civilian workforce which has arisen over the past 10 years".

The Minister goes on to explain that his Department, in particular areas, has a large number of more elderly people in employment and wishes to see that change.

That is a very strange argument. Many other Departments, many businesses, will have experienced the same sort of changes as the Ministry of Defence has experienced over the last 10 years, and their age structure will have moved in that way as well. The Ministry of Defence age structure will also in part have moved in that direction because the proportion of those in employment is becoming greater for the elderly age groups right across the economy.

Therefore, the reasons that the Minister gives seem particularly weak, and should seem particularly weak in this place, where the age structure would look rather similar—indeed, perhaps rather more serious from the Minister's perspective. It might be unsubtle of me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to reflect upon the age and experience of those who preside over our proceedings, but if we applied the same sort of logic as the Minister is applying in this case we would lose many talented and experienced people who preside over, and are involved in, our activities.

The third reason the Minister gives for sticking with the existing Government policy in this area was linked to the second. It is that, according to the Minister,

> "a higher retirement age would inevitably slow down the rate of upward movement through the organisation."

In other words, it would not create enough ability to bring on the good young people coming through.

The Minister himself at some stage in the not too distant future, perhaps shortly after the end of this Parliament, will begin to approach the age that we are discussing. I wonder whether it is in his mind that he should at that stage make way for some of the young people who were elected as Labour Members in 2001 and 1997. I wonder whether he is putting that proposal to the Prime Minister. He is nodding his head. I am willing to let the Prime Minister—the right hon. Gentleman is always faced with this sort of difficulty at reshuffle time—that the Minister, in spite of all his skills, is willing to put his post at the Prime Minister's disposal in order to make way for the able young people in the Labour party.

I do not find that particularly convincing. The Minister has a great deal of skill and experience; he knows his job well. We should retain such skills and abilities, and not assume that at the age of 60 people should be cast adrift in the way that the Minister appears to imply in his correspondence with me.

The final argument of the Ministry of Defence for sticking with the existing Government policy is that it may have to make further manpower reductions, that it does not want to have to make additional people unemployed, and that therefore it wants to focus its efforts to reduce the workforce on those aged 60.

To me, it is clearly ageist and clearly prejudiced to judge whether people should work in an organisation not according to their ability, competence and the skills that they have accumulated, but simply on the fact that they have reached some age that has been chosen arbitrarily. That is precisely the reasoning that the Department for Work and Pensions is seeking to challenge in its Green Paper.

I refer the Minister to chapter 6 of that document, which is entitled "Extending opportunities for older workers". He will see that the Department cites, with some admiration, employers who continue to employ many people who have reached or gone beyond 60. Employers such as the packaging company in south Wales referred to on page 97 point out:

> "Our continuing profitability and success is a testament to the commitment, loyalty and productivity of our older workers."

The Minister is missing something there.

I am also disappointed because one of the final paragraphs of the Minister's letter acknowledges:

> "There are good arguments on the other side too".

However, he merely mentions

> "promoting age diversity and lessening hardship for those who have to leave".

He does not mention the importance of experience, talents, fairness and the fact that those individuals have accumulated experience, and therefore that training and other costs would necessarily be lower.

The Minister is missing a number of key points here, and the penultimate paragraph of his letter to me of October 2002 says:

> "I cannot agree that our policy discriminates unfairly on the grounds of age."

That is very odd indeed, and it puts him in direct conflict with Ministers at the Department for Work and Pensions.

Today, I received a letter from the deputy general secretary of the Civil Service Pensioners Alliance on enforced retirement at 60 in the MOD. Mr. John Amos states:

> "Our understanding is that the MOD is now the only one of the major Departments, which has refused to move from its policy of requiring all people to retire at age 60.
>
> Some of our members have been victims of that policy, having been required to retire at age 60 irrespective of the fact that they were still doing a good job and irrespective of their financial commitments. Such a waste of commitment and expertise."

He points out:

> "The MOD is going to have to fall in line eventually. It should have the good grace to do so now."

Discrimination on the basis of age should be no more acceptable in our society than any other discrimination. The reasons that the MOD is giving for sticking with its existing policy are weak and unconvincing. It must get its act together in this area. Its policy is out of step with that of the Department of Trade and Industry, the Cabinet Office, the Treasury, the Department for Work and Pensions, stated Government policy and the emerging EU legislation. It is wasteful, unfair, out of date and inefficient.

In a few years, the Minister will have to come back to the House, or one of his successors will have to do so, to tell us—

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): One of his younger successors.

Mr. Laws: As my hon. Friend says, perhaps one of the Minister's younger successors, or the Minister himself, will have to come back to the House to tell us that he is changing his Department's policy and give us the reasons for that. However, that will be too late for many people who are facing compulsory retirement at 60 now. The Government should get a grip on the issue now and the MOD should change its policy now.

8.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): I congratulate the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) on securing the debate and pay tribute to his efforts in pursuing the cause that he is further pursuing tonight. He has made important points on an issue that I know is of real concern to his constituents who want to continue their employment in the Ministry of Defence beyond the normal retirement age. I am very sympathetic to the difficulties that retirement at 60 will present for some of them, so I want to explain why we have concluded that it is not, at present, in the wider interests of the Department as a whole to make a change in retirement ages.

The Ministry of Defence employs some 89,000 civil servants who work alongside military colleagues at all levels, from the London headquarters to operations overseas, to achieve defence objectives. We need a wide range of skills. Civilians in the Department include engineers, scientists, project managers, logisticians, commercial officers, claims and legal experts, accountants, and IT specialists—I need not go on.

We need people to do strategic planning and to develop policy on the size, shape and deployment of the armed forces. We need people to work on support operations, international defence policy and defence relations, defence diplomacy, the modernisation of NATO and enhancing European defence capabilities. We need people to do science and technology research and management, to acquire and support equipment for the armed forces, and to do logistics support for the armed forces. Other functions include finance, personnel and contract management. We are a large, complex and diverse organisation.

Ensuring that we have the right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time requires a personnel strategy that recruits suitable people, trains and develops them, deploys them, rewards and recognises them and manages their performance effectively. Retirement also forms a key part of that strategy, as it has a direct influence on recruitment, advancement and the availability of core skills, and on our ability to match our work force to the job that they need to do.

Since 1992, more than half the civilian employees in the Ministry of Defence, mainly industrial skilled and semi-skilled grades and junior support staff, have had the option to retire at any time between 60 and 65. The remainder, mainly those in professional and managerial

[Dr. Lewis Moonie]

grades, have a normal retirement age of 60, although extensions beyond that age are allowed exceptionally where there is a business need to keep someone on for a short while. There are good reasons for this difference, based on the Department's needs for different skills, and the recruitment and retention position in our many different grades and occupational groups. That does not lend itself to a one-size-fits-all solution.

Mr. Laws: Is the Minister sympathetic to looking at the position of people who receive a recruitment and retention allowance or premium? They are clearly valued and needed by the Ministry of Defence. Could not they be given particular attention, given that they do not meet the criteria that the Minister listed?

Dr. Moonie: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. I shall describe in a moment how we sometimes allow people to stay on, and hope to show how the circumstances that he set out are covered by present policy.

In 1999, the Government published their code of practice on age diversity in employment, and Departments were asked to review their employment practices with a view to implementing any changes by 2005. At the Ministry of Defence, our review has been of the case for giving those who have to retire at 60 the option to work to age 65.

The review was very thorough. We examined the business case, the impact on promotion and careers, on our diversity policies and objectives and on pay bill and redundancy costs. Our conclusion was that we should not make a change at the moment. I should like to explain our reasons for this.

Our starting point was the business needs of the Department. We concluded that there was no compelling business reason to raise the age of retirement to meet the Department's needs to keep people in employment whose skills we would otherwise lose. We have pockets of recruitment and retention difficulty, and some isolated skills shortages, but they are not necessarily of the kind that can be remedied by retaining staff beyond the age of 60.

Of course, like other employers, we face a challenging recruiting climate, with a reduced number of younger people becoming available for employment. The 16 to 25 age group will decline from its 1991 level of 16 per cent. of the population to 12 per cent. in 2011. However, keeping staff at the end of their careers is not a substitute for recruiting.

Retraining forms an important part of our strategy. It is vital that we are ready to equip employees of all ages to cope with new demands and challenges, but we need also to attract people who can bring with them new skills. Our retirement policy therefore needs to sustain a throughput of people to create the headroom for recruitment.

It is particularly important that the Ministry of Defence competes successfully in its traditional recruiting area to address a worrying upward drift in the age of our work force. The Ministry of Defence has a markedly older work force than the rest of the civil service: our age distribution peaks in the age category 50 to 54, whereas the rest of the civil service has a peak at 35 to 39. Nearly half of the Ministry of Defence's staff are over 45, with only 22 per cent. under 35. That compares with 30 per cent. under 35 in the public sector and 41 per cent. in the UK labour force as a whole. Only 10 per cent. of our junior managers are under 30. The peak age of staff in our key middle management grade has risen from the mid-40s to the mid-50s in the past decade.

That age profile is a result of the reduction of about 40 per cent. in the size of the civilian work force since the early 1990s as a consequence of the changed international security situation. The achievement of that reduction by natural wastage and voluntary redundancy has meant that we have undertaken comparatively little recruitment over many years.

I should make it clear that nothing that I have said should be taken as implying that, as a Department, we do not value the contribution that older people make to the defence effort. In many areas we could not do without their experience and commitment and, as I have explained, a majority of our staff can already work to the age of 65. However, the health of any organisation depends upon maintaining a balanced age structure, with a regular intake of new blood and good opportunities for people to progress.

Mr. Laws: I am most grateful to the Minister for giving way a second time. Can he confirm that by 2006 his Department will have to scrap compulsory retirement at the age of 60 because of the European Union equal treatment directive?

Dr. Moonie: I shall come to that point later in my speech.

Raising the retirement age would simply exacerbate our current imbalance. That brings me to a further reason for making no change at present. If we were to keep people in employment for longer, there would inevitably be an adverse effect on the opportunities for advancement and promotion of people in lower age groups. Our review included some detailed statistical analysis and modelling, which highlighted in particular a worsening of promotion prospects at our key middle management level. That would be damaging to one of our key personnel priorities: refreshing our work force by bringing in and bringing on talented people at all levels. It is important that decisions that improve the lot of one section of the work force are not at the expense of others: we need to have regard for the interests of everybody, whatever their age.

Our final consideration was the potential additional cost to the defence budget. At a time when the MOD faces continuing manpower reductions as we find new and more efficient ways of delivering defence capability, it would make little sense to allow some people to go on working beyond the age of 60 while paying redundancy costs to encourage others to leave below that age. That would not be a sensible use of taxpayer's money.

I recognise, of course, that a number of MOD employees have compelling reasons for wanting to work beyond the age of 60, and would undoubtedly be capable of continuing to deliver valuable service but at present cannot. I also understand that, for some, retirement at 60 can bring a degree of hardship, and I naturally regret that anybody should find themselves in that situation. I have to say, however, that the retirement age of 60 has been in place in their terms and conditions of service since the early 1990s, and there has thus been time for them to make supplementary pension provision.

Those people who are aware that they will have fewer than 40 years' full service by the time that they retire have the option to buy added years of reckonable service, which increases the individual's pension and lump sum from the permanent civil service pension scheme on retirement, and the benefits payable to their family after death. Should an individual decide to buy additional years, they will receive tax relief on the payments.

In an ideal world I would, of course, want to extend the option to work beyond the age of 60 to anybody who wanted to do so. That has not been an easy issue for the MOD, and we have had to make very fine judgments in the light of a wide range of factors, many pulling in opposite directions. It is a matter of balancing the needs of the Department, our work force as a whole, and those who aspire to work for longer. We have concluded that for the moment our overriding priority must be to redress our age imbalance and to improve the upward flow of talented people. Moreover, maintaining a steady flow of recruitment and upward movement are the key levers in our strategy to widen diversity in the MOD by increasing the numbers from under-represented groups who join and reach more senior levels in our organisation.

However, the legislation that the Government have undertaken to have in place by 2006 to implement the EU equal employment directive on age discrimination will have wide-ranging implications for age retirement. It will extend the facility to all civil servants to work up to the age of 65. In the particular circumstances of the MOD, it makes real sense for us to plan for our changes to happen in parallel with the implementation of that legislation rather than to rush into a change now that would not serve the wider interests of the Department.

That will also enable us to take into account the package of reforms set out in the recent Green Paper on pensions to encourage proper pension provision by individuals and employers and to encourage greater participation of older workers in the labour market. That included a proposal to raise the pension age in the civil service from 60 to 65, and we shall therefore at the same time be able to bring pension age and retirement age into line.

In my view, the key to all this is to encourage flexible retirement alongside longer working lifetimes. We must in future be able to provide options for people to retire at a time that meets their particular circumstances, and to step down or go part-time as they approach retirement. My Department will look at that as part of its further review, with a view to introducing flexible arrangements that meet the needs both of our business and of the people who work in it.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will see from what I have laid out tonight that this is a complex decision that the Ministry of Defence has had to take and not one without some regret on my part. Having looked carefully at the issue within the Department, I feel that at present we have no option. When the Government introduce legislative changes that mean that we must comply with the new directive, of course we shall do so, but we need the additional few years that that delay gives us to correct the age imbalance in our work force and to provide proper opportunities for all of them for the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at four minutes to Nine o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 29 January 2003

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

MR. SPEAKER'S ABSENCE

The House being met, the Clerk at the Table informed the House of the absence of MR. SPEAKER *from this day's sitting, pursuant to leave given on 28 January.*

Whereupon, SIR ALAN HASELHURST, THE CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS, *proceeded to the Table, and after Prayers, took the Chair as* DEPUTY SPEAKER, *pursuant to the Standing Order.*

PRIVATE BUSINESS

TRANSAS GROUP BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Wednesday 5 February.

Oral Answers to Questions

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

The Deputy Prime Minister was asked—

Grant Settlement

1. **Mr. Christopher Chope** (Christchurch): When he will announce the Government's response to the consultation on the provisional grant settlement for 2003–04. [93766]

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): We will be publishing our final proposals on Monday 3 February.

Mr. Chope: That means that there will be just two days before the debate on those important orders, which is unacceptable and typical of the Government's arrogance. Is the Minister aware exactly how angry the people of Dorset are about the vicious attack on their standard of living in the proposed settlement? Does he realise that pensioners in Dorset will receive an increase of £1.95 a week in their state pension but, because of the Government's policies, will be expected to pay over £4 a week in council tax increases? Is that not—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Questions must be more concise.

Mr. Raynsford: I am a little surprised that the hon. Gentleman has forgotten the timetable that has applied for many years, and used to apply when his party was in government. He will realise that local authorities need certainty to plan their budgets, so there is a timetable which involves a provisional settlement published in early December, representations in December and January, the publication at the beginning of February of the Government's proposals, a debate in the House, then implementation by local authorities. That timetable has existed for many years, so his anger is entirely synthetic.

As for the figures, Dorset is once again getting a very good settlement. Last year, it had a 6.7 per cent. increase, despite which it raised council tax by 9 per cent. If there is scaremongering about high council taxes, the people that the Opposition should be looking at are the councillors of Dorset county council, not the Government.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): Will my right hon. Friend accept thanks from Government Members for his effort to try to regulate local authority expenditure? Does he also accept that the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) belonged to a Government who devastated that expenditure? When looking at the consultation and the response from local government, will he take into consideration concerns about high council taxes in some areas?

Mr. Raynsford: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks about our efforts to ensure a fair settlement and consult widely with local government. This year, local authorities throughout the country have got a settlement that gives them an above-inflation increase. Every authority has had such an increase which, we believe, makes it possible for them to set a reasonable level of council tax and maintain council services. We hope that they will do so.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): The Minister has just said that each authority has received an above-inflation increase. At the same time as the provisional announcement, the Minister for School Standards, the hon. Member for South Shields (Mr. Miliband) sent out a letter promising 6.6 per cent. for schools.

What advice can the right hon. Gentleman give to those 13 local education authorities where the change in grant is insufficient to meet the demands of the Secretary of State for Education and Skills? Should authorities, the day after the Climbié findings, take money away from vulnerable children or the care of the elderly, or should they take the stealth option and increase council tax on the backs of hard-working low-income families?

Mr. Raynsford: First, my advice to all local authorities is that in the six years in which the Government have been in power there has been a 25 per cent. increase in real terms in grants for local authorities, compared with a 7 per cent. cut in real terms in the last four years in which the Opposition were in power. Local government is therefore getting a better settlement and has better prospects. I have met a number of authorities that have difficulty meeting their passporting obligations, as has the Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie), and we have advised all of them to talk to our colleagues in the Department

[Mr. Raynsford]

for Education and Skills, who have indicated willingness to be flexible where there are genuine pressures. However, we want money to be transmitted to schools to improve education, and we want continued improvement in social services. We want to give local authorities the opportunity to develop and improve services on the basis of the real increases in grant that the Government are delivering.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I am grateful to the Department for receiving a deputation from my local authority, Barnet. However, when my right hon. Friend is putting together the final draft, could he bear in mind the special circumstances facing us? The impact of the census and the new scheme has had bizarre consequences, and our education budget will be under considerable pressure as a result.

Mr. Raynsford: We have given careful consideration to the representations that we have received from many local authorities, including my hon. Friend's authority. We will make clear our conclusions in the announcement on 3 February. Some areas have experienced difficulties because of census changes relating to previous mid-year estimates, but the floors ensure that every authority is protected against what might otherwise be a sharp change in grant entitlement. The floor ensures that every authority has an increase at least above the level of inflation.

Bed Blocking

2. **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): What discussions he has had with the Department of Health on the impact of bed-blocking charges on local authorities. [93767]

The Minister for Social Exclusion and Deputy Minister for Women (Mrs. Barbara Roche): Ministers and officials in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister regularly discuss matters of mutual interest with their colleagues in the Department of Health.

Tom Brake: I thank the Minister for that response. I am sure that those discussions will have revealed that many local authorities work well with the local NHS trust, as mine does. However, bed blocking happens for complex reasons. Will the Minister confirm that, in Sweden, where bed-blocking charges have been introduced, they have not got rid of bed blocking?

Mrs. Roche: I must tell the hon. Gentleman that we are introducing the system in our own way. He is right that this is a very important matter. In his area, the discharge rate for the Merton and Sutton primary care trust is above the national average. He will know what an issue that is for the 5,000 delayed discharges that we have every day. We are confident that the measures that we have taken, plus the extra resources that we have made available, will deal with the problem.

Jean Corston (Bristol, East): Does my hon. Friend agree that one cause of bed blocking is that people on discharge from hospital have too few opportunities to benefit from packages that would allow them to be supported at home? Does she agree that most people, faced with the choice after hospital of going home or going to a residential home, would prefer to go home? Will she discuss with her colleagues in local authorities ways to give people increased opportunities to be supported at home rather than go into care?

Mrs. Roche: I absolutely agree with the important points that my hon. Friend makes. From my own experience as a constituency Member, I know that what she says about people's preferences is true. That is why we have made available to local authorities an extra £100 million for each full year that the new scheme is in operation. I shall certainly make sure that the Department have the discussions that my hon. Friend suggests, so that we can ensure that those important opportunities are available for our older people.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Has the Minister had time to read the *Hansard* report of Monday's Second Reading of the Community Care (Delayed Discharges etc.) Bill in another place? Does she realise that the Bill is virtually friendless there, as it was here? Will she use her influence with the Secretary of State for Health to withdraw this misconceived piece of legislation?

Mrs. Roche: I have not had a chance to read that report, but I shall make sure that I do. Real issues have arisen to do with the different roles and responsibilities of acute hospital trusts and local authorities. We believe that the new arrangements, in addition to the new resources that we have put in, will deal with the matter. Taken together with the better working relationships between local authorities and hospitals, I am confident that they will lead to a great improvement.

Council Tax (Lancashire)

3. **Mr. Michael Jack** (Fylde): What steps his Department has taken to respond to representations from Lancashire county council on the expected level of council tax in Lancashire in 2003–04. [93768]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Christopher Leslie): The level of council tax in Lancashire is a matter for the local authorities concerned.

Mr. Jack: That was a complacent answer, to say the least. The Minister for Local Government and the Regions said a moment ago that the Government had been generous, but Labour-controlled Lancashire county council says that it does not have enough money and is trying to live within its means. Will the Minister provide my constituents with a cogent explanation of why they face a council tax increase that is three times the rate of inflation? [*Interruption.*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the Minister responds, I must tell the House that there is far too much conversation going on, and that that is making it very difficult for these exchanges to be heard clearly.

Mr. Leslie: I suspect that the right hon. Gentleman should wait until the county council sets its council tax.

Lancashire county council is expecting to get a 4.8 per cent. increase in grant. Fylde district council in the right hon. Gentleman's area is pencilled in for an increase of 8.8 per cent., and Wyre district council for 12.8 per cent. As far as the Government are concerned, the grant support is there. There can be very few excuses for excessive council tax rises.

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): Does my hon. Friend accept that Lancashire county council is clearly saying that 4.8 per cent. is not sufficient, and that it has had a raw deal in comparison with other shire county councils? It will have either to cut services or to make an unacceptably high council tax increase.

Mr. Leslie: In the context of the history of local government settlements, 4.8 per cent. for Lancashire is very generous indeed—well above the rate of inflation. I have never known a council say, "Thank you for the wonderful grant increases," but I think that that is a reasonable settlement.

Fire Service

4. **Mr. Mark Francois** (Rayleigh): What estimate he has made of changes in the number of firefighters in urban areas up to December 2006. [93769]

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. John Prescott): The independent review of the fire service, led by Sir George Bain, set a framework for the future of the fire service. Bain said that changes in the number and deployment of firefighters should be for the fire authorities and the chief fire officers to negotiate and consult on locally. The Government's actuarial report has stated that more than 20 per cent. of the existing force could retire in the next six years, and Bain has made it clear that there should therefore be no need for compulsory redundancies. Indeed, over the last 10 years the number of firefighters in England and Wales has been reduced by 5 per cent. without compulsory redundancies, under the normal negotiating procedures.

Mr. Francois: I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for that reply. He will know that many retained firefighters and retained stations are based in urban areas but are also responsible for providing critical cover in rural areas further afield. Will he join me in congratulating all the retained firefighters who have continued to provide emergency cover when the regulars have been on strike? Moreover, now that the review is under way, can he provide some assurance that retained firefighters and stations will not suffer under the review because of the actions of the regulars?

The Deputy Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman attended my statement yesterday, I think that he will remember that I made it clear that we were expressing our appreciation of the armed forces, the police and the retained fire workers who made the choice to continue the service. Some of the retained fire workers are members of the Fire Brigades Union as well; they belong to two different organisations. Questions have been raised about their future role in negotiations. Bain refers to that, and we will cover all these matters in the coming White Paper.

Mr. John Lyons (Strathkelvin [illegible] Bearsden): May I ask my right hon. Friend to [illegible]consider any threat to impose a settlement on the present dispute? We all want it resolved through ACAS, but we all still feel that firefighters are undervalued and underpaid.

The Deputy Prime Minister: If my hon. Friend feels that firefighters are justified in asking for a 40 per cent. increase—*[Interruption.]* Their demand at the moment is for 40 per cent., and I have to say time and time again that, for the reasons that I have given, I do not think that we can afford 40 per cent. The House must make its judgments about these matters—*[Interruption.]* That is totally untrue; Members did not get 40 per cent. It is a lie that is put on the banner outside a number of fire stations, and I am surprised if my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell) wants to repeat it.

Leaving that aside, however, the question posed to me is whether the actions that I proposed yesterday will have the effect of imposing conditions on firefighters. All that I seek to impose is negotiations. My hon. Friend the Member for Strathkelvin and Bearsden (Mr. Lyons) said that ACAS should be involved in the negotiations, and ACAS has laid down that nothing is ruled in and nothing is ruled out. Both parties should go to those negotiations, but the Fire Brigades Union has said, "No, we're laying down conditions about jobs and fire stations"—assumptions that it has made before negotiations begin. I am saying—and I think that this is the view of the House—that negotiations should start through ACAS, but also that the House may have to take powers to make it clear that the negotiations should continue, but are not unlimited in time, because it has already been 10 months, and longer than that is not required to get a successful conclusion to the negotiations.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Like the Deputy Prime Minister, we believe that fire service modernisation means better fire prevention, not simply job cuts. Given that there are likely to be job losses in some areas, why does he now make a proposal that would remove any legitimate role for a trade union in negotiating the solution, and also remove the independence of fire authorities? Would it not be better for him to call on all sides to commit themselves not just to negotiation at ACAS but to binding arbitration at ACAS, linked to Bain's financial and modernisation framework?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I assume from the hon. Gentleman's last remarks that binding negotiation means that we compel the firefighters to accept those conditions. My proposal does not do that at all. In fact, it would be necessary to take legislation through the House, which, presumably, would be seen as anti-strike legislation. If that is the policy of the Liberals, let them get on with it; it is not our policy.

Yes, of course we would like the unions and the employers to come to an agreement. I am making it clear that they should do in negotiations at ACAS. The difficulty comes if both parties refuse to negotiate. What I am facing is deadlock; I have to find some kind of solution that gets them back to the negotiating table. I believe that those negotiations should take place at ACAS. ACAS has made it clear that no one has to

[Mr. Edward Davey]

comply with any conditions whatever, and they can go into negotiation. Start negotiations: that is the best way to settle industrial disputes.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that any changes in the placement and priorities of fire service staff will be the subject of local consultation before being approved?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Yes.

David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): The Deputy Prime Minister did not answer the question put to him by my hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh (Mr. Francois) about retained firefighters. The retained firefighters are the lowest-cost part of the fire service so there is the least scope for savings there. This is not just about economics; it is about natural justice. The Deputy Prime Minister has quite properly praised those people who have protected the safety of the country throughout the strikes: the armed forces, the police and the retained firefighters. Will he guarantee today that their public service will not be punished by their losing their jobs at the end of this negotiation?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Yes.

David Davis: I am pleased to hear a straight answer from the right hon. Gentleman. It is a novelty. Yesterday, he announced his intention to take powers in order to carry through the changes in job conditions and pay and, of course, the reduction in numbers of personnel in the fire service. In the event that he takes those powers and exercises them and the Fire Brigades Union stays on strike, what will he then do?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I do not accept for a moment that I would come to some decision as to what will be imposed upon them. I do not have the authority of the past to be able to do that, and I would not want the right hon. Gentleman to suggest that that is the solution, as he did in the earlier part of his question. The question is where we get the parties back to negotiations. I reaffirm today what I told the House yesterday: that if negotiations fail and the deadlock continues, I would come to the House and ask for powers for compulsory arbitration. The Liberal spokesman often says, "Let us have compulsory arbitration," as if somehow one could force them to accept a deal. I think that there are real difficulties about that, but I want the negotiations to start through ACAS, and I am giving notice that if they do not I will come to the House to ask for the powers to impose a solution.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): In reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths), the Deputy Prime Minister said that the existing consultation arrangements for the alteration of fire cover and personnel would be retained. Can we assume from that that no legislative proposals will be brought to the House that will alter the existing statutory arrangements, which do provide for such consultation? Yes or no?

The Deputy Prime Minister: If my hon. Friend had heard the earlier replies he would not be asking yes or no, because I have made it very clear to the House that I am going to repeal section 19 of the Fire Services Act 1947, as Bain recommended, and I intend to do so. That would not take powers away from the local area; I am reinforcing the powers of the local area, taking away my right, as central Government, to have the final decision. I do have other powers in the Bill to use if I want to and it is a serious matter in those areas, but I am decentralising that power down to local areas. I thought that that was what my hon. Friend wanted, and that is what I intend to do.

Grant Settlement (Havering)

5. **Angela Watkinson** (Upminster): If he will make a statement on the grant settlement for Havering. [93770]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Tony McNulty): I am afraid that I shall have to disappoint the hon. Lady. There will be no separate statement on the grant settlement for Havering. As the Minister for Local Government and the Regions has already said, the provisional figures were announced on 5 December. The final settlement will be produced on 3 February for debate on 5 February. The Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie), has met a delegation from Havering and taken their views into account during the consultation process.

Angela Watkinson: The Minister will be aware that Havering is acknowledged to have received a perversely low settlement for many years, which gave rise to a 12.5 per cent. increase in council tax last year. Under the draft settlement, Havering has received the lowest increase, 3.5 per cent., which has sent its finances into crisis. Will he agree to re-examine Havering's financial crisis before the final settlement is announced on 3 February?

Mr. McNulty: As I said, the consultation period has already closed. Over the past four years, Havering has received increases of almost 5 per cent. year on year. Council tax is a matter for the minority Tory administration. In the equivalent last two years of the Tory Government, Havering's rises were, respectively, minus 1.8 per cent. and 1.2 per cent.—at a time when, I believe, inflation was slightly higher.

Local Government Finance

6. **Mr Dave Watts** (St Helens North): If he will make a statement on the future of floors and ceilings in the proposed new local government funding system. [93771]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Christopher Leslie): The Government expect the mechanism known as floors and ceilings to be part of the local government funding system for the foreseeable future.

Mr. Watts: Although many Labour Members believe that the new system being introduced is far fairer, we are concerned that the floors and ceilings mechanism will result in Westminster council continuing to receive

£30 million more than it should, while deprived local authorities such as St. Helens receive £2 million less than they should. Will the Minister re-examine that aspect of the changes?

Mr. Leslie: I hear what my hon. Friend says, but floors and ceilings provide a necessary degree of stability and security for all councils. They ensure that everyone receives a real-terms grant increase and they are an integral part of the grant distribution system. Last year, we promised to protect against rapid reductions in population and the like, and it is right and fair that we honour that commitment.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): Is the Minister aware that as a result of the proposed changes, Essex county council will get one of the three worst settlements, with an increase that is £40 million less than it would be if it received the average percentage increase? Will he reflect on his meeting with the leaders of Essex county council and try, before the final decision is taken, to persuade his right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister to come up with a system that is fairer to Essex and does not mean that Essex has to pay for his party's heartlands in the midlands and the north? [*Interruption*.]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I say again to the House that there is far too much noise. We should be able to hear both the hon. Member putting the question and the Minister replying.

Mr. Leslie: The hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) seems to think that there is a north-south divide in this respect. Members from the south think that the north is gaining, and Members from the north think that the south is gaining. In reality, all councils, including Essex, will get a real-terms increase in grant. I have met councillors and officers from Essex, which is to receive a 3.7 per cent. increase in grant, above inflation.

Urban Summit

7. **Ms Meg Munn** (Sheffield, Heeley): If he will make a statement on the outcome of the recent urban summit in Birmingham. [93772]

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. John Prescott): The 1,500 people who attended the summit came from all walks of life at home and abroad in both the public and the private sectors. They emphasised the need to exchange best practice, simplify and clarify policies and programmes, and engage the community more effectively to establish more sustainable communities. I hope to include some of the lessons from the conference in next week's statement on communities.

Ms Munn: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Many cities such as my own, Sheffield, are experiencing a building boom in the centre, as people move to live in the city. However, that throws into sharp relief estates on the outskirts of the city, such as Gleadless valley in my constituency, where although quality of life is improving, there is still some way to go. How will the results of the urban summit help such estates?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The urban summit made it clear that there are different problems in different areas. The mayor of Milwaukee in the United States talked about how the decline in urban areas had led to many people moving to live outside such areas, which gave rise to a different range of problems. I hope that next week's statement on sustainable communities will contain some ideas about how we can learn from best practice in other countries to improve our communities.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): Although I welcome the Deputy Prime Minister throwing his considerable political weight behind the important issue of urban renaissance, may I ask him to call another summit—a rural summit, perhaps in Devon—to examine the also important issue of the crisis in affordable housing to buy and to rent in many parts of rural Britain?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that my previous Department produced urban and rural White Papers, and the conference covered both of those aspects. We are thinking about having a separate rural conference to meet some of the demands. In my statement on the right to buy, I announced that I would make it much easier for people in the areas to which he refers to get affordable homes.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [93750] **Mr. Simon Burns** (West Chelmsford): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 29 January.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I will have further such meetings later today.

Mr. Burns: With the stock market at half the level it was five years ago and a number of occupational pension funds being closed to new members, does the Prime Minister regret his Chancellor's raid of £25 billion on pension funds, and will he apologise to those who have been so cruelly punished by it?

The Prime Minister: First, stock markets have fallen across the world, as the hon. Gentleman knows. Secondly, as a result of the Chancellor's management of the economy, we have the lowest inflation and interest rates that we have had for decades. We have the highest employment that this country has ever had and the lowest unemployment of any major country. Compare and contrast that with 3 million unemployed under the Conservatives.

Mr. Marsha Singh (Bradford, West): Will the Prime Minister join me in expressing profound sympathies to the family of my constituent, Tasawar Hussain, who was gunned down by armed robbers on Monday as he tried to intervene in a robbery? Tasawar was nothing short of a hero. Does the Prime Minister recall that, early in the new year when young girls were gunned

[Mr. Marsha Singh]

down and killed in Birmingham, he promised to stamp down on gun crime? What progress has been made on that?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the whole House would wish to express our deep condolences to the family of my hon. Friend's constituent following the appalling circumstances of the tragic and wicked murder of his constituent. The Criminal Justice Bill will include a measure that will impose a mandatory five-year sentence for the possession of illegal firearms. I hope that the whole House supports that.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): May I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to the constituent of the hon. Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh), who was, as the hon. Gentleman said, nothing less than a hero?

On Monday, the Secretary of State for Defence said that the evidence of links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda was "not strong." However, last night, President Bush said that Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of al-Qaeda. This morning, the Prime Minister's official spokesman appeared to agree with the President and disagree with the Secretary of State for Defence. Does the Prime Minister agree that those who believe that the threat from Iraq must be confronted and not ignored must speak with a clear and consistent voice?

The Prime Minister: First, I answered questions on this in detail at the Liaison Committee. I have explained that we do not know of evidence linking Iraq to al-Qaeda in circumstances concerning the 11 September attack. However, I chose my words very carefully in front of the Liaison Committee: we do know of links between al-Qaeda and Iraq; we cannot be sure of the exact extent of those links. Every member of the Government has adverted to that.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The British people know that Saddam is an evil dictator. They know that he has attacked his neighbours and gassed his own people. They know that he is responsible for countless human rights abuses. Is it not also the case that they want to know more detail about the potential threat that he poses to this country and our citizens? President Bush is, as he said last night, preparing to reveal more of what his intelligence services know about Saddam's weapons programme and his terrorist links. Will the Prime Minister also publish further information? Does he accept that the British people deserve to be given the fullest possible information about the scale and nature of the threat that we clearly now face?

The Prime Minister: Of course we have to give people the fullest possible information, which is why we published the dossier a few months ago. It is extremely important that people understand exactly what the threat is. If Saddam Hussein is allowed to carry on developing weapons of mass destruction—chemical, biological and, potentially, nuclear weapons—he will be a threat not just to his own region, but to the world. This country's security interests are intimately concerned with that matter. However, there is no point in trying to pose differences between, for example, ourselves and the United States when the purpose of what we are doing at the moment is to unite the international community around the United Nations' position as set out in resolution 1441, and to make sure that that resolution is then implemented.

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): Leaders of London's Moroccan community have written to me to express their deep regret at the murder of Stephen Oake and at the terrorist threat, and also their concern that all Muslims, Arabs, refugees and members of the north African community risk being tarred with the same brush of illegality and terrorist threat. Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to send the strongest message that a reasonable concern for security cannot be an excuse for the hysteria that is leading to racial abuse and attacks, and causing members of that community to say that old and young are beginning to live in fear?

The Prime Minister: First, we should make it clear that this is a tolerant country, we are proud that it is a tolerant country, and we never want it to be otherwise. Secondly, my hon. Friend is right to point out that the vast majority of people who claim asylum, for example, are not terrorists or even suspected terrorists. There is a problem with asylum. It is important that we deal with it, for the reasons that have been given, but it is also important that we make it clear that the number of people who come through that route and who are terrorists is small. It is precisely in order to deal with those that we introduced the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 after 11 September, which gives us for the first time the power to detain suspected terrorists without trial. That is the reason for the arrests that have taken place in Manchester, London and elsewhere. We must balance the tough measures necessary to deal with the threat, and at the same time maintain the tolerant society in which we all want to live.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Returning to the issue of Iraq, can the Prime Minister confirm that the British troops deployed in the Gulf will be integrated into the American command and control structure?

The Prime Minister: The precise command and control structure is still being worked out. Of course we will co-operate very closely with the American troops—it would be bizarre if we did otherwise. That is what we did to such good effect in Afghanistan and also in Kosovo.

Mr. Kennedy: Is it not therefore the case that if, in practical terms, British forces are to be under American command and control, the decisions in all this will ultimately be taken by President Bush?

The Prime Minister: No, that is not right. The decisions whether to commit troops on behalf of this country are taken by our Government, our House of Commons, and our country. *[Interruption.]* We are trying to put the maximum pressure on Saddam to comply with the UN mandate. We had a report on

Monday—*[Interruption.]* If hon. Members will allow me—we had a report on Monday from Dr. Blix, the head of the UN inspection team, who reported to the Security Council that Saddam was not co-operating fully with the inspectors. I should have thought that the right hon. Gentleman, along with other hon. Members, would study that report and say that it is right that we regard Saddam as a threat for the reasons that Dr. Blix sets out, and it is right that we deal with the threat. Let us be clear: the troops are down there in the case of Saddam refusing to comply with the UN resolution. Rather than trying to make points about what the command and control will be, when we know that our troops will have to work with other countries, it is surely better that we combine now as a House and as a country to put maximum pressure on Saddam, because the one thing that would make conflict inevitable is a signal of weakness in our determination to deal with him.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Ought not the House of Commons to have a specific vote before British troops are committed under American command?

The Prime Minister: Let me repeat, as we have said consistently: of course we want a vote of the House of Commons on the matter—[HON. MEMBERS: "When?"]—if we get to conflict. The one set of circumstances in which we have said that that would not be the case is if any circumstances arose in which the security of our troops was at risk and action had to be taken quickly. In the absence of that, however, of course the Government want the full support of the House of Commons if action is to be taken. That is precisely what happened in relation to both Kosovo and Afghanistan, so the idea that we have a record of taking such action without the House being consulted is nonsense. What we actually have to do—all of us, with the greatest of respect—is focus not simply on the procedures of the House, which are important and will be carried through, but on the question whether the UN indeed finds that Saddam is in material breach. In that case, I hope that we will have the unified support of the House and, in particular, of the hon. Members who are rightly proclaiming the importance of the UN in taking the necessary action.

Q2. [93751] **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): Why are GCSE results 14 per cent. better in Northern Ireland than in England? Why does the Prime Minister intend to press ahead with Martin McGuinness's ill-conceived plan to scrap grammar schools there?

The Prime Minister: It is only right to point out that GCSE results are also a lot better here than they were, for example, a few years ago. On the point about selection and grammar schools, I do not believe in returning to a division of children at the age of 11. As for scrapping grammar schools, I point out to the hon. Gentleman that, since we have been in office, we have not scrapped a single one. *[Interruption.]* That is a fact. In addition, I do not believe that the right way forward is to focus on what happens to the remaining grammar schools; it is to focus on the secondary schools, the vast majority of which are not grammar schools. They are getting extra investment and rising standards under this Government and would be affected by the 20 per cent. across-the-board cuts of the Conservatives.

Q3. [93752] **Ms Meg Munn** (Sheffield, Heeley): The vast majority of young people who get two A-levels go to university. The higher education announcement made last week committed the Government to increasing the number of young people from poorer backgrounds at university. Will the Prime Minister tell me how that will be achieved?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to make the point that 90 per cent. of children who get two A-levels go to university, whatever their social background. Therefore, the key to increasing the number of people from all social groups who go to university is to improve school standards. That is precisely why we are putting in the extra investment and making the changes that we need in the school system. I am pleased to say that the primary school, GCSE and A-level results are the best that this country has ever had.

Q4. [93753] **Mr. John Greenway** (Ryedale): Will the Prime Minister reassure my Ryedale constituents that they have nothing to fear from the planned upgrade of the radar at RAF Fylingdales? Notwithstanding the alarmist scaremongering of the opponents of missile defence, will he take time today to study the Select Committee on Defence report published only this morning, which describes the lack of proper consultation with the local community by the Ministry of Defence as "deplorable"?

The Prime Minister: Of course we will study the report and respond to any of the concerns that it raises. As for the hon. Gentleman's point about the upgrade of Fylingdales, I do not think that his constituents have anything to fear from that. After all, we have played our part in NATO and the transatlantic alliance for many years, and Fylingdales has been part of that. Should we engage with the defensive system of the Americans, I believe that it will continue to play an important role. I also believe that, in that role, there is nothing for the hon. Gentleman's constituents to fear and everything for this country to gain.

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes): In a recent survey, 85 per cent. of Cleethorpes residents said that they feared crime and thought that it was rising. What will the Government do to reassure my residents that they are seriously addressing crime? Those fears about crime are being exploited by fascists such as the British National party—something that every hon. Member in this House should be worried about.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that, although, according to the British crime survey, crime is down over the past few years, not up, the fear of crime is up. That is why it is so important that we take the measures that we are outlining both in the Criminal Justice Bill and the antisocial behaviour Bill that will follow it. I hope that we will get support throughout the House for both those measures. Unless we make

[The Prime Minister:]

fundamental reforms to the criminal justice system, we will not restore the confidence that is necessary for the fear of crime to be reduced.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): On Sunday, the Prime Minister said that on asylum policy, he would consider

"fundamentally looking at the obligations we have under the European Convention on Human Rights."

Is the Home Secretary in charge of drawing up those plans, and when will they be announced?

The Prime Minister: What I said was that if measures that we have introduced do not dramatically reduce the number of asylum applications, we are prepared to go further, including fundamentally looking at our obligations under the European convention on human rights. Of course, it is the Home Office that is in charge of these issues.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Last week, the Home Secretary said that fundamentally looking at our ECHR obligations was impossible. He said:

"I want to make it clear . . . that no EU country has derogated or withdrawn from article 3, because none could".

He went on to say that those

"who have suggested otherwise are simply wrong."—[*Official Report*, 20 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 6.]

Who is right: the Home Secretary or the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: The Home Secretary is absolutely right: no country has—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps when the right hon. Gentleman gets to his feet, he can tell us which country has derogated from article 3. No country has derogated from article 3—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The House must listen to the answers to the questions raised.

The Prime Minister: Let me just explain it to the right hon. Gentleman again: no country has derogated from article 3 of the European convention on human rights, which is why what the Home Secretary said is right. If the right hon. Gentleman has got the information as to which country has derogated, perhaps he would tell us about it.

Mr. Duncan Smith: So the Prime Minister says that he is right on Sunday, and then he says that he is wrong on Wednesday. Everybody knows that Alastair Campbell gave the Prime Minister his new policy as he walked into the television studio on Sunday. The first that the Home Secretary, or anybody else in the Cabinet, knew about it was when they switched on their television sets and heard him. A year ago, we told him that he had to deal with the ECHR, and how to do it. He said then that that "would be a mistake". Why has it taken him a year to change his mind?

The Prime Minister: What the right hon. Gentleman says is simply factually incorrect. There is no country that has derogated from article 3 of the European convention because derogation is not possible. What we were discussing last year was whether to derogate from article 5 of the European convention. That allows us, if we derogate, to detain without trial people who are suspected terrorists. It was precisely that measure that we introduced in the anti-terrorism measures that came through this House of Commons. However, when we actually introduced the measure, the Conservative party, rather than supporting it—*[Interruption.]* Oh yes. The shadow Home Secretary told us that it was an affront to civil liberties.

The fact is that we have recently introduced the following measures: there are identity cards for all asylum seekers; extended leave to remain is being phased out; social security support is withdrawn unless the claim is made quickly; and controls are being introduced across France, with British immigration officers in charge. Again, under the new measures that have been taken, we have also introduced out-of-country appeals—not in-country appeals—for countries listed by the Home Secretary. What I have said is that, unless those measures make a substantial impact, we will go further, including fundamentally looking at our obligations under the European convention. I repeat: the particular point that the right hon. Gentleman is making on article 3 simply happens to be factually wrong.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The Prime Minister is waffling and he is in a mess. Government estimates now show that at least 1,000 people in Britain have attended terrorist training camps in Afghanistan and elsewhere. We now know, as the Prime Minister admits, that many of them have used the asylum system to get into this country. In the face of that crisis, all that we have had from the Government is panic on Saturday, headlines on Sunday and climb-down on Monday. Is it not the case that we need the powers to deport those who threaten our country—and we need them now?

The Prime Minister: First, the powers to detain someone who is a suspected terrorist exist now. That is precisely why the arrests have been happening in Manchester, London and elsewhere, and those people are detained without trial. However, let me just read what those on the Tory Front Bench said when the issue arose and we were debating the legislation, so that we realise who is changing policy and who is not. When it was put to the Front-Bench Conservative spokesman just a few months ago that we should detain all asylum seekers, this is what he said:

"In today's climate"—

detention of all asylum seekers—

"is . . . wrong in principle and impossible, in practical terms".—[*Official Report*, 12 June 2002; Vol. 386, c. 874.]

The truth is that we have taken the measures that I have outlined. They are important measures to do with controls in France, identity cards, fingerprinting asylum seekers and making sure that those with manifestly ill-founded cases are taken straight back out of the country, but the power to deal with suspected terrorists is there already, and I repeat that, when we took that power, it was opposed by the Conservative party, which now says that it wants it extended.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): In light of Ariel Sharon's well-known views and actions, does my right hon. Friend agree that there is little hope of reaching a two-state peace settlement with the Palestinians unless the Americans change their policy in respect of Israel?

The Prime Minister: There is no way that we will make progress unless there is a huge amount of activity, politically and diplomatically, on three fronts: the first is in relation to security; the second is in relation to political reform on the Palestinian side, which is why we had the conference here and will take it further in the next few weeks; and the third is in relation to final status negotiations. It is not just the responsibility of America, but I hope that all the international community, irrespective of what else is happening in the middle east, realises that the only way we will get a lasting and just peace in the middle east is to engage in detailed negotiations over a long period of time to resolve those three issues.

Q5. [93754] **Richard Younger-Ross** (Teignbridge): Following the likely local government settlement, Devon county council—which is run by all parties, including the Conservatives and Labour—has estimated that the council tax increase will be 15 to 20 per cent. Can the Prime Minister say whether that increase will be the same for pensioners?

The Prime Minister: I do not know what council tax that council will fix—that is a matter for it—but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that, as a result of the extra settlement, we are putting somewhere in the region of a 6 per cent. real-terms increase into local government. It is therefore very important that he recognises that, whatever the authority, that is infinitely more generous than the settlement in the Conservative years.

Q6. [93755] **Mr. David Clelland** (Tyne Bridge): Does the Prime Minister recall telling Sir David Frost in January 2002 that a reformed House of Lords must be different from the House of Commons? Does he believe that an elected Chamber would be sufficiently different? Does he agree with those of us who believe that a properly constituted, non-elected Chamber, free from the hereditary system, is the only way to guarantee the kind of deliberative, advisory and balanced second Chamber that would add value to our system of government in the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: My briefing very helpfully starts by saying, "I understand that there are a range of views on this issue." However, everyone agrees that the status quo should not remain. Everyone agrees that the remaining hereditary peers should go and, what is more, that the prime ministerial patronage should also go. However, the issue then is whether we want an elected—*[Interruption.]* I am asked for my views; I am giving them. Do we want an elected House, or do we want an appointed House? I personally think that a hybrid between the two is wrong and will not work.

I also think that the key question on election is whether we want a revising Chamber or a rival Chamber. My view is that we want a revising Chamber, and I also believe that we should never allow the argument to gain sway that, somehow, the House of Commons is not a democratically elected body. I believe that it is democratic. [HON. MEMBERS: "A free vote?"] It is a free vote; people can vote in whatever way they want, but I think that all Members, before they vote, should recognise that we are trying to reach a constitutional settlement—not for one Parliament, but for the long term. In my view, we should be cognisant not just of our views as Members of Parliament, but of the need to make sure that we do not have gridlock and that our constitution works effectively.

Mr. Andrew Mackay (Bracknell): As the Prime Minister is rightly exercised in the fight against international terrorism and the crisis in Iraq, may I urge him not to take his eye off Zimbabwe, where the situation is rapidly deteriorating? May I specifically encourage him to increase the smart sanctions on the regime and resist the behaviour of the French, who have been behaving quite deplorably?

The Prime Minister: First, I agree entirely with the right hon. Gentleman about the situation in Zimbabwe. The humanitarian situation there is becoming dire. Millions of people are either starving or at risk of starvation in a country that is rich in potential natural resources. That is a tragedy and we are doing whatever we can in every international forum to try to ostracise the Mugabe regime. It cannot be emphasised too often that that regime is a threat most of all to Zimbabwean people: not simply to white Zimbaweans but to black Zimbaweans, too.

Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): Will the Prime Minister tell the House how the proposals in the higher education White Paper could help a single parent in my constituency who aspires to take a degree? Will he take particular note, and encourage our hon. Friends to take particular note, of the successful track record that Plymouth university has in widening participation?

The Prime Minister: Yes. First, maintenance grants will be reintroduced for those from lower-income families. Secondly, nobody will have to pay any fees upfront. Anything that is paid will only be paid back on a more generous set of terms than previously and paid back interest free. We will only be able to fund universities properly and fairly for the future if we not only put in more public money but come to a point at which students make some contribution by paying it back, but only when they are earning as graduates and in a position to do so.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): Very many shift workers, including emergency workers, those who work in security services and those who work in this House, will, with effect from 17 February, pay £1,000 a year in tax for the privilege of using the only viable means of transport to get to work: their cars. The Prime Minister will no doubt try to blame the Mayor of London for that, but, in fact, it is the result of his policy. Given that it is his responsibility, and that the Transport Act 2000 was passed under his Government, is he satisfied with the detail, and is he ready to take the blame for it?

The Prime Minister: It is a devolved matter, it was devolved to the Mayor, and the Mayor has taken his decision.

Phil Sawford (Kettering): In the light of the report on the torture and tragic death of Victoria Climbié, will my

[Phil Sawford]

right hon. Friend give urgent consideration to the recommendations of the Laming report, and will he appoint a children's commissioner?

The Prime Minister: In respect of the report of the Laming commission, it made more than 100 recommendations, and we will implement more than 80 of those within six months. Clearly, in relation to the issue of a children's commissioner, we will study the report carefully, and that is one finding among many on which we will deliberate and then come to a decision.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): When Army numbers are stubbornly and significantly below establishment, why have 450 basic training places been suspended?

The Prime Minister: I do not know about the basic training places that the hon. Gentleman mentions. We are, however, engaged in a huge recruitment campaign for our armed forces, as he knows, and people are applying to our armed forces as a result. We have a settlement this year, and for the next few years, which, for the first time in many years, provides a substantial real-terms extra amount of spending for our armed forces.

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Even if Saddam Hussein does possess weapons of mass destruction—most people accept that he probably retains some residual capability—can my right hon. Friend explain why he did not use those during the Gulf war when his arsenal was massively greater than it is now? In particular, can he explain why Saddam represents a greater threat today than he did in 1997, 1998, 1999 and all his time as Prime Minister until President's Bush's axis of evil speech, when apparently the situation changed?

The Prime Minister: First, the one thing about which we can be sure is that his reason for not using his chemical, biological and nuclear weapons back in the early 1990s was not out of the goodness of his heart.

Secondly, my hon. Friend should study the UN inspectors' report. I shall read just one small part of it. Dr. Blix says:

> "The nerve agent VX is one of the most toxic ever developed . . . Iraq has declared that it only produced VX on a pilot scale, just a few tonnes and that the quality was poor . . . UNMOVIC, however, has information that conflicts with this account . . . There are indications that the agent was weaponised."

He then goes on to detail similar findings in respect of a lot more weapons.

When my hon. Friend says that we did not regard Saddam as a threat between 1998 and the axis of evil speech, that is wrong. Precisely because he was a threat, thousands of British forces have been down in the Gulf the whole time, flying over the no-fly zones. Precisely because he was a threat, we have had to impose a sanctions regime on Iraq that, because of the way that Saddam implements it, means—I fear—misery and poverty for many, many millions of Iraqis. The fact is that, way before President Bush's speech, at the very first meeting that I held with the President in February 2001, I said that weapons of mass destruction were an issue and that we had to confront them.

In the House on 14 September, I said that, after 11 September, it was even more important to deal with the issue. I simply say this to my hon. Friend: the UN having taken its stand, if we do not deal with Iraq now—

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): Who is next?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend asks who is next. After we deal with Iraq, we have to—*[Interruption.]*—yes, through the United Nations. We have to confront North Korea about its weapons programme—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] We have to confront those companies and individuals trading in weapons of mass destruction—

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): When do we stop?

The Prime Minister: Another question has been shouted at me. We stop when the threat to our security is properly and fully dealt with. I say this to the hon. Gentleman: if he reads Dr. Blix's report, who can doubt that Saddam is in breach of his UN obligations?

We have talked about the UN in this House. Let us, therefore, follow the UN route. Let us implement the resolution and let us make sure that the threat to our security from those weapons is properly dealt with.

Auditing and Accounting

12.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Ms Patricia Hewitt): With permission, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the report of the co-ordinating group on audit and accounting issues and the report of the review of the regulatory regime of the accountancy profession, which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and I are publishing today. Copies of both reports have been placed in the Library.

Last year, the collapse of Enron, WorldCom and Andersen's in the United States appalled investors all over the world. Millions of people saw their savings and pensions collapse. As I told the House last year:

> "Audit and accountancy standards in Britain are different from those in the United States: different and, as is now widely acknowledged, in some respects better."—[*Official Report*, 24 July 2002; Vol. 389, c. 1003.]

So there was no need for the UK to rush into a Hewitt-Brown version of the Sarbanes-Oxley Bill: but, equally, it would have been folly to sit back and say "It couldn't happen here".

Structures, standards and regulations can never be a complete defence against individuals determined to do wrong, nor can they wholly protect us against a culture of corporate greed and loose ethics, but we owe it to savers, investors and employees, as well as to all the honest business people whose reputations have been tarnished by those scandals, to ensure that our defences are as robust as they sensibly can be.

The reforms that I am announcing today, along with those proposed last week by Derek Higgs and Sir Robert Smith, will raise standards of corporate governance. I emphasise that these reforms, in essence, cover only listed companies. They will strengthen our accountancy and audit professions and provide for a more effective system of regulating the professions. Together, they make up a complete package of reforms that are comprehensive and mutually reinforcing.

First, I shall deal with boardrooms. Following Derek Higgs's proposals, the combined code on corporate governance will be strengthened to provide: that at least half the board, as well as the chairman, should be independent, as should all members of the audit and remuneration committees and a majority of the nomination committee; that the definition of an independent director should be strengthened and clarified; that the separation of the roles of chairman and chief executive should be reinforced; and that new descriptions should be given of the respective roles of the board, the chairman and non-executives.

Mr. Higgs's report showed a startling picture of the way in which top-level appointments are handled, with more than half of directors being appointed through personal contacts and friendships. I welcome his proposals to promote meritocracy through an open, fair and rigorous appointments process. As part of the follow-up to the report, a group led by Professor Laura Tyson of the London Business School will examine ways of bringing candidates, including women, from the non-commercial sector to greater prominence. It will report to me in May.

In revising the combined code, the Financial Reporting Council will implement the recommendations of Sir Robert Smith's group that the audit committee should: consist entirely of independent members, with at least one having relevant financial experience; monitor the auditor's performance, especially on independence and objectivity; and develop and implement policy on the purchase of non-audit services from the auditor, with reference to tough new ethical guidance. Following well-established practice, listed companies will be required either to comply with the provisions or to explain to their shareholders why they are not doing so.

The second aspect of our reforms concerns tougher measures to underpin auditor independence. Following the recommendations of the co-ordinating group, I can announce, in addition to an enhanced role for audit committees and a tightening of the provision of non-audit services by auditors: that the professional bodies have already changed their regulations so that the lead audit partner has to be rotated within five years; that partners and senior employees of audit firms will not be able to take up employment with a company they audit within two years of leaving their audit firm; and that most of the UK's large audit firms have already agreed to publish an annual report, to provide management and financial information; and, in particular, to reveal levels of dependency on single clients, including how the firm handles conflicts of interest and interdependence issues. We think that that will work on a voluntary basis. If not, we will make such disclosures a condition of auditing listed companies.

I am also calling for the standards and ethical guidance for auditors on the provision of non-audit services to be toughened even further.

We will also strengthen the enforcement of accounting standards. At the moment, the financial reporting review panel steps in only if particular concerns are raised with it. However, the co-ordinating group recommends, and we agree, that enforcement of those standards must be proactive. From now on, the Financial Services Authority will help the financial reporting review panel on enforcement—especially by identifying the high-risk cases that most merit investigation. The FSA and the panel will need to agree as soon as possible a memorandum of understanding to clarify their precise roles and responsibilities.

Those measures will be underpinned by the third element of our reforms—more effective regulation of the professions. The Financial Reporting Council will assume the functions of the Accountancy Foundation. That will create a unified, independent UK regulator with three clear roles: setting accounting and audit standards; proactively enforcing and monitoring them; and overseeing the self-regulatory professional bodies. The Financial Reporting Council has, under the chairmanship of Sir Bryan Nicholson, developed an excellent reputation. The Accountancy Foundation, led by Lord Borrie, has also done valuable work. I thank them for that.The new combined body will build on both their achievements.

After wide consultation, the DTI's review team made three recommendations, with which I agree. First, the Auditing Practices Board should take over from the professional bodies the responsibility for setting standards for independence, objectivity and integrity.

[Ms Patricia Hewitt]

Oversight of other ethical standards will become the responsibility of a new professional oversight board. The Ethics Standards Board will be wound up in due course. I greatly appreciate the work that its chairman, Christopher Jonas, and his colleagues have done to take forward the ethical agenda and to provide the basis for the new board's work.

Secondly, a new independent inspection unit, located within the FRC, should take over from the professional bodies responsibility for monitoring audits of listed companies, major charities and pension funds.

Thirdly, the long-delayed investigation and discipline board should come into operation quickly to provide a truly independent forum for hearing significant public interest disciplinary cases.

It is vital for the new structure to have clarity of accountability and responsibility together with the appropriate powers to operate effectively in the public interest. There is a strong case for statutory underpinning to make the new body work. We will consider that further and report our conclusions to the House.

The proposals that I have outlined are substantial and mean significant changes to the way in which companies and auditors carry out their work. The package should be implemented as quickly as possible. Changes to the regulatory structure will be made immediately. The Department will lead an implementation steering group, on which Sir Bryan Nicholson, Lord Borrie and Peter Wyman, president of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, have kindly agreed to serve.

An FRC with enhanced responsibilities will need more investment. The Government will pay their share of core running costs, but I also expect companies and the profession to contribute. It is in all our interests to make the changes work and it is fair that we all pay for the improvements.

The changes to the combined code that arise from the Higgs and Smith reports will be made in the early summer once the FRC has consulted on the precise wording. All those measures will be taken forward alongside our long-standing programme of company law reform following last year's White Paper.

The proposals are not a response to short-term market movements. They are about strengthening the foundations of our capital markets for the long term. I want to thank Derek Higgs and Sir Robert and his group for their excellent reports as well as all those who participated in the co-ordinating group under the joint chairmanship of the Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Miss Johnson), who is responsible for competition and consumer affairs, and the Financial Secretary. I pay tribute to the officials who so swiftly took forward the review of the regulatory regime.

The overall package is tough when that is needed but measured and proportionate. It will ensure that our corporate governance structures remain among the best in the world for the benefit of millions of pensioners, savers and businesses that depend on them.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for making a copy of her statement available to me this morning.

I broadly welcome the Government's approach. As I said last July, when the interim report was published, there are significant differences between our approach in Britain and that in the United States. Our principles-based approach is right and should continue to be championed.

I hope that the Secretary of State will agree with me on four broad principles. First, no regulatory system, however stringent, can provide total protection against the consequences of human greed, folly or corruption. In auditing and accountancy, as in all matters of corporate governance, the best safeguard against fraud, abuse and incompetence is the integrity and conscientiousness of the men and women in positions of responsibility.

Secondly, any change to existing practice must be scrutinised for its effect on Britain's competitive position and whether it makes wealth creation easier or harder. The purpose of regulation of auditors and accountants, the role of non-executive directors and so on is to provide some protection for lenders, investors, employees and customers. However, it cannot replace the duty of all those people to carry out their checks and responsibilities. Care must be taken not to increase business costs unnecessarily.

Thirdly, self-regulation should always be the preferred option for professions such as accountancy. The statutory route should be taken only when it is clear beyond doubt that self-regulation is inadequate.

Fourthly, even when we rely on self-regulation, any codes of practice or guidance systems must acknowledge the need for flexibility and understand that requirements that may apply to companies of a specific size or type are wrong for many other businesses. A one-size-fits-all approach is damaging.

I welcome much of Derek Higgs's report. The Secretary of State referred to listed companies. Does she include alternative investment market listed companies, off-exchange market companies and foreign companies that have a listing in London in that category? There are wide variations in the size and nature of the businesses even among the fully listed companies. The Higgs recommendations do not entirely acknowledge those differences.

I am worried that, for example, the recommendation to require a senior, non-executive director to develop an independent relationship with shareholders, separate from that of the chairman, chief executive and other executive directors, may be a recipe for division and conflict. That will not improve standards of corporate governance.

I am also concerned about the requirement for some smaller listed companies that half the board, or, if the chairman is included, a majority of the board, shall be independent. I am concerned that that recommendation is onerous, expensive and unnecessary. Further consideration should be given to both those recommendations before they are incorporated in the combined code.

Since institutional investors already have the power to address many of the concerns that Higgs has focused on, does the Secretary of State have any practical suggestions about how those institutions can be encouraged to take a more active role beyond the lip service that is so frequently paid to that need?

I welcome the recommendations of Sir Robert Smith, and particularly the involvement of an entirely independent audit committee in scrutinising the purchase of non-audit services from an audit firm. That, coupled with a little more transparency, should remove the need for greater restrictions on the freedom of clients to employ their auditors for non-audit work—a freedom that I believe is often in the best interests of shareholders, as when, for example, a client wishes an auditor to help with due diligence work on a proposed acquisition. The Secretary of State says that she would like guidance relating to non-audit services to be toughened still further. Will she explain exactly what she has in mind in that respect?

Looking at the issue of auditor independence, I warmly welcome the steps that the profession has taken on a voluntary basis to meet public concern and maintain confidence.

On the issue of standards, can the Secretary of State clarify exactly what role she expects the Financial Services Authority will play? She says that she is asking the FSA to agree a memorandum of understanding with the financial reporting panel. Will she clarify what issues she thinks that memorandum should cover?

Turning to the regulation of the professions, I welcome the extensive consultation that has taken place and pay tribute to the institute and to its president, Peter Wyman, for his role, and also to the work of the Financial Reporting Council.

Although the Secretary of State referred to a unified, independent regulator with clear roles, it would be helpful if she could explain how she thinks the distinct roles of five different groups will be defined and how their work will interact. I refer to, first, the FRC itself; secondly, the independent inspection unit to be located within the FRC; thirdly, the Auditing Practices Board; fourthly, the professional oversight board; and, fifthly, the investigation and discipline board. Is there any risk of duplication? Will their responsibilities really be clear to outsiders? Is there a danger that what starts to look like a proliferation of bodies may obscure accountability?

There is also the crucial question of cost. At a time when company profits are under pressure, not least because of the extra burden of tax and regulation imposed on them by the Government, there will be concern that audit fees and other charges may rise significantly because of these proposals. What does the Secretary of State expect the effect on profits to be? What will be the Government's contribution to the budget of the FRC?

In addition, when will the Secretary of State be able to say whether legislation is needed to implement the proposals? What timetable is envisaged for their implementation? Does she agree that after a period of consultation there is every advantage in quickly resolving the uncertainty that has inevitably existed in recent months?

Britain has a real chance to lead in the setting of standards for audit and accountancy. We must continue to champion our principles-based approach and the success of much of the self-regulation that has prevailed here. Both the nature of new legislation in the United States and the confusion over key appointments to regulatory bodies there are a warning of what may go wrong when a hasty reaction to a corporate scandal occurs.

I hope that the areas of remaining uncertainty in the Secretary of State's statement will soon be addressed. In the long term, the interests of shareholders and management should be aligned. Since every member of a pension fund and every holder of a life insurance policy has an interest, both in the standards of corporate governance and in the profitability of businesses, today's proposals affect almost every man, woman and child in the country.

In the six months since the issues were last discussed in the House, share prices have fallen and uncertainty in financial markets has increased. It is all the more important, therefore, that moves to rebuild confidence do not add excessively to the burden of cost and regulation. Our response to the problems must continue to be proportionate to the dangers involved. The essence of what is needed is not necessarily more regulation, but better regulation.

Ms Hewitt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his broad support and welcome for the statement and the proposals. He began by setting out the principles. As I said, there cannot be complete protection against determined wrongdoers. The best defence against wrongdoing is the integrity and incorruptibility of the individuals concerned. That is why we want to strengthen not only professional standards but oversight, monitoring and enforcement of them. The reforms must be designed, and have been designed, to strengthen the competitiveness of our companies. At the outset of the work and report, Derek Higgs said that the reforms are about promoting the greater success of our companies, not least by strengthening the confidence of the people who invest in them. We believe in self-regulation where possible, legislation where necessary. That is what we have practised, and I think that the balance in the package is right.

Let me stress and develop what the hon. Gentleman said about the need to avoid one size fits all. Derek Higgs clearly acknowledges that. Perhaps I can clarify matters by confirming that the Higgs proposals apply to listed companies, pension funds and major charities. They do not apply to alternative investment market listed companies. However, he recognises, as we do, that the circumstances of companies, especially smaller companies, that fall within the scope of the combined code will be different. It is important for the FRC to reflect that in the wording of the revised code and it explains why we rely on comply or explain. There will be circumstances in which it is not sensible or appropriate for a company, especially a smaller firm, to meet every Higgs recommendation or combined code standard. They will be able to explain that to their shareholders. That is the great merit of comply or explain.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the implementation of Sir Robert Smith's recommendations, in particular the role of the FSA. The suggestion is that the FSA will extend its proactive enforcement role by conducting a risk assessment to guide the work of the financial reporting panel. Instead of the FRC simply waiting for problems to be drawn to its attention or worries to be raised, the FSA, having conducted a risk assessment, will draw the panel's attention to those audits on which it thinks the panel should focus.

[Ms Hewitt]

Let me elaborate on the implications of toughening standards for the purchase and delivery of non-audit services. Sir Robert Smith's recommendations involve stronger policy and standard setting by the audit committees of the companies that purchase the services. Each committee will have to review that and set out company policy on it. On the other side of the fence, where the audit companies themselves are concerned, I am asking the Financial Reporting Council to consider the recommendations by my colleagues in the combined group who have suggested much tighter controls on what audit firms can sell. For instance, a prohibition on the supply of internal audit services by the external auditor might involve checking on management controls. Similarly, a ban on the provision of non-audit services might create a mutuality of financial interest and perverse incentives to distort either the audit or the non-audit services, or both.

The hon. Gentleman asked how all the different groups fit together. I draw his attention to the helpful diagram in the DTI review. By bringing the Accountancy Foundation and the FRC together, we are creating a single unified regulator under which will sit the Auditing Practices Board with its enhanced role, the investigation and discipline board with its strengthened powers, and the professional oversight board, which will include the audit inspection unit. That is a much simpler and more rational system than we have had until now, and because it all fits within the FRC, I think that the hon. Gentleman will find the complementarity of roles that we both want. Finally, he urged on me speedy implementation of the recommendations—that is precisely what we are now doing.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): I welcome the Secretary of State's timely statement. She has avoided, as she said, the excesses of Sarbanes-Oxley, but at the same time she has been able to ensure a proportionate response to the drop in confidence in accounting services and the way in which businesses are run. Intriguingly, however, she missed one point that has been a matter of discussion in recent weeks—trying to avoid the practice of giving golden handshakes to failed executives. The issue provokes great bitterness and discontent, and I know that it will be a subject of a private Member's Bill later this week. However, I feel that my right hon. Friend missed the opportunity to address the issue, and wonder whether she could tell us why.

Ms Hewitt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his welcome for this package and for giving me the opportunity to comment on an issue about which, as I have said before, I feel extremely strongly. I have often said that big pay-offs for large corporate failures are unacceptable, which is why last year I introduced new company regulations requiring an annual shareholder vote on the directors' remuneration report for quoted companies. Company owners should, above all, take the matter into their own hands and sort it out. Of course, I am aware of the private Member's Bill proposed by the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), whose aims I entirely support. We have had an opportunity to discuss his Bill, and I told him that I share the concerns, of investors in particular, about the way in which it would work in practice. We are assessing the impact of the changes that we have already made to company law, and I intend to consult on whether further changes are needed to deal with rewards for failure.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): May I, too, welcome the Minister's courtesy in giving us early sight of the statement? Like the Conservative spokesman, I agree that its contents are both good and controversial. It is a welcome follow-up to the Higgs report, requiring accounting companies to produce proper accounts, which they often have not done in the past, and the tidying-up of regulation.

Is that enough? There has been a crisis in capitalism and there is a fundamental lack of trust in corporate behaviour, particularly in independent audits. It is striking that on the three big issues that the Government had to confront—audit rotation, competition policy and conflicts of interests—they have not taken the robust action that one might have expected. I shall pose a series of specific questions. First, on corporate governance and Higgs, I welcome the fact that the Government are now taking the initiative to break up the magic circle and break the incestuous links between non-executive directors. As there will be a demand under the reforms for more non-executive directors, what action will be taken to ensure that the existing community does not take on excessive numbers, which is already happening? Why have the Government not responded to advice to set limits on the number of non-executive directorships and chairmanships?

Secondly, on rotation, if it is indeed impractical to rotate audit companies, do the Government not accept that there are great dangers from close personal relationships developing between individuals in audit companies and the companies that they are auditing? Why are the Government not taking steps to encourage or demand that, for example, all audit partners—all signing partners, not just the lead partners—are rotated and that all members of audit teams are rotated, to ensure that those incestuous links are broken?

Thirdly, on conflicts of interest, surely the Government accept that it is inherently unsatisfactory for an audit company simultaneously to carry out an audit role and seek to carry out or carry out big IT consultancy contracts for the same company? The issue is subtle and complex, but surely there should be action beyond the Government's guidance to ensure that the most obvious conflicts of interest are simply stopped? On competition policy, do the Government accept that having four groups auditing the accounts of the top 500 companies is inherently unsatisfactory? The problem is difficult because those companies are global, but do the Government have any plans to pursue with the European or American authorities a combined approach to competition policy to try to break up the groups or introduce more competition in the market?

Finally, why was there no reference whatever in today's statement to the Comptroller and Auditor General and the National Audit Office, as both the private sector and the NAO have suggested that there is a major role for the NAO in auditing private accounts, possibly nominating auditors? That would be an excellent way in which the public and private sectors could collaborate, so why is there no reference to it?

Ms Hewitt: I see that the Liberal party is swinging to the left today.

The hon. Gentleman talked about widening the magic circle of directorships. I entirely agree. As I said both in my statement and when we announced the appointment of Derek Higgs to conduct the review, it is not satisfactory, however good the individuals, to have a limited number of people on the boards of our major companies. The hon. Gentleman asked whether there should be a statutory or regulatory limit on the number of directorships. I draw his attention to Derek Higgs's clear recommendation that a full-time executive director should not take on more than one non-executive directorship and that no individual should chair the board of more than one major company.

However, as I told the Conservative spokesman, one size fits all is not appropriate. To try to set a single figure as a ceiling for the number of directorships and non-executive directorships that one individual may hold would not take account of the fact that some directorships may be in much smaller companies and so on. Some non-executive directors, particularly chairs of audit committees, have a much larger company burden than other independent non-executive directors. So I believe that we have got the balance right.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of whether the entire audit team, as well as the lead audit partner, should be rotated. Various review teams have looked at that matter carefully, because it was raised as an obvious solution to the problem. As with the issue about rotation of audit firms, the problem is about getting the right balance, ensuring that cosy incestuous relationships do not develop—that was part of the problem at Enron—while not destroying the expertise built by an audit team in relation to its client firm. There is evidence that some of the worst problems arise in an audit firm's first year, when the team, by definition, is completely new. Again, there is a balance to be struck, and we have approached it sensibly.

The hon. Gentleman wanted me to say more about non-audit services, including IT services. I draw his attention to the recommendation in the co-ordinating group report that the new regulator should further restrict the circumstances in which auditors supply internal audit services, and ensure that there is a strong presumption against supplying any internal audit services other than in exceptional circumstances. The report suggests that the regulator should review the circumstances in which it is permissible to provide valuation services, actuarial services, litigation support services, taxation services, and services involved in the design and supply of IT and financial information technology systems. A strong case is made for much stronger standards being set for audit firms. They will complement the strengthened provisions in the combined code that result from Sir Robert Smith's recommendations.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about competition in the supply of auditing and accountancy services. Of course that is a matter for concern, although the Office of Fair Trading has looked at it already, at our request, and has agreed to keep it under review. The market for such services is increasingly European and, indeed, global. At a regional level, where smaller companies are concerned, the competition for supply is rather greater.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I do not promise to call every hon. Member who is seeking to catch my eye, but I will be encouraged to be well disposed if questions have just one part and receive concise answers.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be aware of a serious fraud in my constituency, as I have written to her Department about it. It involves some issues to do with accounting practices. In her statement, she referred only to listed companies. The very large multinational company in which some of the fraud to which I refer originated is privately owned. What protection will be given to third parties such as the small company in my constituency that purchased a company that was formerly a supplier to the multinational? That small company's representatives have told me that audit is merely a tax on firms such as theirs. The audit on the company that it purchased was fine, but completely superficial. How will the new recommendations make such audit less superficial?

Ms Hewitt: From what my hon. Friend has said, the company to which she refers would be a suitable candidate for consideration by the financial reporting and review panel. I am aware in outline of the case to which she refers, but it may be sub judice and I therefore do not propose to comment further.

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): I thank the Secretary of State for her remarks on payments for failure to departing directors, which is the subject of my private Member's Bill, and I welcome her confirmation that the Department will put the matter out to consultation. However, my Bill has widespread support across the House, especially among Labour Members. It is also supported by Sir Adrian Cadbury, who in a sense is the father of the combined code, and by firms of solicitors in the City. One of those companies is McFarlane's, which was instrumental in preparing a practical and robust solution. What form will the consultation take; how long will it last; who will be consulted; who will be responsible; and will the right hon. Lady take this opportunity to say that she will present the conclusions of the consultation in a statement to the House in a few months' time?

Ms Hewitt: I know that many hon. Members of all parties want companies and boards to take action on the matter of big rewards for big failure, and they also want better and proportionate regulation. I do not believe in legislating without sensible consultation and consideration of how proposals would work.

We will publish a consultation document on this issue, I think in March. I certainly want to assess views about the changes that we have made already and which will come into effect for the next round of corporate AGMs. We will put forward the proposal made by the

[Ms Hewitt]

hon. Gentleman and variations on it. We will ask for views about whether further action, over and above what I have taken already, is required. If so, we will ask whether it should be along the lines suggested by him, or whether there are other possible ways forward. Although there is widespread support for the aims of his Bill, there are also widespread doubts about the means that he has chosen—overriding contracts that have been entered into—to achieve those aims. The TUC is one of the bodies concerned about the precedent that would be set.

There are a number of matters that need to be considered. We will have three months of consultation with everyone who has an interest in these matters and who would like to express a view. Of course I shall report the conclusions to the House.

Alan Howarth (Newport, East): Will my right hon. Friend explain further why she has stopped short of proposing a ban on the provision by auditors of non-audit services such as consultancy services, which may be much more profitable than audit? Following the events at Enron and elsewhere, does she accept that confidence in the integrity of audit is undermined where there is evident conflict of interest? Does she accept that investor confidence is also undermined, with all the damage that that causes?

Ms Hewitt: This is a matter of enormous interest, and one on which I have elaborated already. It has been looked at carefully by the various reviews. Clearly, as the co-ordinating group concluded, there are situations in which a ban would be appropriate. Those circumstances depend on the relationship between the client company and the audit firm, and the particular non-audit services that it is proposed will be bought. In some cases, a company will not be able to buy those non-audit services from its external auditor. In other cases, however, as Sir Robert Smith makes clear, there is no conflict of interest and so no risk of jeopardising the independence of the audit. In those cases, the expertise built up in the external audit may be valuable to the company and therefore help to strengthen its governance and its competitive success. That is why I do not think that the proper way forward is to write into the regulations a blanket ban. Instead, we must ensure—through the role of the audit committee on the company's side, and through the audit standards on the auditor's side—that we have the right balance. We must also ensure that the non-audit services are banned in those cases where that is required.

Mr. Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon): The pool of people qualified for non-executive positions is relatively small at present. If the role of non-executives is to become more onerous and demanding as a result of these recommendations, that pool could become even smaller. However, Mr. Higgs has also suggested that the boards will have to have more than 50 per cent. non-executive content. That could mean that boards will get larger. How will the Secretary of State tackle the significant concerns being raised by business that those possibly conflicting aims could lead to weaker, if not larger, boards?

Ms Hewitt: There is a real problem with non-executive directors, especially in the larger companies, being drawn from such a small pool. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the burden on any director of a firm is becoming increasingly difficult. We therefore need to widen the recruitment pool. It is pretty implausible to suggest that only the very small number of already existing non-executives are capable of carrying out that role.

We can widen the pool in two ways. First, a growing number of large and medium-sized companies regard a non-executive directorship as an important contribution to the professional and career development of younger executives. That means that the corporate governance of the smaller firms on which those younger executives cut their teeth will be strengthened, and also that the pool of people with the commercial experience needed by good non-executives of major companies in future will grow.

The other step that we are taking, as I have indicated, is to encourage firms appointing non-executive directors to look to the non-commercial sector. In the public services and the not-for-profit sector, there are large organisations such as NHS trusts that are responsible for very large sums of money. Their non-executive directors tend to be drawn from a rather more diverse community than their counterparts in FTSE 100 companies, and to have built up exactly the sort of expertise need by the boards of large listed companies.

Linda Perham (Ilford, North): As my right hon. Friend knows, I am interested in the issue of corporate governance and, with 20 or so other colleagues, made a submission on the White Paper. How will the measures that she has announced today fit in with the rest of the agenda for the reform of company law? Is it not a rather piecemeal approach if some reforms are introduced now, while others have to wait for the introduction of a new company law Bill?

Ms Hewitt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and the other hon. Members for their very detailed submission. I think that my hon. Friend is in part referring to the proposals for the operating and financial report that we made in the company law reform report. It is important that that enormous rewriting of the whole of our company law is all taken forward together, as we intend it will be, so that we can deal with the problem of 150 years' accumulation of company law, both statute and case law—and that is what we are doing, building on last year's White Paper. However, the package that I have announced today can in large part be taken forward by the actions that we have described in reorganising the Financial Reporting Council and the other bodies, and through the combined code and the audit standards that I have mentioned. They will complement and provide a solid foundation for the much larger reform of company law that is also coming.

Mr. Michael Weir (Angus): The Secretary of State says that the provisions to reveal levels of dependency on single clients will at this stage be voluntary, but that she will consider legislation if necessary. Can she tell us more about how that will be reviewed? Obviously, it is important that any problems are revealed at an early stage. It would be a tragedy if we had to wait for another Enron-style debacle before new rules were brought in.

Ms Hewitt: I think that the hon. Gentleman is referring to how we monitor the comply-or-explain provisions. The combined code on corporate governance is, of course, attached to the listing rules, so for large listed companies—that is what we are talking about here—the Financial Services Authority has responsibility in its role as the listing authority.

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on what she has said about the move away from self-regulation, but I want to return to the point about possible conflicts between audit and non-audit services, which is now being raised by hon. Members on both sides of the House. Does she not see that in sending out rather confusing signals about what may or may not be acceptable in future, she has lost the opportunity to make a clear-cut separation between external audit services, internal audit and consultancy? That distinction could help to create more competition, and to prevent the dangerous possibility of regulatory conflict for listed companies in Britain that also list in the United States.

Ms Hewitt: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of that point, but I do not think that we are sending out confusing signals. The report from the combined group is absolutely clear about that, and I have no doubt that the FRC will respond positively to the recommendations. I also stress to my hon. Friend the fact that the steps that we propose should be taken to ensure that there is much greater transparency in relation to where the audit firms get their income from.

All the recommendations about an annual report, about the disclosure of the fees received from a client where those exceed 5 per cent. of a firm's total fees, and about audit firms publishing information on how they manage auditor independence within the firm, together with relevant management and reward structures, will shine a bright spotlight on the practices of audit firms. They will also, I think, ensure that the separation of functions and the preservation of the independence and integrity of the audit, which is at the heart of both my hon. Friend's concerns and my own, will be delivered.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Will the Secretary of State monitor the growing practice of the qualification of audit certificates, which is having adverse consequences for small businesses? I learned only this week that the Civil Aviation Authority is refusing to accept for the purposes of ATOL—air travel organisers' licensing—bonding accounts that have had a qualified audit statement. We understand why the auditors are doing that, but what is the small business supposed to do when its own auditor says, "I can only give a qualified statement, because that's what my professional body says I must do"? That is very difficult, and I would like the Secretary of State to look into the problem

Ms Hewitt: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. There is no doubt that since Enron, auditors have, not surprisingly, been much more cautious, so there is a much greater readiness to qualify accounts. I have not come across the particular problem that the hon. Gentleman raises concerning small firms that need ATOL bonding; of course I will look into that and also draw it to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport.

Angela Eagle (Wallasey): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her determination to bring forward quickly these sensible changes in the aftermath of the financial scandals that became apparent in the United States. Will she undertake to keep the new regulatory system under constant review, because ways of getting round regulations often demonstrate much more innovation among the rogues than we would like to see. If my right hon. Friend keeps such matters under constant review, we shall know that we have the best possible protection in this country, and that shareholders and investors can proceed with confidence.

Ms Hewitt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her comments. I hope that the new structures that we are putting in place, especially the merger of the Accountancy Foundation and the FRC, will simply be able to settle down and get on with the job. It would be a great pity if we had to change those structures again in just a year or two. Within that framework, however, I agree that we must monitor the impact of the changes that we are making. The new unified regulator and the overarching council that we are establishing will be well placed to ensure that they are constantly monitoring and reporting on the impact of the strengthened ethics and the independent standards that are being put in place, as well as the strengthened and much more proactive enforcement and monitoring system involved.

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): As a member of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland, I believe that the Secretary of State's proposals for audit and accountancy deserve strong support. In the current climate, however, does she not agree that public confidence in the reforms, particularly in the capital markets, will depend on their having an early statutory underpinning, and a funding basis independent of the accounting profession that is to be subject to the revised regulations?

Ms Hewitt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, with his expertise in such matters, for the welcome that he gives the proposals. Confidence in the system is crucial, and I think that we will achieve that. There is enormous consensus, especially with the regulators—the independent bodies—about what needs to be done, and that this package is the right one. He makes a strong case, as does the combined group, for a statutory underpinning for the new package, and the combined group has sketched out what that might look like. As he will know, there are very different views about which bits of the system should be underpinned by statute. I am sure that the House will groan if I announce yet another consultation—but we do need to take views on the details of what that statutory underpinning should concentrate on; we do not want to legislate

[Ms Hewitt]

unnecessarily. We will consult on that, and if we decide that it is necessary, we shall make proposals as quickly as we can.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the statement, which I think will make a major contribution to securing the integrity of corporate finance. In the light of what happened with Equitable Life, and other difficulties in the insurance industry, will she consider whether the special risks of insurance require special treatment, both in accounting and in auditing?

Ms Hewitt: That, of course, is a matter for the Financial Services Authority and I understand that it is looking at it already.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that more than 100 companies with a full listing have a market capitalisation of less than £10 million, how does the right hon. Lady expect those businesses to comply with the Higgs requirements on non-executive directors?

Ms Hewitt: As I said earlier, in some cases those companies will not comply with every aspect of the Higgs recommendations, and Derek Higgs makes it very clear that that is what he expects. His recommendations are drafted with proper regard for the fact that they will not fit those smaller listed companies, and the comply-or-explain provision works very well in enabling companies to say, "This particular recommendation"—on the number of independent directors, perhaps—"does not fit our circumstances, for this reason, and this is what we have done to ensure that we still have very strong corporate governance," which of course is what our shareholders expect.

Ross Cranston (Dudley, North): I very much welcome the package that my right hon. Friend has announced. It is a sensible and measured approach. However, may I press her on the progress of the company law review? Although one always starts with self-regulation and the improvement of professional standards, at the end of the day one needs a modern legal framework to underpin directors' duties and to ensure that auditors' conflicts of interest are properly addressed.

Ms Hewitt: I entirely agree with my hon. and learned Friend about the need for complete reform of our archaic company law, but it is of course a huge undertaking. It is very complicated. I am glad to say that the whole process of drafting the legislation is making very good progress and, as my hon. and learned Friend will be aware, we are consulting on many different aspects of the company law reform package at the moment. I hope that we shall be able to legislate on it just as quickly as possible.

Mr. Mark Hoban (Fareham): I have a declaration to make in that I am a non-practising chartered accountant. What estimate has the Secretary of State made of the additional costs that companies and auditors will have to bear as a consequence of the proposals? It strikes me that these, in addition to some of the proposals in the company law White Paper, will actually increase the costs of compliance to many businesses, and perhaps the extent to which those costs are disproportionate to the benefit that they bring.

Ms Hewitt: The initial reaction that we have had, particularly from the large companies that are most affected, is that in most cases they are already in compliance with the bulk of, for instance, the Derek Higgs recommendations. I do not believe that the additional compliance costs will be substantial in most cases, if indeed there are additional compliance costs at all, but of course the FRC will be undertaking a proper regulatory impact assessment of the changes that it will be bringing forward.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): In the light of her statement, will the Secretary of State explain her Government's policies towards multidisciplinary professional practices, and does she believe that the description of an individual or a firm as an accountant or accountants should be reserved for those who have achieved professional qualifications, are subject to rigorous rules of practice and have adequate insurance?

Ms Hewitt: As I think the hon. Gentleman knows, there is nothing in law at the moment that prescribes the use of the term "accountant" in the way that I think he is suggesting. This is really a matter for the professional bodies to take forward.

Greenbelt Protection

1.18 pm

Mr. John Baron (Billericay): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require local authorities to provide a designated number of permanent sites for the traveller community; to make additional provision in relation to the powers available to local authorities in relation to unauthorised development of greenbelt and greenfield land; and for connected purposes.

In my constituency of Billericay and district, we are very concerned about the various threats to our green belt. One of the growing dangers is that of unauthorised development, especially by the travelling communities, who buy land and then, very quickly, develop it without planning permission.

A recent example at Sadlers Farm roundabout involved travellers digging a 6 ft earth mound around the perimeter of a field on Friday, laying hardcore on the Saturday and then moving caravans in on the Sunday. By the time that the council reacted with enforcement and stop notices, the development was complete. Consequently, we have now entered a lengthy planning and appeals process. Meanwhile, the illegal development continues. Similar situations have occurred in Hovefields in Wickford and Oak road in Crays Hill. Such unauthorised development often occurs on highly visible areas of the green belt, and causes a good deal of resentment among other residents.

When trying to combat the situation, Basildon council—whether Labour or Tory—has found the existing law inadequate. The Bill attempts to put this right, by giving local authorities additional powers to stop unauthorised development of greenbelt land.

Before I describe my suggested measures, may I first make two things absolutely clear? First, no one is looking to discriminate against a minority, but it is only fair that all those who live in a community should abide by its laws and regulations; otherwise, it is the majority who are discriminated against. Partly because of our historic links with the pilgrim fathers and the Mayflower, as a community we recognise more than most that the mark of a civilised society is the extent to which minority interests are respected. We have no problem with the law-abiding traveller. Indeed, latest figures show that there are more than 100 authorised sites for the travelling and gypsy communities in our district, while some neighbouring districts have none at all.

We believe that it was wrong that the statutory duty on local authorities to provide authorised sites was removed in 1994. It is only right that the way of life of the law-abiding traveller be recognised. However, for reasons that I cannot fully explain, there has recently been an increasingly large number of cases of travellers, new to the area, buying land, speedily developing it without planning permission and subsequently not living in harmony with their neighbours. That is causing much concern and anger not only among the settled community but among the more established gypsy communities.

The second point is that this private Member's Bill is the product of a long consultation exercise in which party politics has played no part. It has included numerous discussions, site visits, public hearings, and public meetings with residents, travellers, councillors, the police and Basildon council planning department. Here I should like to pay particular thanks to Councillor David Dadds, Mr. Clive Simpson and Graeme Bloomer of Basildon council. I have consistently stated that the law needs changing, whichever party is in control of the council.

In addition, in an attempt to engage the Government in debate, these suggestions were inserted by way of amendments to the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill when it was in Committee.

The Bill has support on both sides of the House and, whatever the outcome, I should like to take the opportunity to thank all sponsors for their support. It is in that spirit that I present the Bill.

Two key problems face local authorities when trying to deal with this issue. The first is that local authorities have difficulty in acting quickly to prevent unauthorised development. If an injunction is granted, it can be difficult to serve on the owner or occupier as they can often be difficult to pin down, particularly if land is being quickly sold on and individuals are being unco-operative.

The second problem is that although local authorities can issue stop and enforcement notices, rights of appeal and retrospective planning applications unnecessarily prolong the issues. The reality is that the planning and appeals process can take many months, if not years. Even when it is exhausted, it is often the case that local authorities have then to resort to the courts to reinstate the land, and that can be a long process that does not necessarily result in the clearance of the land. Some planning departments believe that decisions go against local authorities because there is inadequate provision of sites.

I have three suggestions for the House on specific details. The first is that, to share the responsibility of site provision for the travelling community, the Bill would introduce a requirement for all local authorities to provide authorised sites. The target figure should be identified by central Government in consultation with regional bodies, county councils and local authorities. The allocation would be based on the level of local need, and take into account the generation of new sites, likely immigration, outstanding commitments and the ability of local infrastructure to cope with additional growth. In return, the travellers would pay a fair rent for the time they spend at the sites and use the council's services; otherwise, it would be unfair to local taxpayers.

Secondly, the Bill would introduce powers to enable local authorities more easily to obtain an injunction by allowing it to be served on a landowner whose identity is unknown to the local planning authority. Although a similar power already exists to a lesser extent, it is hardly ever successfully exercised by local authorities because of the heavy burden of proof required. By entirely removing that burden of proof and serving the injunction, in effect, against the land, local authorities will be able to obtain an injunction far more speedily, and so quickly nip in the bud any unauthorised development. The injunction would be registered at the Land Registry as a charge against the land and would give local authorities the power to enforce the injunction against any new owner or occupiers.

[Mr. John Baron]

Thirdly, local authorities would have a further power to serve a notice to remedy, the aim of which would be to reinstate the land to its original condition. That would be a discretionary power available to local authorities, the guidance being that it should be used only when, in the opinion of the local authority, significant harm is being caused to green belt or greenfield land under its control. The aim of the guidance would be to ensure that, where a minor breach of planning laws had taken place—for example, Mr. Smith accidentally deviated by 3 ft from planning permission when erecting a garage—the normal planning regulations would apply. But where, for example, a whole field was developed without planning permission, local authorities could consider that to constitute significant harm and would then have the option of instigating a notice to remedy.

Should a notice to remedy be exercised, it would stand apart from the normal planning procedure and have to be complied with. Once the land had been reinstated, the owner and occupiers would be allowed to seek planning permission through the normal planning process. If the land were not made good within the specified time frame, the local authority could arrange to put it right, the costs being reclaimed from the perpetrators where possible.

To conclude, it is important to stress that apart from the provision of authorised sites, the additional powers in the Bill are not mandatory. They would be additional options available to local authorities to choose if they so wish. Local councillors, democratically elected, would make the decisions. I do not deny that I have not covered all the details in the past eight or so minutes. There may well be technical issues to address, but I hope that they will not get in the way of what the Bill's sponsors and I believe are common-sense policies that, if sufficient political will exists, would tackle the problems. By ensuring that a sufficient number of authorised sites are provided and giving local authorities additional powers to combat large-scale unauthorised development, whether or not it is by travellers, I believe that the proposals will create fairness for all, and I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. John Baron, Mr. Colin Challen, Mr. Jim Cunningham, Mr. Jeff Ennis, Mr. Mark Field, Mr. Chris Mullin, Mr. Kerry Pollard, Hugh Robertson, Mr. Andrew Rosindell, Andrew Selous, Mr. Mark Simmonds and Angela Watkinson.

GREENBELT PROTECTION

Mr. John Baron accordingly presented a Bill to require local authorities to provide a designated number of permanent sites for the traveller community; to make additional provision in relation to the powers available to local authorities in relation to unauthorised development of greenbelt and greenfield land; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 21 March, and to be printed [Bill 49].

Public Accounts

1.39 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): I beg to move,

That this House takes note of the 1st to 63rd Reports of the Committee of Public Accounts of Session 2001–02, and of the Treasury Minutes on these Reports (Cm 5393, 5450, 5470, 5477, 5481, 5487, 5512, 5524, 5549, 5600, 5612, 5636 and 5676; and HC 1261, Session 2001–02).

The motion stands in my name and those of the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) and the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel).

It has been an extraordinarily busy year for the Public Accounts Committee. In the past 12 months, we have produced almost 70 reports—probably more than in any one year in our 140-year history. If I were to devote only five minutes to each report, I would have to give a speech of Gladstonian length—[HON. MEMBERS: "Excellent—go for it!"] That is the bad news. The good news is that I shall take only a few examples.

Our reports have covered almost every part of Government, from the vast Departments of State such as Health, Education, Defence and Revenue, to smaller but very interesting bodies such as the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. We have examined major defence spending programmes and high-profile health and education topics, as well as some of the behind-the-scenes operations that contribute much to the quality of public services, such as the roles of various regulatory bodies.

The rich and varied range of topics that we examine each year places the members of the Public Accounts Committee in a unique position in the House. Our remit spans the whole spectrum of government, our perspective is comprehensive and our conclusions and recommendations for improvement are pragmatic and, I believe, well founded. That claim is borne out by the fact that the Government accept more than 90 per cent. of those recommendations, which is a record unmatched by any other Committee—in fact, no other Select Committee comes anywhere close. The National Audit Office calculates that the work of the Public Accounts Committee has led to savings of £1.5 billion in the past few years.

Our role is twofold. We exist to hold to account those who are responsible for spending the hard-earned money of taxpayers, and we are bold and outspoken when we find that the expected standards of financial management have not been met. We are also anxious to ensure that lessons are learned and mistakes not repeated, so we cast a retrospective eye over events, but we adopt, we hope, a forward-looking and positive approach, and we are prepared to commend when it is right to do so.

Some senior officials may regard an appearance before my Committee as little preferable to an audience with the Inquisition, but the purpose of our rigorous questioning, which we try to do politely, is to make a difference and provide an effective check on the actions of the Executive. That is surely what Parliament is about. However, we do not stop there. This year, we showed that we are prepared to take on a major company, Imperial Tobacco, by questioning its chief executive and posing severe questions about an aspect of the company's activities.

I am extremely proud to be Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, the best and most influential Committee in Parliament. Our work load is staggering, but shouldered with great competence by my colleagues on the Committee. I hope that I am giving nothing away, but when I recently spoke to the Clerk of another Committee who was watching the progress of our work, he said, with some surprise, "But they ask their own questions! In our Committee, we give the Members the questions." In the PAC, we ask the questions and we do the research.

Our success is due to our solid cross-party consensus, which again makes us unique. On my watch, I shall never allow party politics or advantage to influence our work—

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): Shame.

Mr. Leigh: It is not a shame at all. It is central to our achievements. As our inquiry into Portcullis House showed, we are prepared to look to our own without fear or favour.

We are well supported by our Clerk and his staff, who also have a vast work load because of not only the number of reports that we issue, but the mountain of correspondence on every aspect of public life that we receive. I pay tribute also to the organisation with which we work so closely, the National Audit Office. I thank Sir John Bourn, the Comptroller and Auditor General, whose reports to Parliament do so much to inform the work of the Committee—indeed, they make the work of the Committee possible.

I shall focus on three themes that have characterised the Committee's work in the past year: improving service delivery to the public; fraud; and improving the quality of public administration. Improving the quality of public services is not a party political issue. The Prime Minister himself has placed great emphasis on the need to make rapid progress in that respect, and the PAC welcomes that initiative. Over the past year, we have looked, from the point of view of service delivery, at a number of different areas. We have found the picture to be mixed; we have found much good practice and staff dedication, but also evidence of major shortcomings and the need for improvement. Let me give some examples.

Perhaps the most visible example of public service delivery is the provision of health services. In our 45th report, we focused on efforts to reduce NHS waiting lists and waiting times. A lot of money is being spent on the problem and we were keen to find out what progress had been made. At the time of our inquiry, over 195,000 people in England and Wales had been waiting for more than 13 weeks for an out-patient appointment, and just over 1 million people were waiting for treatment.

Waiting a long time can be a painful and dispiriting experience, as I found out myself a week ago at the Chelsea and Westminster hospital, where I was kept waiting for more than two hours for a four-minute appointment. It makes people angry that the money that they see being put into the health service is not being used wisely. In addition, over a third of patients stated that their condition worsened while waiting.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): The Chairman of the Committee may remember that the following report was about occasions when some parts of the NHS had tried to fudge the waiting lists, and had made people wait inappropriately for that reason. Does he recall the suggestion that the NHS should have told those people if they had been inappropriately put down the waiting list because they might have been due compensation? The NHS did not seem very happy about that. Would he like to take up that point?

Mr. Leigh: I shall deal with that point later, but the hon. Gentleman is right that the NHS could have been more forthcoming about compensating people if their waiting times had been inappropriately adjusted. That is a good point and we shall want to debate it at greater length.

We found some evidence of improvement in waiting lists and waiting times, and we give credit to the efforts of the Government; where credit is due, we give it. But we also found significant variations in waiting lists and times in different parts of the country and in different specialisms. The accuracy of the figures remains uncertain, partly because not all hospitals check their waiting lists often enough. We found that pressure to reduce waiting lists had led to significant numbers of consultants treating less urgent patients before others with higher clinical priority. That was entirely unacceptable and the Department issued clear guidance that clinical priorities must be adhered to. We wanted annual surveys to be carried out to make sure that consultants were observing the guidance that was now being given to them.

The large amount of extra money—there are huge amounts of extra money going into the health service—is to be welcomed, but only if it is spent wisely and effectively. There is no virtue in throwing money around, with no clear idea of whether it reaches desired targets. It will also be necessary to change the culture and working practice of all medical professionals and foster greater co-operation between health and social workers. Ultimately, the public will be convinced that their money is being spent well only when their experience of the NHS improves.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am grateful to my hon. Friend, whose industry is matched only by his ingenuity. Following through the train of thought that he has been pursuing, and given that the Government spend approximately £400 billion a year—or £700,000 per minute—can he offer the House any indication of the size of the savings potentially available from the 70 reports issued over the last year?

Mr. Leigh: As I said, we reckon that our work in previous years has saved £1.5 billion. The NAO calculates that, for every pound that it spends, it saves £8. I never quite understand that argument. Presumably, the more the NAO spends, the more will be saved; there must be a limit somewhere. We reckon that our activities help the Treasury; indeed I pay tribute to Treasury Ministers. Our agenda is very similar to theirs. We work closely with the Treasury, but when we find it falling down from its own high standards, we will not be slow to criticise it. We work closely with the Treasury to try to achieve some of the savings to which my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) refers.

[Mr. Leigh]

A different aspect of service delivery is the opportunity created by the development of electronic services. I am a bit of a technophobe myself, but I accept that this is a very important part of Government, and certainly a high priority. It is clear from our work that Departments recognise the potential, but in several areas we have found a failure to deliver e-services that people in the real world can, and want to, use. The Government aim to have all their services available electronically by 2005. That is fine, but there is little point in having e-services available if the public do not use them.

For example, Customs and Excise has made it possible to submit value added tax returns electronically, but we found that only 2,500 out of 1.65 million VAT-registered traders signed up to do so.

Another timely example for any of us who have yet to complete our tax returns—I hope that everyone here has done so—comes from our 52nd report, which looked at the Inland Revenue's progress in introducing e-services. The Revenue has a target of 50 per cent. take-up of its services by 2005. However, last year fewer than 100,000 out of a potential 9 million people filled their tax forms online. If we are to bring these e-services online, we must be able to complete the process.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne) once tried to access the Passport Agency and went through the whole process, but, at the end of the day, he still had to deliver his application by post. There is not much point in that.

The public will see no point in using e-services when new systems fail or are difficult to use, or where there are concerns about system security. It is important to assure people that e-services are potentially quick, easy and secure. More generally, e-services need to be better thought through. Departments will not reap the rewards if they simply convert existing ways of delivering services to electronic applications. They must fundamentally rethink what they are offering.

That was demonstrated by NHS Direct, the subject of our 40th report. NHS Direct has been a real success story for the Government. It provides easier and faster health advice and information to the public and quickly established itself as the world's largest provider of telephone health care advice, handling some 5.3 million calls in the last financial year. It is popular with the public. We felt that other Departments could learn lessons from how that large new service was introduced.

Our praise was tempered slightly by concerns that many callers were waiting too long to speak to a nurse, as I found myself when I called them after suffering from severe headaches—no doubt caused by chairing overlong meetings of the PAC. There is a risk that NHS Direct could be a victim of its own success. The Department should take stock, set a clear strategic direction for the service and plan what impact it will have on other parts of the NHS.

There are few areas where the need to improve the service to the public is more important than health and education. We looked, in our 58th report, at access to higher education. We found that the Government will surely fail to meet their target—that, by 2010, 50 per cent of 18 to 30-year-olds will go into higher education—unless universities recruit and retain more students from poorer backgrounds. That is highly topical because a major barrier to increasing participation is the system for funding students. Its extreme complexity and the fear of debt are barriers to increasing participation. We called for the Department to simplify the situation and make it more certain. In response, the Department has already developed proposals radically to streamline funding. That will give students greater certainty over their finances.

One public service that we use daily is the postal service, which I take a particular interest in because I once had responsibility for it. It is true that it still retains a high level of customer satisfaction. Not long ago, the service was regarded as one of the best in the world. In recent years, it seems to have lost its way. In examining the topic, we took evidence from the regulator, Postcomm, and from Consignia, now once again known, thankfully, as the Royal Mail. A key element of the service is the early morning delivery, but this may soon be lost to us, inconveniencing people and damaging small businesses.

We found that the Royal Mail was experiencing major problems. Profitability was affected, and job cuts were proposed. Those difficulties had impacted on the quality of the universal postal service—something that we all support in this House and something for which we have all fought, particularly those of us who, like me, represent rural areas. The Royal Mail had consistently failed to meet its own target of delivering 92.5 per cent of first-class mail the next day. Performance also varied substantially over the country.

Our work showed that something had to be done. Postcomm intends to encourage improvement by rapidly opening up the market, way beyond what the European Commission is planning to do to liberalise the mail markets. We were concerned that Postcomm was making critical decisions that could jeopardise the universal service without the right information to judge the consequences. I believe that competition must be the way, but there is a real risk of throwing the baby out with the bath water. Postcomm needs more information about how changes to the levels and types of service that the Royal Mail provides will affect its customers.

In our 28th and 49th reports, we looked at the variety of initiatives designed to promote better policy making. We had a wealth of examples: some were good and some were not. Those who forget the lessons of history are condemned to repeat them. If we are to avoid a repeat of the millennium dome, the benefits payments card or the state earnings-related pension scheme fiasco, Departments must get better at all aspects of the process of making policy. That has nothing to do with Labour or Conservative Governments: we are all as bad as each other. Dare I say that? I suppose that I can get away with that much. In particular, Departments must carry out sound analysis and consult both potential customers and those who deliver the service properly. That might sound rather obvious—it is rather obvious—but it does not always happen in practice, as we found again and again.

I shall conclude the theme of improving service delivery on an up-beat note. Earlier this month, the Committee took evidence on the acquisition of the London Heart hospital. What is striking about this case is the way in which a hospital trust, aware of undercapacity in cardiac treatment, took rapid action to resolve the problem. When the private London Heart hospital came on the market, the University College London Hospitals NHS Trust saw a chance, went for it, slashed through the usual pernicious red tape that can envelope much of Government, broke a few rules in the process and took a risk. The deal to acquire the London Heart hospital was completed in months—a record. The result is a boost to patient treatment, as we saw when we visited the hospital.

The case stands out against the quagmire of bureaucracy that all too often hampers Government bodies. If Departments keep using the same processes, they will achieve the same outcomes, and it is likely that extra funding will exacerbate many of the problems that we encountered. A radical improvement in the standard of service delivery across almost all sectors will require a radically new approach to service delivery. Providing they are managed well, my Committee will welcome innovation and creativity. Although we recognise that they might not always work, we are not trying to create a culture in Whitehall that is averse to risk. We say take a risk, as long as it is a carefully considered risk.

I turn to my second theme—tackling fraud. We are fortunate—we should say it more often—to have very few cases of serious fraud committed by individuals in the public sector. We have a record second to none in the world. That is a tribute to the honesty of our public servants, and the robustness of the systems and controls that are in place. However, fraud against the public purse is a major concern. There is a wide spectrum, from individuals exploiting weak control systems for agricultural subsidies to fraud of epidemic proportions in the benefit payments stream.

One of the most serious individual cases that the Committee considered was described in our 51st report, which examined the activities of a farmer who was found guilty of committing £157,000 worth of fraud against the common agricultural policy. The fraud was perpetrated over a number of years because controls operated by the former Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the former Intervention Board were laughably weak. There was no cross-checking of claims between different subsidies, and the fraudster was able to claim for different crops on the same piece of land. Map references for fields were not always required from the farmer, or checked. His crimes came to light through a chance transfer of a member of staff.

Our hearing on the episode could almost be described as surreal. Notwithstanding the seriousness of the offence, a number of scams were pulled that would make Joe Grundy jealous. It was a case of appallingly lax controls—or perhaps I should say flax controls. The farmer had a particular problem with a series of combustible barns. His losses might have provoked a comment from Lady Bracknell, but they apparently did not evoke any interest in the Ministry. Over a two-year period, three of his barns, together with the crops that he claimed to have harvested, burned down. Indeed, so fond was the farmer of his barns that he even applied to the Ministry for a grant for a barn that had already been built.

In our hearing, my colleague the hon. Member for Glasgow, Pollok (Mr. Davidson) asked the Department

> "There had already been inspections made of this property, had there not, and nobody had spotted that the barn was already there?"

To which the reply was:

> "At that stage, no, nobody had spotted that."

Our colleague then remarked:

> "It is a difficult thing to spot, of course."

The farmer also had an unconventional approach to geography. To disguise the fact that he was claiming to grow different crops on the same fields, he made up the Ordnance Survey map references for them and claimed for fields in Iceland, Greenland and the North sea. In our view, the Ministry and the Intervention Board did not pursue the irregular claims with sufficient vigour and recovered only £1,325. Clearly, there were a large number of lessons to be learned from the case, and I am pleased that controls have now improved.

Mr. George Osborne: Did not the hearing demonstrate the value of picking apparently small cases of fraud—in that case, £150,000, which is small relative to overall Government spending? By focusing on the issue and getting a permanent secretary to explain why things had gone wrong in that case, we revealed broader lessons about the failure of controls in that Government Department.

Mr. Leigh: That is an important point. It is sometimes tempting for our hearings and NAO reports to cover a whole aspect of better Government policy making, and often the hearings that we hold, though interesting, are less effective than when we focus on a specific subject, possibly involving a relatively small wastage of money. When we focus the spotlight of the PAC on just one small part of a Department, nobody in Whitehall knows whether our spotlight might hit them next. If we were concerned only with value, we could spend all our time dealing with social security and nothing else. We must range widely.

Mr. Richard Bacon (South Norfolk): Does my hon. Friend also recall from that hearing the rather strange fact that the Ministry had had recommendations from our Committee four years ago about ways in which it could reduce fraud, and appeared to have taken no notice of them? Indeed, the permanent secretary was unaware of them. The point made sotto voce by my hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne) at the beginning stands: it is not enough for the Government to accept the recommendations of the Committee; they must follow through afterwards.

Mr. Leigh: That is an extremely important point. Sometimes we have a tendency to congratulate ourselves on the fact that 90 per cent. of our recommendations are accepted. It would be surprising if they were not, as we do not get involved in policy. We make sensible suggestions for improved implementation of policy. However, there is no point in the Government accepting 90 per cent. of our recommendations if there is no follow-through mechanism, particularly undertaken by the NAO to keep track of those recommendations. One thing that the Committee could do, which we have not

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actively pursued in the past, is to keep an eye on Treasury minutes and come back to them in questions to Ministers over the ensuing months and years. It is important that that aspect of our work is done effectively.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for generously giving way again. Although I do not in any way argue with claims made for the probity of British Government in general, or for the integrity of the bulk of our civil service in particular, does my hon. Friend recall that, in a series of parliamentary answers in the previous Session, many Members were shocked to discover the scale of theft and fraud from Government Departments, including Government buildings? Is he not as concerned as I am about the scale of the heists that have taken place from the Lord Chancellor's Department?

Mr. Leigh: Yes, obviously we are concerned about that. I shall deal briefly with the Royal Mint, where there was a particularly serious example, to illustrate the point. The trouble is that we can only take examples. We are speaking about raising and spending £650 billion, so it is a vast field to cover.

Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Returning to the case of the farmer, Mr. Bowden, it was suggested that that represented the tip of an iceberg and that there was a systemic problem of fraud. Can the hon. Gentleman confirm that, after our report, the Department looked thoroughly into such activity and found, perhaps as much by good fortune as by judgment, that that was an isolated case, and that the public need not fear that people like Mr. Bowden with lots of fields in the North sea and elsewhere are claiming subsidy?

Mr. Leigh: We must put the matter into perspective. The fact is that farmers are claiming large amounts from the CAP. As I said, the Ministry has now introduced controls, so it is to be hoped that the attempted scam will not be repeated.

Benefit fraud is far more serious. When we examined the level of fraud and error in income support and jobseeker's allowance, we found that welcome progress was being made towards targets to reduce fraud levels. There is still too little information about the scale of fraud across benefits, which is remarkable. Estimates so far suggest that some £2 billion could be lost in fraud and a further £1 billion in customer and official error each year by the Department for Work and Pensions. As some of the Department's fraud estimates were out of date, however, it was impossible to tell what progress was being made across the board.

Large-scale benefit fraud has been around for a long time and will not be solved overnight. The Department's antiquated IT systems are, to some degree, dogging its attempts to improve performance, but it could do more. The Comptroller and Auditor General has qualified his opinion on the Department's accounts for reasons of fraud and error for the past 13 years. In other words, the Comptroller and Auditor General qualifies the Department's accounts every year. A loss of £3 billion each year to fraud and error may not immediately amaze the general public, as like me and others, they are phased by arguments about billions, but when we think that that amount would buy us almost 45 new hospitals each year or, more frivolously, allow us to stage an annual Olympic games, the enormities of the Department's losses come home to us—and this is just one Department of State.

Mr. Bacon: Does my hon. Friend agree that the most extraordinary aspect of the issue was that the then permanent secretary admitted to the Committee that she did not even have a target date for publishing a set of accounts that was not qualified because of fraud?

Mr. Leigh: The matter will be dealt with later this week and I cannot reveal to the House what the result will be, although it may well guess that the problem will be ongoing because of the Department's apparent inability to deal with it. We appreciate the problems that it faces. It is in control of a budget of massive complexity and difficulty, but it must surely concern the House of Commons that the independent auditor has, in layman's language, been unable to approve the accounts of a great Department of State for 12 consecutive years. That must be of great concern to the Treasury, just as it is to the Committee and the House as a whole.

We think that better targets are now in place as a result of our work. We hope that the auditor can work closely with the Department to ensure progress, so that we can reduce the amount that is lost on fraud and error. Unfortunately, the fraud cases that I have outlined were not the only ones to come before the Committee.

Mr. Brian Jenkins (Tamworth): Will the hon. Gentleman clarify the situation? I am sure that, like me, he believes that there is no endemic corruption in the British civil service. We are discussing fraud and corruption not among staff, but among members of the public. We are challenging not corruption in the civil service, but competence.

Mr. Leigh: The hon. Gentleman makes his point very well and I agree entirely. I am firmly of the opinion that the problem is not one of fraud or corruption on the part of civil servants, although there will be isolated incidents. Given the complexity of the system, the problem is fraud on the part of those claiming the benefits. Of course, only a small minority is involved, but it is large enough to waste £2 billion a year.

As I mentioned, the other startling case involved the Royal Mint, which one would have thought was a bastion of tight security. Sadly, we found it to be the mint with the hole. Remarkably, for eight months, a safe containing £25,000 in banknotes was left open and unattended during the working day. Unremarkably, somebody—or some people—took advantage of that slapdash security and put their hands in.

My third and final theme is linked to measures to combat fraud, and it concerns improvements in the quality of public administration, in respect of which the Committee makes a significant contribution. We do so on behalf of the taxpayer. I believe that good governance is an essential ingredient of a stable society. Our work provides the public with confidence about the way in which their money is spent. That is why we find it unacceptable when standards are not maintained and insist that lessons are learned.

I have mentioned aspects of our work relating to NHS waiting lists, and I want to deal with the appalling lapse to which the hon. Member for Newbury referred. Fortunately—we must put the matter into context—a very small number of NHS trusts were involved. The Committee found examples of 10 hospitals where managers and staff had fiddled their waiting lists to hide the fact that they were missing Government targets. That was a profoundly irresponsible thing to do and had very serious consequences for patients. In some cases, those actions will have prolonged the suffering of patients and their condition may have worsened.

The arrangements for identifying those involved and taking disciplinary action fell well short of good practice. In some cases, the inquiries were not rigorous or complete and some of those who were allegedly responsible were allowed or encouraged to resign during the process. Some trusts breached NHS guidelines that ruled out confidentiality deals as part of severance packages. The right hon. Member for Swansea, West has repeatedly pointed out that the Committee does not want to see confidentiality deals. We want transparency. The severance packages cost some £260,000 and some did not include clawback arrangements in respect of working elsewhere in the NHS. As some people had confidentiality schemes, they went to work elsewhere in the NHS and got their money.

The Department of Health has promised to address all those issues. NHS trusts took steps to develop action plans for the 6,000 or so patients who suffered as a result of the adjustments. That includes sending patients to other trusts and to the private sector for treatment. However, the Department could not tell the extent to which patients' health suffered as a result of delays in treatment or whether compensation will have to be paid.

Manipulating public information such as waiting list statistics can have an appalling effect on public trust. The Chancellor has made it clear that the NHS is an absolute priority for him and is compassion in action, as he puts it. I repeat that the manipulation of public information affects the public trust in what is going on. The Department must ensure that pressure to meet targets does not lead the NHS to engage in any more statistical sleights of hand or distortions of clinical priorities.

Geraint Davies: The hon. Gentleman will remember that the manipulation of data was carried out by a small number of people in a small number of trusts. Those people have since left or been thrown out, but is he aware that there is evidence to show that some of them are emerging on the other side in PFI deals? Will he give an undertaking that our Committee will consider that issue so as to chase through the small minority who have been corrupting public statistics and ensure that they do not play any future role in public service?

Mr. Leigh: That is a very important point. We want to consider each PFI deal individually rather than become involved in policy arguments. One is always worried about the problem to which the hon. Gentleman refers and the possibility of gamekeepers who have worked in the public sector turning poachers in the private sector. There is now a far more of a relationship between the private and public sectors, and we and the Treasury must constantly keep that in mind. The issue may not be corruption in the accepted meaning of the word, in which people are taking backhanders, but corruption that involves people using knowledge acquired in the public sector for their own private good when they go into the private sector. I give him my undertaking that the Committee will consider that issue.

Criminal justice is another interesting area. Financial penalties are the most common punishment imposed on offenders by Crown and magistrates courts—a subject in which I am interested, as I used to be a practising barrister. Such penalties account for 70 per cent. of all sentences. In 2001–02, the financial penalties imposed totalled £387 million, but the collections amounted to only £228 million, and some of them related to fines imposed in previous years. The crucial point is that, in practice, slightly more than half of financial penalties are collected. It seems to be up to criminals to decide whether they pay fines, certainly in some parts of the country. The effectiveness of the criminal justice system is being undermined and both victims of crime and the taxpayer are being sold short.

Our 57th report from the last Session should be read by every public servant, and certainly by every accounting officer. It concerned the operation and wind-up of the Teesside development corporation. We found that weak financial management and oversight of the corporation may have cost the taxpayer some £13 million in additional costs, leaving a deficit of £23 million that could rise to £40 million. To put it in context, one has to say that the corporation achieved much of lasting benefit to the Teesside area. It helped to attract private investment of more than £1 billion, created 12,000 new jobs and brought 1,300 acres of derelict land back into use. However, we believe that this could have been done with greater regard to the principles of the proper conduct of public business. It is not sufficient to deliver a good in Teesside or anywhere else, while still breaking all the rules of public corporate finance, or enough of them to cause concern.

Explanations for some of the more unconventional transactions entered into by the corporation were—how shall I put it?—unconvincing. There was evidence of poor risk taking and acting without appropriate authorisation. The Department failed to act when it should have to bring the corporation's regeneration activities into line, despite warning signals from a number of sources, including colleagues in this House.

Mr. George Osborne: The hearing on the Teesside development corporation revealed a weakness in our hearings. Often, we get the accounting officer who is currently in post, rather than those who were in post when the problems arose. As I remember it, the accounting officers involved in that particular case were the then permanent secretary at the Treasury and the Cabinet Secretary, neither of whom we were able to call before our Committee.

Mr. Leigh: That is a weakness. Our Committee has the right—as do all Select Committees—to call any official, and naturally, we normally call the current accounting officer. The principle is: the king is dead, long live the king. The fact that the officer was not in post at the time does not mean that he cannot answer questions. Having said that, Whitehall should take note that our Committee has passed a new resolution that

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makes it absolutely clear that in a case where we believe that we will not get to the bottom of things simply by interrogating the current accounting officer, we will be prepared to summon the former one—in this case, the permanent secretary—even though that person may have moved to another Department or retired. I know that that is controversial in Whitehall: the mandarins do not like it, and I can understand why. However, I am sure that they will appreciate that, if we are to do our work, we cannot simply be presented with someone who has mugged up an argument for that afternoon. There may be long periods when that person was not in control, and we would be unable to question the accounting officer of that time.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth): Some members of the Committee have been irritated by the principle of collective, almost anonymous responsibility that the civil service seems to apply whenever something goes wrong. As with the private sector, our Committee should emphasise the principle of individual responsibility.

Mr. Leigh: We have to accept that in the modern way of doing business, whether in the public sector or the private sector, people must accept a certain amount of responsibility for their actions, and we shall indeed demand that that happens.

Geraint Davies: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned Imperial Tobacco, which set a great precedent for the Committee in the summoning of witnesses from the private sector to bring them to account for the loss of public funds. In that case, the smuggling of cigarettes was involved. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the Committee will be prepared to summon private sector witnesses when the public purse is being threatened?

Mr. Leigh: Yes, of course. In that case, we were looking at Imperial Tobacco's exporting billions of cigarettes to Kaliningrad, Moldova and Andorra, where they could not possibly all be smoked. For that to be possible, every inhabitant of Kaliningrad would need to have smoked several hundred cigarettes a day. So they can only have been exported to Kaliningrad in order to be re-imported here as smuggled cigarettes, which clearly affected the public revenues available to Customs and Excise. Interestingly, it was the chairman of Customs and Excise who fingered Imperial Tobacco. In fact, he attended our Committee, although we did not know about this issue. He wanted to use the Public Accounts Committee as a lever to put pressure on Imperial Tobacco, and we have indeed caused it considerable embarrassment, which is a fair and proper thing to do.

The key part of improving the quality of public administration is the need to ensure that the lessons learned are spread widely, and that the savings and improvements identified in one area of government are quickly transferred elsewhere. Here, I shall deal briefly with the private finance initiative, about which there is much debate. We believe that each initiative must be judged and assessed on its own terms. However, in 1999, after we examined and reported on some early PFI deals, we issued a report on the experience so far, to help the public sector to get the best possible deal for the taxpayer. We are currently drafting a follow-up report, which will draw on the 15 reports we have published so far. It will tackle recurring themes in our work, such as the quality of contract management skills available in the public sector, and the extent to which risk is really transferred to the private sector. My personal, strongly held belief is that if things go well, the private sector must be allowed to make a good profit, but if they go badly wrong, it must be prepared to lose its shirt.

One area in which our work has already made a difference is in the refinancing of projects. Our work on the refinancing of the Fazakerly prison deal caused the Office of Government Commerce to insist that the taxpayer get a share of refinancing gains. This amounts to a mandatory 50:50 sharing of refinancing gains from new projects, and a 30 per cent. share of refinancing gains on early deals.

So the Committee will look very closely at how robust these new arrangements are. The private sector shoulders the risk of a PFI project, and we do not deny that it is entitled to benefit from refinancing gains, but taxpayers must be able to feel confident that they are also getting the money to which they are entitled. The Government's willingness to accept our views on this again demonstrates the tangible contribution that the Committee can make to the work of the Government.

In summarising the Committee's work, I hope that I have been able to show that we add value in all that we do. We have a distinct role in the House, and we constantly touch on key issues.

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North and Sefton, East): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, of all the Departments we have interviewed—certainly since I have been a member of the Committee—the one in greatest need of better management is the Lord Chancellor's Department?

Mr. Leigh: That is a Department that could perhaps do a little better. *[Interruption.]* We must not get involved in personalities. In fact, a National Audit Office report published today shows that the Libra project is probably one of the shoddiest PFI deals ever. It has run completely out of control, costs have risen from £135 million to £400 million, and the basic computer system for magistrates courts is still two years away. I acknowledge the point that the hon. Gentleman makes.

We have a distinct role within the House. We focus on implementation rather than policy, and we are able to stay above party politics. I am always impressed by the way in which my colleagues on the Committee respect that discipline. That is essential if we are to continue to be effective, but we would not be effective without the considerable help of the National Audit Office. In turn, the NAO's effectiveness depends on access rights. I should tell the Financial Secretary that I look forward to the imminent implementation of recommendations stemming from the Sharman report. Nearly two years ago, Lord Sharman recommended, and the Government accepted, that the Comptroller and Auditor General should audit all Executive non-departmental public bodies, and that his access rights should be on a statutory basis. Once in place, that provision will represent a significant step forward for Parliament. I very much welcome the Government's response to this, and when the Financial Secretary sums up the debate, she will doubtless be able to tell the House what action she intends to take—hopefully, very shortly.

Before I finish, there are some small gaps to which I must refer. I remain concerned that the BBC is outside the remit of the CAG. I await with interest the Government's response to our recent recommendation that Parliament's ability to scrutinise the BBC would be considerably enhanced were the CAG able to examine its financial management. For just over £2 billion-worth of compulsory licence fees—in essence, a poll tax—to be outside our scrutiny is simply not sustainable, and I urge the Government to act. I am sure that, sooner or later, we will win this battle on behalf of Parliament.

I have a similar concern—here, I may not carry with me everyone on the two Front Benches—about the civil list. I must say, as a monarchist, that the royal family's position is strengthened by greater transparency about their spending. For example, we were able to demonstrate that the cost of royal travel has substantially reduced over time. I therefore repeat, on behalf of the Committee, our long-standing request for the CAG, on behalf of Parliament, to be given access to the civil list.

Mr. Rendel: Is there not a third instance where the CAG could do with further access? When we were talking about tax credits recently, it came to light that the CAG needs to have direct access to the accounts of those private sector firms that are handing out tax credits to ensure that they are doing it properly.

Mr. Leigh: The CAG has asked for access to employers' records, but that is being resisted by the Inland Revenue. I do not know why. The Inland Revenue claims that that would add to the tax burden, but the CAG's staff are skilled in doing their work to ensure that they would not increase burdens on business. In effect, the private sector is a tax collector, so why should there not be such an audit?

Mr. Bacon: Is there not a fourth example? The Financial Services Authority could do with some oversight, judging by its recent performance on split capital investment trusts, when it denied knowing anything about what was going on and later had to admit that it had been informed about what was going on in Guernsey.

Mr. Leigh: That is a bridge too far for the time being, but my hon. Friend makes his point, and we may return to that—perhaps he can do so, when he is Chairman of the PAC in a few years' time.

I am part of a long tradition, established by Gladstone, of Opposition Members chairing the most powerful Select Committee of the House. We are able to consider matters of the utmost political sensitivity, but because we focus on delivery, rather than policy, we sustain the cross-party consensus that is fundamental to our success. Our work reaches into every corner of government and covers every pound of the £650 billion that the Government collect and spend each year. Some may argue that our work skims the surface, but our presence alone focuses minds. Our recommendations—by and large, the Government accept them—make a real difference. In my view, government is only as good as the independent parliamentary scrutiny that it receives. I believe that we play our part in that process, and I commend the motion to the House.

2.27 pm

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West): I congratulate the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), on the way in which he has taken up his new role. His speech today echoed the enthusiasm that he shows in Committee, and these 70 reports show the effectiveness with which he and the Committee work. The humour that he has brought to the Committee has been very helpful on occasions, and he has demonstrated that again today.

I was pleased to hear the hon. Gentleman say that he would abstain from any political partisanship. Of course the PAC Chairman is always an Opposition Member, and one of the delights of being its Chairman, which is one of the best appointments in Parliament, is that within about two years of a change in government, one is in the happy position of always questioning the other side. We had a long, long spell of questioning the other side.

I joined the Committee just over 12 years ago, and what impressed me then—it still impresses me now—is that, although the Committee reflects what the Chairman has said, it has an ethos of its own and its job is to get at the facts and to produce reports based on the facts, regardless of which party is behind the Administration at the time.

I wish to join the hon. Gentleman in extending our thanks to the National Audit Office and, indeed, its equivalent in Northern Ireland. That is more than ritualistic; it is important that the House of Commons understand the NAO's importance. With national income and expenditure of more than £700 billion, even with 70 reports a year, we would still not get very far, as a bunch of 15 Members of Parliament, unless we had the quality and depth of research contained in the reports that we receive from the NAO. That tribute is not meaningless; it is important because, without the NAO, financial accountability would not exist in the House.

I should also like to thank the NAO in relation to my role on the Liaison Committee. The NAO is now extending the help that it gives to the other Select Committees by seconding people, where appropriate, to help them with studies. Indeed, as the House has asked the other Select Committees to carry out a more detailed examination of estimates, the NAO is preparing to support them in that work.

It is also important to realise that a review is being undertaken into the back-up for the Select Committees. What depressed me when I became Chairman of the Liaison Committee was the inadequacy—not the low quality—of the support given to the Select Committees. A review is now in hand to examine the support that the Committees need, and the NAO is playing a leading role in it. That should reassure hon. Members, because the NAO will be absolutely objective. When I gave evidence

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to the Modernisation Committee, I recommended that the NAO should be used in that way because I knew that we would get an objective assessment of what is needed.

As the Chairman of the PAC has intimated, we have tried several innovations this year. Once or twice in the past, we have called X permanent secretaries and X accounting officers, but that never became a habit. However, two recent episodes justify our decision to determine who will come before us—not just the current accounting officer, but the previous one or whoever was in office at the time.

One of those instances relates to rail privatisation and goes back a couple of years. We recalled a witness whom we expected to give a very rough time, and we were provided with a good insight, even compared with the NAO report. The man who had sat there dealing with the practical managerial problems of trying to implement the policy, regardless of its rights and wrongs, was able to give us an insight into why some of the decisions had been taken. The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) will remember that occasion.

Although we did not agree with those decisions, we had a better understanding of the motivation and, indeed, the attempts by some of the individuals concerned to do their best. That led to a less abrasive report than we might otherwise have produced, whereas relatively recently—I shall not name the occasion—we had an example where the reverse happened. Very recently, someone who had been made a permanent secretary had to answer on behalf of a predecessor who had been in place for the previous four years. In the end, that person had to say, "I was not there. I don't know." That is our point, and the head of the civil service should understand that, although we know that he is not happy about our decision.

It is an enormous advantage to us if we can have first-hand experience, rather than always having before us a witness who has read the same report as we have read and then been briefed on what the questions might be by civil servants who were previously in that post. There is no substitute for questioning the person who was in post at the time, especially with very important examinations. I know that the head of the civil service and his permanent secretary colleagues are not happy, but they must recognise that accountability to the House comes above their sensitivities and sensibilities.

Our second innovation is in relation to visits—I am not talking about visits to Australia, New Zealand or the United States. We made visits to the Treasury building and the Heart hospital, and a memorable visit to Kensington palace. Because of the sensitivities of one Member who is present today, I shall not go into that in depth, but we can look back on that experience with more than fondness, as the taxpayer had previously been receiving reimbursements of only £69 a week for seven bedrooms and seven living rooms, whereas, in a year and a half, he will be receiving £120,000 a year for that same property. That is a small example, but it demonstrates the advantage of looking at things oneself.

That case—the hon. Gentleman and I may view it from different angles—demonstrated what I found when I first started asking questions. The palace said in its recent statement that the apartment had five bedrooms and five living rooms. In a parliamentary answer, the Department said that that same property had seven bedrooms and seven living rooms. I suspect that the truth is that the other two bedrooms and living rooms were for staff and therefore did not count in the palace's version. When I first started asking about grace and favour accommodation, I pursued a series of questions for about 12 months. As a result of the constant changing of the figures that the Department received from the palace, we discovered 100 grace-and-favour apartments that the Department did not even know existed. There is a value in scrutiny, which we may pursue with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

I want to raise the issue of no-go areas. We have produced about 70 reports, but we have been impeded in some ways by the existence of no-go areas, some of which the Chairman has referred to. The BBC is one of the most outrageous examples. I shall discuss that at some length. The National Audit Office is not allowed to audit the BBC, even though it receives £2.5 billion of statutorily raised money in the form of the fee, which, in Sharman's terms, constitutes public money. It should be monitored by the NAO.

As it happened, Mr. Dyke and the permanent secretary appeared before us to answer questions in relation to collecting the television licence fee. In our discussions, he repeated the old standby argument that if the BBC allowed the NAO and the PAC to investigate and audit its resources, its editorial freedom would be undermined. As we cannot consider policy, I do not see how that could arise. In any case, the BBC appears before the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which can consider policy, to discuss its work, but it cannot appear before us to discuss money. One is left with a clear impression that they are more worried about money than about editorial freedom, because, of course, we audit the BBC World Service, and have done so for many years. In the more than 12 years that I have been on the Committee, I have never been aware of any complaint from the BBC that our monitoring of the overseas service had in any way impinged on its editorial freedom. I thought that we should confirm that, however, so I asked the permanent secretary if she would check with her Department whether there had been any complaints about the role of the NAO and the PAC in relation to the World Service in the previous six years. A footnote to our report states:

> "Note by witness: Neither DCMS nor the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has any record of complaints, in the last six years, about National Audit Office access to the BBC World Service."

Thus the argument does not stand up.

It got worse, however. Mr. Dyke displayed a sheer arrogance, verging on contempt for the Committee, which was revealed in his answers to questions. I pursued the issue with him and, in answer to question 223, he said:

> "There were quite strong arguments against when we were established in 1982 and those positions have not changed."

I followed up by asking,

> "You know what they are, do you, the strong arguments that were against in 1982".

Mr. Dyke responded:

> "I have looked at what the arguments were because I guessed the question might come up."

I responded:

> "In that case, you should be well prepared."

Mr. Dyke replied:

> "Being prepared and deciding to enter the debate are two different things."

Therefore, according to Mr. Dyke, he had taken the trouble to prepare to answer a question that he was not prepared to answer when he came to the Committee.

I ask my colleagues to cast back their memories: I recollect that from that stage I became somewhat impatient with Mr. Dyke; I called in the Comptroller and Auditor General, and I mentioned the matter of contempt of Parliament. Strangely, there is no mention of that in the minutes. I had the Clerk check the transcripts this morning. I draw that to your attention, too, Madam Deputy Speaker, as responsibility for *Hansard* rests also with you. In some mysterious way, part of the hearing—it may have been ill-tempered, and I may have been fractious and wrong, in which case I do not deserve to be protected from my wrong-headedness—has not been recorded as it should have been. If my hon. Friends recollect the occasion—

Jon Trickett *indicated assent.*

Mr. Gerry Steinberg (City of Durham) *indicated assent.*

Mr. Williams: I seems that they do, as does the Clerk. I therefore ask you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to find out what went on.

The fact is that the Sharman Committee, the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport and numerous Members on both sides of the House—

Geraint Davies: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Williams: Let me finish this point, and then I will do so gladly.

All those people—and Mr. Gavyn Davies when he was carrying out a review of BBC finances prior to becoming chairman of the BBC—favoured National Audit Office monitoring. The only one of us who has changed his mind is Mr. Davies, since he changed his job. It is for him to explain why. Upto now, other than stating that we would prejudice or damage editorial freedom, no one at the BBC has given the PAC any evidence or convincing argument to demonstrate that. As I said earlier, one is bound to conclude that what they are worried about is not editorial freedom but impartial external audit and accountability to the House of Commons.

The second no-go area is the Financial Services Authority, where we are talking about £170 million of public money, in Sharman's definition, raised statutorily in the form of levies and fees, in an area of extreme importance to the public At a time when pension funds are collapsing and there are scandals about the advice that people have received on investments and savings, the FSA monitors banks, building societies, insurance companies, investment advisers and fund managers, yet as far as I can determine, it is the only regulatory body of the many that come before us that the Committee cannot investigate. Why? Even powers that were formerly exercised by the Treasury and were thus subject to examination have ceased to be subject to examination because they have been transferred to the FSA. We want to know what is to be done about that.

The Treasury will arrange for value-for-money investigations, but in the case of all other regulators, the NAO determines whether there should be such an investigation and carries it out. The NAO should be given the same powers in relation to the FSA.

I again echo a point made by the Committee Chairman, the hon. Member for Gainsborough. The Committee, Sharman and the NAO have all had a go at the third no-go area. We can look into royal travel, which involves a lot of money, and the cost of the palaces, which takes far more money, but the one thing that we cannot look at is the civil list—all because of a Select Committee recommendation made in 1972.

The PAC found that the real-terms costs of the palaces had fallen to about a third of what they were before—after I had produced a mass of information from a series of parliamentary answers—I persuaded the NAO to carry out an investigation and the PAC to hold a hearing. That was beneficial. The palace told us, "What good boys and girls we are, we're saving all this money."

Seventy per cent. of the civil list goes to pay the salaries of people who support the monarch. There is no problem with that; the monarch must have support. We do not vote against the money, but we want to find out whether it is being used effectively, as we do with other grants of public money.

The Committee was frustrated because for many years it had tried to get access to quangos—a point that was also made by the Committee Chairman. We had access to most but not all of them; we could not look at Government companies. We asked successive Chancellors, but the Treasury seemed to close around them and we lost, so during the last Parliament I made some proposals. The hon. Member for Newbury may remember the occasion. The Government Resources and Accounts Act 2000 was being considered by Parliament, so I suggested that the Committee carry out some political terrorist activity and send a volunteer team to the Standing Committee. The then Chairman of the PAC, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis), the hon. Member for Newbury and I attended the Committee to fight the case for the PAC.

We made such confounded nuisances of ourselves—not by being awkward but by winning the arguments—that, in the end, the Treasury set up the Sharman committee to look into accountability to Parliament in relation to public money. The Government had no problem in giving notional acceptance to Sharman's recommendations, apart from those on the BBC and the civil list. I am delighted about that.

For well over a decade, the Committee had hammered its head against the wall of supplication; the moment that we got awkward, we got somewhere. Accountability to Parliament can be made to work if we want to make it work—if we discover where

[Mr. Williams]

Departments are vulnerable. I am genuinely pleased—as was the whole Committee—that Sharman was almost entirely adopted.

I shall conclude by asking my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary three questions. The first relates to NAO access to bodies receiving public money either from Departments or from non-departmental public bodies, including contractors, subcontractors and so on. I understand that a statutory instrument will be enacted in March. Will my hon. Friend confirm whether it is still on schedule and will be in force by the end of the current financial year?

My second question is about NDPBs that are companies. At the request of the NAO, the PAC took on a case that the NAO strongly believes in and is arguing for in Brussels. It related to how our rights are influenced by European directives. Are the Government giving the NAO full support in those representations and, if so, what form does their support take?

My final question is politically sensitive at present, for obvious reasons. Sharman recommended that the NAO undertake validation of the data systems underlying the public service agreements. Ministers were understandably a bit nervous about that. My understanding is that the NAO is undertaking four trial runs, as it did with resource accounting. It is trying, with four Departments, to devise a system that works effectively. It is hoped that the first reports to the House and to the PAC will go live in 2004. Can my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary tell me whether that is still on target?

I became a Member of the House in 1964. I joined the PAC in 1965 and enjoyed the experience. I then spent 18 years on the Front Bench before returning to my proper position. The first place I headed for was the PAC. I still think that my colleagues and I do some of the most valuable work in the House of Commons. I still find that work rewarding and absorbing, and I hope that all my hon. Friends do, too.

2.54 pm

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), who is, as all its members know, one of the Public Accounts Committee's most effective members. It is always a pleasure to see him come in, often at the end of our hearings, to address the witnesses with that delightful smile on his face. It is so disarming as far as the witnesses are concerned, but we all know that it is the smile on the face of the tiger. His bite is always worse than one expects, and it is certainly effective.

I pay tribute to our Chairman, who has proved to be very effective and has done a great job since the last election. I am delighted that we are working closely across all three parties with him.

The Committee has been expanded so that, for the first time, a colleague from the Liberal Democrat party has been appointed to it. Sadly, however, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones) has been unable to with us much as he became rather ill shortly after his appointment. I am sure that we would all want to wish him a swift return to the Committee when his health recovers.

I pay tribute to Nick Wright, our new Clerk, who has had just over a year in office and has proved to be as effective as his predecessor, Ken Brown. It is a delight to work with him and his staff, and they always give us a very good service, as of course do the staff of the National Audit Office, who are invariably patient with all our demands, however insensitive they may be.

The right hon. Member for Swansea, West was absolutely right to say that this is one of the most powerful, if not the most powerful, and effective Committees of the House. It is a delight to serve on it. I am surprised that some of my fellow Opposition Members and some Government Back Benchers have not yet recognised its effectiveness. It is fun to serve on it and to feel that, once in a while, even as an Opposition Member, one can have real influence over the workings of, if not Parliament, the country as a whole and the way in which civil servants work to make Departments more effective.

I should like to speak about a few of the Committee's reports in order to bring some matters to the attention of the House. One report was on obesity. It was the first time that a collection of senior civil servants from a wide variety of Departments—permanent secretaries, accounting officers and others—had appeared before us. If I remember rightly, there were five witnesses, all of whom held senior office. It was fascinating to see some cross-departmental working—so-called joined-up government—and to have a chance to do some joined-up work in the Committee by asking questions of permanent secretaries and others. It also gave me the chance to get on to one of my hobby-horses—cycling—and to mention that cycling and walking reduce the problems of obesity, which are—dare I say it?—growing.

A report on the Victoria and Albert Museum made it clear that the imposition of charges had been a major reason for the drop in visitor numbers. I am delighted that charges have now been removed, as a result of which the figures have risen very quickly. I like to think that that fact, combined with our report on what went wrong after charging was introduced, means that charging to enter our museums will never be reintroduced.

Another report was on oil pollution at sea. That gave me a chance to use, as members of the Committee often do, some of my experience as someone who worked for a while in the oil industry and therefore knew a little about it. I asked the witnesses whether oil transported by pipeline or oil transported by ship was most likely to lead to pollution. It became apparent that oil companies, which decide whether to construct a pipeline to a new oilfield purely on cost grounds, had done no real research into whether the cheaper solution in terms of their costs of moving oil to and from an oilfield was also cheaper in terms of the long-term costs of pollution. The witnesses agreed that research into which of the two was more likely to lead to pollution would be a good thing. I hope that the Government will try to ensure that it is conducted.

We had an interesting hearing on the Post Office. Some of us with rural constituencies made the important point that rural areas are suffering from a drop in the number of post offices. Small post offices are often the heart and soul of small rural villages; often, when such a post office closes the village dies. The maintenance of those post offices is therefore very important to us. It became clear that the threat to rural post offices and to the Post Office in general is likely to grow as competition is introduced. I like to think that it is partly as a result of that hearing that the extent to which and speed at which competition was introduced was somewhat reduced.

It became clear that what has really gone wrong with the Post Office is that it has made very large profits over a long period, all of which have been siphoned into the general Government coffers and not reinvested in technology and services. If the Post Office had made such investments, it might still be making some of those profits and would not be in its current state.

We had an interesting investigation into income tax and the Inland Revenue. The Chairman of the Committee said that people should be encouraged, as much as possible, to submit their income tax returns online. However, he did not mention the ironic fact that Members of Parliament are among the few employees, wage earners or whatever who are unable so to submit their income tax returns online because the special parliamentary form that we must use is not yet available online. If the Treasury wants to set a good example, perhaps it could ensure that something is done to correct that.

I was able to make a bit of fun of the Inland Revenue on that occasion by pointing out that it sends out bills for £0.00 to those who have been fined for sending in their forms late when they do not in fact owe any tax. In subsequent parliamentary questions, the Treasury replied that it was important to send out those bills to warn people that they were late sending in their forms, even if no payment was implied. That merely brings the Inland Revenue into disrepute. I hope that the Treasury will think again about whether that is really the best way to approach Inland Revenue taxpayers.

We also had a hearing on clinical negligence in the health service. One of the issues that was discussed was whether we should move towards a no fault, no blame compensation system, on which I have been keen for a long time. I should explain, as I often have to in our hearings, that I have a direct interest in the health service in that my wife is a general practitioner. There is no question about the amount of concern and distress in the health service as a result of people worrying about being taken to court for decisions made, often in very good faith, but nevertheless in error. Medicine is not a science but an art, and it is often difficult to make the right decision. The fact that people do not always make the right decision should not necessarily lead to their being taken at great length, often over many years, through the courts, with all the stress that that adds to them in doing their jobs. I am sure that that is one of the reasons for people wishing to take early retirement, which is leading to some of the health service's staffing problems. A great deal of stress arises from the difficulties that people get into when they are taken through the courts. We also discovered that the amount of money that is spent on lawyers in many negligence claims is more than the victim of the negligence ever receives. The whole system is a way of putting a lot of money into the pockets of lawyers rather than into those of victims, which is not a good way of spending public money.

The private finance initiative was a much-discussed subject, often as a result of individual cases that came before us. Several issues have been common to many of our hearings. First, competition is likely to reduce gradually for PFI schemes, not least because of debt refinancing, which the Chairman mentioned. As we get better at demanding back for the public sector some of the savings that are achieved through debt refinancing, PFI schemes will become less attractive for the private sector. There is a danger, which one or two cases have shown, of few companies competing for PFI contracts. When we reach the stage at which the level of competition is so low, the value of PFI is likely to reduce and it will become more difficult to judge whether such a contract is good value for money when compared with the public sector.

On several occasions, some of us have been worried about the way in which the public sector comparator was calculated. We sometimes wondered whether the figures were fudged to show that the private sector contractor offered better value when, had the figures been calculated differently, the result would not have been so clearly in favour of the private sector.

Many of us have been worried about risk transfer. Often, the risk has not been properly transferred in the expected way. Consequently, the value of the PFI contract has been much less than it was believed to be. The public sector has frequently had to bail out a private sector contractor. In practice, the risk has remained with the public sector, which is no great surprise. The major public services that our Government run simply cannot be allowed to go to the wall. One cannot put out a major health service operation to the private sector so that there is nowhere to treat patients if it goes bankrupt. The public sector must keep the facility going. Genuine risk transfer is difficult in major, important public services.

A further point recently came to light. It has not formed part of our hearings so far but I hope that it may do so in future. There is a growing worry that many major contractors who win PFI contracts transfer large parts of the debt to special purpose vehicles, which are subsidiaries of the main contractor. They may be hiding the extent to which they are getting into debt and putting their operations at risk. We may have to take that up in the Committee. It is not direct fraud, but it hides from the public sector the danger that some of our PFI contracts could pose.

The point is worryingly mirrored by the Government's tendency to treat some of their liabilities as off balance book by trying to ensure that genuine Government liabilities in some privatised contracts are hidden off balance sheet and do not count towards the public sector borrowing requirement. Further questions will have to be asked about where the debt lies, especially in relation to, for example, privatisation of the National Air Traffic Services or the tube.

We had some fun with our investigation of pipes and wires. Controlling the number of holes that are dug in our roads is a subject of enormous public interest. Everybody experiences the congestion that roadworks cause. There is a case for telling regulators that they should insist on private utilities ensuring that they use the same hole in the road and do not dig up the road several times in quick succession. That maddens many members of the public.

I want to consider three reports that have particular topical significance. Prisoners and prisoners who reoffend have featured in the press recently. It became

[Mr. David Rendel]

clear when we talked to the head of the Prison Service that, if we want to reduce crime, the worst thing that we can do is imprison people for a short time. One of the most likely methods of causing reoffending is to give sentences that are too short to provide the education that prisoners need and could mean that they lead a life free of crime.

The point is difficult to get across to the public, who tend to believe that the best thing to do with prisoners is to lock 'em away for as long as possible and throw away the key. If we want to ensure that a prisoner does not reoffend, and if we are interested not in retribution but in securing the minimum number of victims in future, it is important not to put people in prison for a short time, after which they are more likely to commit more crimes. That happens all too often.

There is a strong case for investing much more money in prison education. When Mr. Narey, director general of the Prison Service, came before us, he said that the return from investment "would be dramatic". He stated:

> "I do not believe I am doing much more than playing at the edges".

That makes a strong case for the "spend to save" budget—another subject that we considered recently. Spending a little more on educating our prisoners would give them a chance of leaving prison not for a life of more crime but a useful life in the community.

We could spend a little more on such education now. The report states:

> "The Prison Service said that the single action most likely to impact on reoffending was investment in education to enable prisoners to obtain jobs on release."

As I said earlier, that is a difficult view to present to the public. It is easy to follow the tabloid route of claiming that the best thing to do with those who have committed crimes is to shut them away for a long time. However, the worst thing that we can do is to put them away for a short time and leave them to learn more about how to commit crimes in future.

Combat identification is the second especially topical subject that I want to consider. It is topical because of the severe threat of war with Iraq. The war already has comparatively little public support. Many people believe that we should not even consider going to war in Iraq. If many of our troops are killed by friendly fire or many enemy civilians are killed by our fire, public support for a war is likely to reduce. That was apparent in recent conflicts. For example, in Kosovo, the deaths of innocent civilians constituted a major reason for some people's belief that it was not sensible for us to be there.

Mr. Alan Williams: The National Audit Office report made it clear that friendly fire is not a new occurrence and that it has been part of warfare for a long time. One can understand that, on the ground in close battle, friendly fire causes a high proportion of deaths; it is not a new experience. That does not mean that we do not want to stop it, but the hon. Gentleman might inadvertently have given the wrong impression that it was a recent phenomenon.

Mr. Rendel: I accept the right hon. Gentleman's point that it is by no means a new experience. However, the extent to which civilians are in danger in modern warfare is new. When armies met on a battlefield in Europe in the middle ages, that was different.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not continue with that point for long.

Mr. Rendel: I shall not wander into the middle ages any longer, but one of our reports made the specific point that we should consider whether our armed forces need to pay more attention to the possibility of identifying the difference between enemy forces and enemy civilians.

It struck me as rather odd that the witnesses who came before us on that occasion did not seem to recognise that it was an important point. They seemed to think that the only important point was to identify our forces from the enemy forces, and they had not taken into account the important psychological effects of modern warfare—not just on our armed forces, but also on our civilians back here in this country—and how important it is, if we are to fight a modern war, to have the support of the public behind our armed forces, which they could lose if we do not pay proper attention to this question.

I turn now to what is my own specialist subject, in so far as I have one in this House: higher education and widening participation in it. As the Chairman mentioned, that is another matter of important topical interest.

The NAO report confirmed that people from poorer backgrounds are already significantly less likely than others to participate in higher education. The previous Secretary of State and the current Minister for Higher Education have both confirmed over time on different occasions that the fear of debt is one of the main reasons why young people are being put off going to university.

A report from Universities UK, the joint vice-chancellors' body, is, I believe, to come out in a few weeks' time. Baroness Warwick, chief executive of Universities UK, announced some of its findings to a conference that I attended just the other day. She pointed out that about 84 per cent. of the group of young people that it surveyed who were thinking of going to university—they were either in further education colleges or sixth forms—said that they were concerned about the levels of debt, which were among the problems deterring them from possibly going to university. It also found that 15 per cent. of these young people had decided that they would not go to university, and that 50 or 60 per cent. of them had decided not to go because of the fear of debt.

The Government are rightly determined to get more of those young people who can benefit from university education to do so. They are rightly concerned to widen participation in that sense. As we all accept, widening participation means widening participation particularly among the less well-off sections of our population, those who perhaps do not come from families that traditionally have gone to university.

If we are to achieve that wider participation, it is absolutely clear that we must reduce the fear of debt. Indeed, it was the Prime Minister's recognition of that fact that led to his announcement in his famous conference speech immediately after the last election that he would set up the review of higher education financing, and of student financing in particular. The present situation is therefore somewhat ironic. The Prime Minister having decided upon that, because he knew the problems the matter had caused for Labour party candidates on the doorstep in the previous election, as a result of the perception of the debt and the fear of debt at the levels it was then, after the introduction of tuition fees, we now find that as a result of that review the fear of debt will be much greater. Indeed, the debts that students end up with will be much greater.

There is possibly a need for a further National Audit Office investigation of how we have reached this point. The Government knew that they had a major problem over widening participation among less well-to-do families. They set up a review to answer it and ended up with proposals that will make the problem far worse. If that is not some error in the way in which the Government work, I do not know when in the time that I have been on the PAC I have seen a worse case.

3.19 pm

Mr. Brian Jenkins (Tamworth): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel). Listening to his contribution, particularly what he said about prisoners, one can readily see why he has the reputation for being someone who does not naturally court popularity.

Following the Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), is always difficult. As a member of the Committee, one realises that he always takes the best shots first, and in his extensive, well-presented opening he covered a wide range. If I repeat some of his remarks, it is only because I feel they need repeating.

Being a member of the Public Accounts Committee is one of the most challenging and rewarding positions to hold in the House. The PAC is unique among Select Committees. No other Committee has the same work load or breadth of remit. No subject is left untouched. One of our great strengths is that we can question different Government Departments; we go across government and can therefore judge the degree of joined-up government.

The Committee's aims are unique compared with those of all the other Select Committees. We do not look at policies; we look at the management, at the effective delivery of the civil service. The intricacies of policy analysis are left to the other Select Committees. We interview permanent secretaries rather than Ministers. Our role is to put a unique spotlight on the operation of the civil service and its relationship with the Government.

We have enjoyed some fine verbal exchanges with the witnesses, at times producing from both sides turns of phrase of which Sir Humphrey would be proud.

The PAC's success rate in being listened to also makes it unique. Over 90 per cent. of its recommendations have been accepted by the Government. Is that because they are so easy and are not challenging enough? No. Working with the National Audit Office we have brought about savings of £1.5 billion over the past few years. My colleagues on the team are well supported and are probably the best briefed in the House, having over 700 members of staff in the NAO to draw upon, as well as the excellent professionalism of the Committee staff.

The PAC can highlight the culture of the civil service. It is worth drawing attention to the present culture. As the Chairman pointed out, the present permanent secretaries have a background in policy rather than management. Yet the Government have expectations of delivery that the civil service will work towards, and different types of individual may need to rise to the higher echelons. Good management makes all the difference to the success of a project. Without those skills being prioritised internally in the civil service and, equally important, in external dealings with private sector suppliers, a project can fail to be delivered on time and in its full scope.

Throughout the past year the PAC has risen in prominence, owing in no small part to its excellent chairmanship and support staff. I hope that that trend will continue. With the commitment of staff, Members and the NAO, I am sure that it will.

Our job as parliamentarians is to ensure that we ask the right questions—the questions that the public demand—and obtain publicity, highlighting both successes and failures in our administrative set-up.

A notable moment for me last year was our visit, an away-day, to Kensington palace to view the accommodation. Regardless of the merits of the present living arrangements, the team on the PAC should feel justifiably proud that it was they who gained access and saw the accounts for the first time and brought into the limelight a sector of public expenditure that should be accountable.

I should like to give the House a quick sample of what it is like for some of our witnesses to appear before us. It is not all bad. We had the Radio Communications Agency before us. On the auction of radio spectrum for the third generation of mobile telephones, we thought congratulations were in order. In fact, that auction was a great success and raised a great deal of money—much more than anyone originally anticipated. But when we put the operation under scrutiny we found that £6.1 million had been spent on advisers who were so out of touch with the market that they were looking for £1 billion in the sale. We raised £22 billion. Was the £6.1 million well spent? Many Departments spend a great deal of money on advisers. Is it always well spent? The £22 billion was, indeed, good news.

Another report that the Committee considered last year was "Giving Confidently: the Role of the Charity Commission in Regulating Charities", on the Charity Commission for England and Wales. As a citizenry, we have a right to believe that the charities that collect on our streets are run effectively and efficiently and are above board. We found that in 1999–2000, 38 per cent. of charities had failed to submit annual accounts on time or at all. We decided that the Charity Commission must improve on that. If it does not and the public believe that the money that they donate does not reach its final destination, their contributions will diminish.

The Chairman referred to Joseph Bowden. That is a classic case. Mr. Bowden was a farmer who claimed money off that well-known Department MAFF—I am

[Mr. Brian Jenkins]

not sure whether it stands for the Ministry of Agriculture and the Farmers' Friend—for farming flax. Not only did Mr. Bowden develop a new technique and get paid for planting two crops in the same field, he did even better by claiming for planting crops in the Irish sea. Of course he had some difficulty when he had to collect the flax and send the crop off, so he burnt down the barn.

One would have thought that the insurance company that inspected the barn and paid out would have been efficient, but Mr. Bowden burnt down the barn in January 1996 and, lo and behold, again in December 1996. The insurance company paid out £85,400. There was no problem with him pleading guilty to that deception. But if the MAFF investigation was inconsistent, what about the investigative procedures of the insurance company that paid out twice in one year? We could go so far as to say that Mr. Bowden was a serial abuser of benefits.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has since renewed its operations so that fields are logged. Satellite technology allows us to tell when one crop has been planted in a field and it is not possible to claim for another crop in the same field. We know where fields are located, which is amazing, and the Department has come to grips with one of its major problems.

Many farmers complain about red tape because of the number of forms that they have to fill in. I have much sympathy with them. But they must understand that the only reason for that red tape is to stop fraud and the misappropriation of public moneys. Unfortunately, the Department was not quick enough to impose controls on Mr. Bowden or to get back much of the money that he managed to squirrel away.

Appearing before the PAC can give rise to difficulties. I always think of the PAC members as a pack—an apt term, I think. The way in which we follow each other when questioning a witness can be a tortuous experience for the person giving evidence. That was the case with the 57th report "The Operation and Wind-up of Teesside Development Corporation". The corporation left a large debt of £40 million when it was wound up. We put one or two questions to the chief executive that are a good example of the Committee working well.

The chief executive sold land on behalf of the corporation even after the board had been wound up. He received valuations from a team of valuers on selling the land and advice from a team of lawyers on the wind-up. The lawyers had no other client and advised Mr. Hall to shred the documentation. I said to him:

> "If there was an inquiry, you would have extreme difficulty proving the decision you made on the day was in strict accordance with the regulations laid down and the notes on valuation provided to the corporation to uphold your story, would you not?"

The witness replied:

> "In so far as those cases refer to files, I am not saying there would be a difficulty in responding to them ultimately, if one had all one's advisers around, but the situation appears to be that the National Audit Office did not find all the files it wished to find. All I can do is repeat the organisation and set-up of the disposal of the files of the Corporation."

When asked

> "You would have difficulty in proving these deals were open honest and above board, would you not?",

Mr. Hall said:

> "I am totally satisfied they are open and above board".

However, I pursued him by saying:

> "They are not in existence though",

to which he replied,

> "It would appear not."

I had to recite to Mr. Hall one of the things that people in public life believe in. I said:

> "In public life the one thing we are terrified of, above all things, is not the fact that we are innocent, in that respect",

but that

> "we have to prove we are innocent."

If the media are on our back, we have to prove with documents that we have done things correctly and in accordance with the law. Anyone who is told by legal advisers to shred files has received bad legal advice.

When an accountancy officer appeared before the Committee on that issue, we explained that the Department's guidelines were left in tatters, yet he continued to support the corporation, for reasons best known to himself. I asked

> "Do you think the corporation was not better controlled because your Department lacked the power, the will or the ability?"

He replied:

> "We are trying to improve the way in which it governed itself. We certainly had the power, we had the ability—what was the third one?"

I said:

> "The will, the power or the ability?"

The accountancy officer replied:

> "We had the power but it was rather a nuclear option. We had the ability and we chose to do it in a non-nuclear way. We did not have the will to throw the baby out of the bath water, by which I mean we decided it was better to soldier on with the existing management, the existing Chairman, the existing Board than to go for some other option."

I countered:

> "The question jumps up, why?"

He said that although the corporation was effectively trying to wind down,

> "The Department took an active role in doing that. As I said earlier . . . if we did not succeed"

it was

> "because of some pretty amazing behaviour at the very end."

One is left in no doubt that although the corporation ignored the Department's financial guidelines, it was allowed to do so because the Department lacked the will—the political will—to get involved and ensure that things were done in accordance with strictly observed guidelines.

One lesson that any Secretary of State or Minister must learn is that they will be held to account if they start interfering with strict financial guidelines—they will be brought before a Committee to answer for their actions. We get Sir Humphrey answers, but sometimes if we push a little harder, we get more revealing answers. That is the PAC's role. The breadth of subjects that we cover gives us a spotlight on the public sector that few parliamentarians have. I look forward to the challenges that 2003 will bring for the Committee, and I hope that the Government, especially the Treasury, recognise that openness and accountability are essentials of good government. They should join us in insisting that all public expenditure, including that of the BBC, the Financial Services Authority and the civil list, comes under the auspices of the PAC.

3.34 pm

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): I apologise to the House and my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) for missing the first few minutes of this debate. I had to attend a meeting that was arranged some time ago, and it was difficult to rearrange it. However, I heard most of his excellent speech, which was an enjoyable and important contribution to our debate. I agreed with the three themes that he set out in weaving the year's events into his speech, and I should like to pursue some of them.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Tamworth (Mr. Jenkins), as I often seem to do in our twice-weekly hearings. He is right that serving on the PAC gives one a unique spotlight, to use his phrase, on the operation of the civil service. I find particularly interesting the notion of a split between the running of an organisation and policy development. It is echoed in the question of whether a Minister should be held accountable when things go wrong because of poor policy implementation or when the policy itself causes things to go wrong in his Department. Permanent secretaries who appear before our Committee often draw that distinction.

A recent case that starkly illustrates the point is the London Heart hospital, to which my hon. Friend the Chairman of the Committee referred to early in his speech. Mr. Andy McKeon, the director of policy and planning at the Department of Health, appeared before the Committee, and I asked him what experience he had had of running an organisation of 800,000 employees. I would have been happy if he had told me that he had experience of running an organisation of 100,000 employees. He told me that he had no such experience, and added that he was not running an organisation of 870,000 employees. His role was to set a framework for the NHS within which 600 organisations can develop and implement their own plans. In other words, he saw himself merely as the civil service adviser to Ministers on the overall direction of policy in the Department, not as an executive or director of the NHS as a whole. No doubt that is also the view of Sir Nigel Crisp, the chief executive of the NHS. There is therefore no one in charge of the NHS. There are 600 separate organisations, and the Department of Health fulfils its role by sending memos, guidance notes and teams of inspectors to those organisations, cajoling, harassing, targeting, measuring and judging them. But it does not actually run the national health service.

By contrast, in the private sector, there is always one person in charge at the top—a chief executive in the true sense. He runs the operation, and his survival depends on how well he does so and how profitable the company is. That, in turn, is determined by the successful delivery of the company's service. There is no distinction between policy and operation—every failed operation is a failure of the chief executive's management. The most revealing distinction between the operation of the private sector and Whitehall is that the person who runs the organisation also sets its policy. In Whitehall, the people who run the organisation are different from the people who set policy. Because of that, the skills required of a permanent secretary in Whitehall are different from those required to run a large organisation, be it the NHS or the education system.

A running theme of the PAC's deliberations—there were many echoes of it in the Chairman's opening speech—is the fact that the successful project manager rarely makes it to the top job of permanent secretary. He may be able to run a successful operation but cannot necessarily craft beautifully written policy recommendations and memos to Ministers.

One of the best witnesses to appear before the Committee in the past year was Mr. Paul Jenkins, to whom my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough referred. Mr. Jenkins is the national project manager for NHS Direct. The National Audit Office report was very complimentary about how NHS Direct was established and run, and Mr. Jenkins was widely praised for his achievements by members of the Committee. Even more striking, however, was the way in which he answered questions. He was clearly on top of every aspect of the project, and did not need to turn to the people behind him for extra briefing or notes. I suspect that he had not even been briefed the previous week in the usual intensive way undertaken by civil servants coming before the Committee. I think that he knew everything anyway.

The contrast between Mr. Jenkins's answers and the answers that we normally receive from permanent secretaries was striking. The difference is that Mr. Jenkins is a project manager who has been in charge of NHS Direct for the past five years. The tragedy is that it is unlikely—although I hope that it is not impossible—that he will become permanent secretary at the Department of Health. PAC members with experience longer than mine have noticed that success at project manager level tends not to lead to promotion to the top positions in the civil service. That is a mistake that may contribute to the problems that Britain has faced over many years. Those problems—which did not begin in 1997, but go back 20 or 30 years—have surfaced in our health and education systems, not to mention in the immigration service, the passport office, and elsewhere.

I want to draw to the House's attention three other PAC reports that I believe are of concern. To an extent, they demonstrate the broader themes that I have just set out. A number of hon. Members mentioned the report entitled, "Improving Student Achievement and Widening Participation in Higher Education in England." The problems in that area were in part attributed, in the report and by witnesses, to poor prior attainment at secondary school level. I focused my questions to David Normington, permanent secretary to the Department for Education and Skills, on that poor attainment.

I was struck by the equivocation in the answers that we received. There seemed to be no clear departmental view about the reasons for the poor performance of many secondary schools. Despite constant questioning, I was unable to extract a departmental view about the ethos that makes a state school successful, and how that would contrast with the ethos that makes a school

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unsuccessful. I felt that there was an alarming complacency about British education, and that it contrasted alarmingly with parents' deep concerns.

The permanent secretary cited the Pisa report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. That is an international survey of all 32 OECD countries, and Mr. Normington said that it provided evidence that Britain's education system was fourth in science, seventh in English and eighth in maths. By now, he will be aware that the survey has been widely discredited, because the questions that it used measured aptitude and life skills rather than the education curriculum. The survey is more a test of IQ than knowledge, and French officials have dismissed it as biased in favour of creative skills over knowledge. I had hoped that Mr. Normington would refer to the more authoritative Timms survey, which has been carried out for many years and shows that, in terms of the standard of state education provision, Britain comes 20th among OECD countries.

I am worried about complacency and the lack of understanding of our education system. Above all, I am concerned about the lack of rigour in policy development—a problem to which my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough alluded. There appears to be no real understanding of the figures cited to the Committee.

I was concerned when we interviewed the then permanent secretary at the Department for Work and Pensions, Rachel Lomax, who gave one of the worst performances of the year before our Committee. The accounts of what was the Department of Social Security, and is now the Department for Work and Pensions, had been qualified by the National Audit Office for the past 13 years because of the huge and unacceptably high levels of fraud and error, which, as our Chairman said, are estimated to amount to at least £3 billion a year. Personally, I suspect that that is an underestimate.

Our report considers fraud and error in just one benefit—income support. For that one benefit, some £573 million a year is lost through fraud, £154 million through customer error, and a staggering £173 million through official error. The £573 million fraud figure is made up of a staggering 216,000 cases of fraud, in each of which an average of £2,600 a year is fraudulently claimed. Of those 216,000 cases, the Department prosecutes only 11,000 a year—just 5 per cent. of the estimated number.

Leaving aside the difficulties that we had in extracting those figures from the permanent secretary during the hearing—I believe that that demonstrates that tackling fraud was not at the top of her list of priorities—I must emphasise that such a low prosecution rate in itself reveals problems. At first I thought that the low rate was a policy decision, based on the fact that the costs involved in pursuing a prosecution involving only £2,600 fraudulently claimed would be likely to exceed the amount recovered. That, of course does not take account of the argument that prosecuting and obtaining convictions constitutes a deterrent to people attempting fraud, whereas merely repaying fraudulently claimed benefit, even 13 weeks' worth of it, does not.

The bulk of the £573 million of fraud does not derive from organised crime, which accounts for only £100 million, but from small-scale fraud. The only way to tackle the massive fraud at the Department for Work and Pensions is to have a policy to deal with small-scale fraud rather than concentrating on organised crime alone.

Mr. Bacon: I am enjoying listening to my hon. Friend' interesting speech. I particularly remember the questions that he asked the permanent secretary at the Department of Social Security; I, too, was unimpressed by her answers. Indeed, I have a videotape of my hon. Friend's contribution on that occasion, and I recommend it to any hon. Member. My hon. Friend finally forced the permanent secretary to admit that what he was saying was correct.

Does my hon. Friend agree that this attitude to prosecution is not confined to social security? Our hearings have produced evidence from various sources, including the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, Customs and Excise and others, that in Government generally—I am sure that it was the case when we were in office, too—there is an unwillingness to pursue prosecutions. Does he agree that that needs investigation?

Mr. Gibb: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention and hope that he continues to enjoy watching that video. He has made a valid point. Across Departments, the decision whether to prosecute is based on detailed departmental guidelines that we need to examine to find whether they are appropriate in today's climate. Like him, I believe that we are not prosecuting sufficient numbers of people, not just in respect of benefit fraud but of tax and customs and excise matters. Prosecution is a deterrent.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): I have been listening with great interest to the hon. Gentleman. Does he accept that a major contributory factor to the difficulties outlined in the Committee's investigation is the complexity of the benefits regime? Does he agree that there are also major problems in assembling the level of evidence necessary to prosecute cases, and that until we deal with those two issues, we will never get to the bottom of the fraud problem in our benefits system?

Mr. Gibb: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Of course complexity is a key reason, particularly for customer error and official error, but the simpler one makes the system, the less fair it becomes. It is a balance between complexity and fairness.

The hon. Gentleman is right that it is difficult to obtain the evidence to pursue frauds. To arrive at an estimate of 216,000 cases of fraud a year, a sample of 30,000 is taken, on which detailed annual reviews are conducted to determine how much fraud there is in the sample. The results are then extrapolated across the whole population. We must do such sampling for real, across a much larger proportion of the population, and then pursue the prosecutions once that review has taken place. The problem is that that is very expensive, but the invest-to-save approach will be well worth while in the long run.

The Department will not be able to reduce the level of fraud until it invests significant sums in tackling fraud to provide real deterrence against the submitting of false claims. If the only punishment for making a false claim is that the money must be repaid if one is caught, there is no deterrent against submitting one. Because of the complexity of the system and the difficulties in obtaining evidence about whether a person is living with another person—these are terribly intrusive questions—it is necessary to rely on the deterrent effect of prosecutions. Where enough evidence can be compiled to pursue a prosecution, a decision should be taken to go ahead with it. I suspect that the small sums of money involved mean that there is no real desire to pursue prosecutions, even when evidence can be compiled, because the focus of the Department is on organised crime, which causes only a small proportion of the fraud.

Mr. Love: I must declare an interest in that I have written at length to the Comptroller and Auditor General on this issue. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, in the sample 30,000 cases that he mentioned, a strong element of subjective value judgment is used in deciding whether fraud has been perpetrated? Many people outside the National Audit Office consider that the figures for fraud are vastly inflated.

Mr. Gibb: I do not agree that the figures for fraud are vastly exaggerated, because of what one hears anecdotally. The hon. Gentleman will hear from his constituents of cases where people are claiming benefit while working. The number of times that we hear of such cases from constituents makes us realise that there is a widespread culture in certain parts of our constituencies and in certain sections of society where falsely claiming benefit is regarded as par for the course. We must end that approach to the benefit system, not just because it costs the taxpayer at least £3 billion a year, but because it fosters a culture of dependency, which is not good for society and very damaging to the people caught up in it. We shall inquire into benefit fraud later in the year when we examine jobseeker's allowance, and I hope that the Committee will be presented with evidence that shows that real progress has been made in reducing these unacceptable levels of fraud.

Finally, I mention our report on improving air quality, on which I was particularly dismayed by the lack of rigour in policy making. My hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne) was able to extract from Mr. Martin Williams, the head of technical policy at DEFRA, the information that the measures being proposed to deal with just one out of nine pollutants to be dealt with would cost the United Kingdom economy some £1 billion a year. In defence of that very large sum, the permanent secretary said that it was not a trivial issue as we were trying to deal with

"24,000 early deaths a year,"

to use his phrase. On the face of it, a mere £1 billion per pollutant would be very worthwhile expenditure if it were saving 24,000 people a year from untimely and tragic early deaths, but of course it all depends on what is meant by 24,000 early deaths. The correct technical phrase that the permanent secretary should have used was, "24,000 deaths brought forward". The definition of "deaths brought forward" is given in a footnote to the NAO report, as

"It is not known to what degree deaths are brought forward . . . it is more likely to be by days or weeks rather than months or years."

In other words, we are talking not about someone in their thirties struck down in the prime of life, but about losing a day or so over a lifetime. If the cost of that day or so is having to earn an extra £1 billion per year per pollutant divided by the number of people in Britain, generating that extra wealth for the country may cost us all more than a day, or a few days, or a week of our lives. I therefore wonder whether the policy is the right one.

I am especially concerned about the fast and loose way in which facts and figures are bandied about without any focus on rigour. Far more accurate cost-benefit analyses are needed before we pile on to ourselves restrictions and costs that might be far more harmful to us than beneficial. If we are to restore people's faith in the political process, we need to be far more scrupulous in the use of facts and statistics, but in my time on the PAC, I have seen too many examples of an absence of rigour in their use. I hope that the coming year will bring evidence of more intellectual rigour in the development of policy, more integrity in the use of facts and figures, and more professionalism and relevant experience among the people who are charged with advising on policy and direction in our public services.

3.56 pm

Mr. Gerry Steinberg (City of Durham): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb). It was a pleasure to listen to his wise and considered speech—there was a lot of sense in it. I only hope that mine matches his.

I want to place on record my thanks to the staff of both the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office for the excellent work that they carry out in a highly professional manner. I feel especially sorry for the PAC staff, who have to put up with my constant requests for assistance. Perhaps it is because I am getting old and forgetful that I am always searching for my papers—they are never in the right place at the right time—but the staff are always very obliging and make sure that I get them. My thanks go to them and to the NAO staff, who are always ready to give members of the PAC expert advice and the information that we want.

Serving on the PAC is one of the most worthwhile and enjoyable duties that I have as a Member of Parliament, especially here at Westminster. It is easy for a Back-Bench Member in a Government party that has a substantial majority to become very bored and to have to go looking for something to do, but I assure the House that that is not often necessary when one is a member of the PAC with two thick reports a week to digest; there is plenty to do if one can get through those reports.

The beauty of the Committee is twofold: first, we keep it non-political and out of the realms of policy, although members of the Committee occasionally try it on—especially Opposition Members—

Mr. Bacon: Surely not.

Mr. Steinberg: Yes, they do, but the excellent Chairman of the Committee makes sure that the

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Opposition do not get away with it and are soon brought back into line. We all share the same aims: to root out inefficiency and waste, and to seek value for money—and to embarrass the accounting officer, some more than others. The second aspect of the PAC that I like is that it covers so many topics, as we can see from today's Order Paper. When I was a member of the Select Committee looking at education, education was the subject of report after report, week after week, year after year. To be frank, it was extremely boring. With the PAC, we have a different report twice a week and the topics are varied: from defence and social security to smuggling and the royal family. I did not put those two together on purpose. I do not intend to speak about those subjects today, and I am sure that the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton will be delighted to hear that.

For the first two or three years that I was on the Committee, we produced reports on the previous Government, so it was easy to criticise. It is becoming a bit more difficult now that it is the present Government's policies that are being examined and we can see the mistakes that they are making. However, that does not deter us; it is a pleasure to do it.

Another topic on which I do not wish to dwell is the PFI, an issue that will be a constant source of discussion over the next few years. We need more time to consider the PFI and deliberate before we come to any firm conclusions, although I accept that each PFI scheme will be looked at individually. I was very sceptical about the PFI, particularly at the beginning, but I must admit that I am beginning to warm to it a bit more. It will be interesting to see the reports on the present PFI schemes.

On the Order Paper today, we see reference to two reports on PFI schemes: on the Royal Armouries museum in Leeds, which was a bit of a cock-up—if one is allowed to use that expression in the Chamber—and the other on the Treasury building. There will be many more in the future and we will be able to see the success, or otherwise, of such schemes.

Before I refer to the reports, I want to place on record my thanks to the Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), who does an excellent job.

I want to concentrate on three different, but worrying, reports, each of which deals with how taxpayers have to pick up the bill when things go wrong. When a mistake is made, it is our constituents who pick up the bill, which can add up to billions of pounds. We talk about "billions of pounds", but we do not realise how much that is; at least, I do not. It is a huge amount of money.

The first report to which I shall refer was entitled "Tackling Obesity." It seems like an age since we did it, but it still seems to be hitting the headlines now. Although the hearing had its humorous moments, the topic is of immense importance because of the problems of obesity. Most adults in England are now overweight; that includes myself, although I would not go so far as to say that I was obese. One in five adults are obese, which results in about 18 million working days lost because of sickness and about 30,000 premature deaths a year. Those 30,000 deaths are probably not the ones to which the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton referred; obesity cuts people's lives considerably.

Obesity is costing the NHS about £500 million a year and additional costs mean that the total comes to something like £2 billion. The situation is getting worse year by year. The National Audit Office estimated that, by the year 2010, the cost to the NHS would be something in the region of £3 billion a year.

When I read the report and listened to the evidence, I was—to say the least—a little cynical. There are, of course, people who are obese because of a medical condition but, frankly, most of them are obese because they over-indulge. They eat and drink too much and do not do enough exercise. Were it not for the fact that the taxpayer had to pick up the bill, I would probably say, "Let them get on with it. It is up to them." Unfortunately, the consequences for the rest of us are serious, so we should not allow them to get on with it. We should do something about it.

The vast majority of those who are obese or overweight, including myself—I do not deny that—eat too much, drink too much, eat the wrong food and do not do enough exercise. I am a lot more careful since I was told that I had high cholesterol. I went to see my doctor, who told me that I was too fat. I lost about a stone and a half and I do quite vigorous exercise now, so I feel rather proud of myself. I hope that people will take notice of what I am saying.

Should not every GP automatically advise their patients, as my doctor did? They do not, I am afraid. That does not happen. We found that doctors' attitude towards patients who are very fat or obese is pathetic. Only 40 per cent. of GPs identified those patients as being at greatest risk, and 2 per cent. of GPs did nothing. If they saw a great big fat lump sitting in front of them, they did not even mention it. They just allowed the patient to get up and walk out, without mentioning their weight. That is wrong. Seventy-five per cent. of GPs sent overweight patients somewhere else to do something about it. All they needed to say was, "Look, you're too fat. You need to take some exercise and you have to eat less." but they did not do that. They simply sent the patients somewhere else and brushed over the matter.

I concluded from the report that GPs were failing to tackle the problem, either because they did not take it seriously enough or because they did not have time. It is correct that they do not have time. The report is accurate about that and about the diseases associated with obesity. Doctors are contributing to their own work load, because if they fail to treat obesity, more patients will come back to them with the associated illnesses, so the doctors' attitude is counterproductive.

Targeting schoolchildren and influencing them is the most important way to combat the problem. It is probably impossible to change most adults' way of life. There was an article recently in one of the daily newspapers about a head teacher who, for the benefit of the pupil, had informed the parents that their child was obese, and rightly so. If I were a head teacher, I would have done the same thing. What did the parents do? Far from saying, "Thank you very much. We'll do something about it", they blew their top and went to the press, complaining about the disgraceful way in which the head teacher had picked on their child. If the parents had had any sense, they would not have reacted with outrage but taken notice of the head teacher and done something about the problem.

We must educate children so that they can educate their parents. Parents must learn that a trip to McDonald's is not so much a treat as a health hazard. I asked why, for example, the Food Standards Agency does not target the unhealthy fast-food outlets or pressurise the food manufacturers to produce cheap, tasty, low-fat, low-salt, healthy food. The FSA does not do that and I did not get the impression in the hearing that it intended to do so.

Geraint Davies: I am listening carefully to what my hon. Friend is saying. Does he agree that schools should reduce the amount of salt and fat-impregnated food on offer and should not have coca-cola machines, and that the Government should think seriously about the possibility of not allowing advertising in the middle of children's programming to induce children to get hooked on salt and fat-impregnated processed food?

Mr. Steinberg: I am always delighted to give way to my hon. Friend. I wondered whether he had written my speech for me, as I shall come to those topics in a few moments. If he will bide with me, he will get the answer.

The increase in fast-food intake, coupled with the huge decline in physical activity, is the main reason why children are becoming fatter. Sport England recently produced some statistics showing that the proportion of young people who spend two or more hours a week in curricular sport decreased from about 46 per cent. in 1994 to 33 per cent. in 1999. In the same period, the number of 17-year-olds walking to school fell from 59 per cent. to 49 per cent. Senior pupils have no excuse for not walking to school. They cannot be worried about what will happen on the way there. The reason is simply pure laziness, which means that they get lifts instead. Indeed, car journeys have doubled over the same period. One of the most frightening increases, however, has occurred in the number of hours spent watching television. The figure rose from about 13 hours a week in the 1960s to 26 hours a week in the 1990s. I suspect that any new research would find that much more time is spent in front of a screen, bearing in mind the development of computer games and so on.

Those powerful statistics demonstrate a reduction in physical activity, but investment in sport and other physical activity has not declined. In the past 15 years, five sports centres have been built in my constituency. People cannot blame a lack of facilities for doing less exercise. I suspect that the problem is that we make too many excuses and that the population is merely becoming lazy. We are lazy in our eating habits—it is very easy to buy something from McDonald's or to fry our food—and our exercise.

Mr. Alan Williams: My hon. Friend is making some interesting comments. I was lucky enough to attend a conference in the United States, which has an even worse child obesity problem than ours, where child psychologists said that children as young as two were now developing brand preference. That is why there are so many jolly little jingles and plastic giveaway toys. Children who do not even know what they are telling their mums and dads that they want are being indoctrinated into brand preference and their parents will unthinkingly give them what they want.

Mr. Steinberg: My right hon. Friend is right. I visited America a number of years ago. The amount of food served there—especially meat—was, frankly, disgusting. One could not eat it all. If people eat in that way, it is not surprising that they are getting fat. He is right that television and advertisements are dictating the way in which people lead their lives.

The Government need to take some tough decisions to ensure that lifestyles change. On the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Geraint Davies), I believe that every schoolchild should have at least two hours a week of timetabled and compulsory physical education. On his specific question, schools should be allowed to serve only healthy meals. There should be no chips or crisps. Manufacturers of unhealthy food should be banned from having any involvement with schools. Companies such as McDonald's, Walkers, Pepsi and Coca-Cola should not be allowed to give sponsorship to schools. We should not allow them to have any involvement with schools, let alone through sponsorship.

We could also ban cars from towns, which would make people walk a little more. Car parking should be banned outside schools and moved to, say, a quarter of a mile away. We should make kids walk to school if they have people who can accompany them. I know that those proposals are radical, but there is a reason why: our kids are eating the wrong foods, getting no exercise and suffering the consequences. Such measures need to be taken very seriously, because we are, frankly, killing ourselves.

The second issue that I want to raise is completely different, although it again relates to waste, value for money and even fraud in some cases. The operation and winding up of the Teesside development corporation relates to my area in the north of England. I know that this issue has been mentioned already, but I want to go into it in a little more detail. The TDC, which was the largest corporation of its kind, was set up in 1987 and wound up in 1998. It received some £354 million-worth of grants and generated income of about £116 million.

The usefulness of Members of Parliament is shown by the fact that this particular investigation was initiated by local MPs, who complained to the National Audit Office. They had worries about the corporation's operations, but they had gained little satisfaction from the then Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. As it proved, their worries were fully justified. The NAO's report clearly showed that, from an early date, the DETR and the regional government office in the north had had severe doubts about the TDC's financial probity and working, but had done very little about it. The report was highly critical of the lack of control and involvement of board members. They existed but were not used, and they appeared to take no interest in the running of the corporation. They sat back while some horrendous things went on.

The chief executive managed the TDC as a one-man band and was a complete law unto himself. On numerous occasions, he personally handled controversial property deals without the board's approval or even knowledge. In the main, his financial director was not invited to board meetings, even when financial items were being discussed. How on earth that could happen God only knows, but it did. The chief executive ignored and overrode DETR cautions and warnings. The NAO investigated many cases. In two of

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them, the corporation had re-acquired sites from prospective developers for the original sum paid plus £1.6 million, even though none of the developments had actually taken place. In other words, £1.6 million of taxpayers' money was just given away to developers, in return for nothing other than getting the sites back.

The chief executive flouted the TDC's guidebook and his responsibilities as an accounting officer, and he ignored Treasury guidelines for accounting officers. That led to financial losses on transactions of some £11 million. He believed that his actions were justified because his primary role was to foster regeneration, by entrepreneurial means, with the private sector. However, he went far beyond what could be regarded as acceptable, and in doing so he abused his position, knowing full well that, at the end of the day, the taxpayer or the Government would bail him out if anything went wrong. He spent money that had not been approved by Parliament, and in the process he lost the taxpayer millions of pounds.

To make matters worse, when the NAO investigated the TDC, it was unable to find key information such as marketing and disposal files and contract files with developers, which, as we learned, had been shredded. In my view and that of many other Members, the very fact that those documents were missing and had been deliberately shredded shows that the NAO had discovered only the tip of the iceberg.

The worrying aspect of this case was that the then DETR clearly knew that something was not right about that corporation. For more than two years, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar) had tabled parliamentary questions that made specific and general allegations. The same Member met the relevant Minister, and an internal investigation took place. However, it concluded that limited evidence had been found, and that there was little point in investigating what was possibly maladminstration. In my view, nothing was done simply because the DETR knew that it would otherwise disturb a can of worms, and all hell would break loose. The NAO's later investigation did indeed discover a can of worms.

Thus I am very critical of what was, in essence, a failure on the part of the then DETR. In failing, it also failed the taxpayer.

Mr. Bacon: I am enjoying the hon. Gentleman's speech. Does the fact that the permanent secretary who was in charge at the time is now in charge of social security give the hon. Gentleman any cause for concern?

Mr. Steinberg: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would not expect me to comment on that, except to say that I hope that that permanent secretary's record is a little better in social security than it was in dealing with the fraud that I mention. I had better not go down that line because I seem to remember that that permanent secretary said—what was it again? Perhaps I should not go into that any further. I am sure that, if I did, you would be very cross, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I do not want that to happen.

When the corporation was wound up in 1998, it estimated that it had left a surplus of about £14.5 million. Again, after investigation, it became clear that there was no surplus at all. In fact, there was a deficit of about £23 million, but that could rise even further to as much as £40 million—a sorry state of affairs and, again, the taxpayer has had to pick up the bill.

The final report that I want to comment on is about the handling of medical negligence claims in England. The costs to the taxpayer are entirely different from those of obesity or the Teesside development corporation. I am trying to show that public money can be wasted in a number of different ways. By March 2000, provision to meet likely settlements for medical negligence was £2.6 billion and claims expected to arise from incidents that had occurred but had not been reported were estimated at a further £1.3 billion. Thus a total of £3.9 billion in medical negligence claims is expected. That is staggering. How many hospitals could be built with £3.9 billion, making such claims unnecessary because the hospitals would be in better condition?

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): As has been mentioned, that report goes on to make the point that the legal costs are likely to be just as great as the claims, thus implying that the ultimate costs arising from that source may amount to about £7 billion.

Mr. Steinberg: Not being a mathematician, I will not go into the exact figure, but I intend to deal with that issue almost immediately.

On average, such claims take a long time to settle—about five and a half years. The point is that almost half the claims settled the year before last cost more in legal and other costs than the settlements themselves. For example, the cost of reaching settlements up to £50,000 was greater than the damages awarded in more than 65 per cent. of those cases. That report and the evidence itself make it clear that the whole system is chaotic and desperately needs an overhaul.

I think that all PAC members received a letter from Dr. Anthony Barton, who is apparently a solicitor and medical practitioner. In the letter that he wrote to me, he said:

> "Victims of clinical negligence are rightly entitled to compensation; there must be affordable access to justice. Most cases are legally aided and most cases fail. The legal aid system (available only to a minority) is fundamentally flawed:
>
> Funding is granted on the advice of the applicant's lawyer; the system is inherently biased, creating perverse incentives for unmeritorious cases to be pursued. This is amply borne out by the low success rates of these cases."

I have investigated that, and the figure is 24 per cent. He went on to say:

> "The usual 'loser pays' rule of litigation does not apply to the legally aided claimant who enjoys costs protection; the claimant is in a no lose position and the health service defendant is in a no win position. Cases may be settled irrespective of merit in order to avoid irrecoverable legal costs (especially in low value claims). The system is inherently unfair.
>
> The problems of clinical negligence litigation are inextricably linked to the flaws of the legal aid system."

He is absolutely right, as became clear when we undertook that report.

The report made it clear that because of the difficulty of pursuing claims, few people were able to do so unless they were getting legal aid. If the legal aid was not available, they were excluded from the legal aid process, exactly as has been described. Steps were taken to address the problem by bringing in a no-win no-pay scheme, and claimants' solicitors have been able to add to their charges a success fee of up to 100 per cent. of their costs if the claimant wins—a bonus that is claimed from the loser. That worries me greatly, as I am sure that it will encourage the development of a litigation culture—as we have seen in the United States of America—in which solicitors chase ambulances and patients sue for the flimsiest of reasons.

A short while ago, I visited the hospital that is being built in my area under the private finance initiative, with which I am very pleased. When I came out of the gate, I saw pasted on nearby bus shelters posters advertising a firm of solicitors in Newcastle called Samuel Phillips and Co. The huge headline on the poster encouraged people to contact the firm "If the nurse has made it worse". I do not know what other Members think of that, but I found it very distasteful. I accept that solicitors must advertise for business, but stooping to that kind of campaign is unacceptable.

I do not believe that the new conditional fee arrangements have improved patient access to justice. Indeed, they could have a detrimental effect, because solicitors will not want to take risks and claimants may not be able to get insurance. Between 1990 and 1998, claims rose by about 72 per cent. Is there more negligence, or are the public more aware of the litigation culture? In five years, the cost of claims has risen from about £200 million to £1.5 billion. The report says that the total value of outstanding claims—with only a 50 per cent. chance of success—in 2000 was about £4.3 billion. Those are staggering figures, which seem to indicate that we should concentrate on the apparent clinical incompetence throughout the national health service.

Obviously, claims are successful only if there has been negligence, and the report indicated that there had been £4.3 billion of incompetence in the NHS. I shall refer to some of the 94 negligence claims examined in a recent report, "Clinical Negligence in the National Health Service in Wales"—I presume that the situation is similar in England; there is no reason why it should not be. The Auditor General for Wales produced the report, so it is very reliable. One of the aspects examined was the frequency of alleged or admitted causes of clinical negligence. Of the 94 claims, more than 30 per cent. were for misdiagnosis by a doctor, 20 per cent. were for technical mistakes during an operation, 18 per cent. were for surgical mistakes during an operation, and fewer than 10 per cent. were for drug complications. To me, that was unbelievable.

The report also notes some of the main alleged or admitted causes of negligence; for example, under misdiagnosis, it lists

> "Doctor fails to take an x-ray. Doctor underestimates patient's concerns. Failure to recognise signs of illness."

What are doctors for if they cannot even do that? Other causes of negligence are listed under the heading "Operation, technical" and include

> "Failure to listen to the patient's requests. Failure to perform pre-operative checks. Failure to provide pre- or post-operative explanations. Inadequate supervision of instruments—dislodged or not removed."

Do we really want to go into hospital? The list under "Operation, surgical" includes

> "Damage to organs, muscles or nerves. Failure to administer appropriate drugs during operation. Incomplete operation."

The list goes on; it is a horror story.

We need to take drastic action to eradicate that incompetence. The arrogance of many medical professionals needs to be tackled, otherwise we shall continue to pay out millions of pounds in compensation. I have no faith at all in the British Medical Association as a regulator; we need an independent body to look into cases of alleged incompetence.

A pilot study in two London hospitals concluded that about 10 per cent. of patients admitted to acute hospitals experienced an adverse event, but that half those events were preventable. That is appalling and does not give us much confidence about going into hospital.

Patients should be able to check on whether a doctor has a record of negligence. Almost every constituent who comes to me with a complaint about a hospital has experienced a negative attitude from the hospital. Patients must have clear guidelines on the options open to them, whether for a complaint or a claim. If that occurred, most cases would never reach the stage where solicitors were involved. If trusts were more open and honest, the number of cases resulting in litigation would be considerably reduced and so would the bill to the taxpayer.

The House will be delighted to know that I have almost reached the end of my speech. The examples that I have highlighted from our investigations in 2001–02 show both the importance of the PAC in the fight against waste, inefficiency and incompetence and the need for all Departments to achieve value for money. Government spending needs constant scrutiny if there are to be real improvements. Scrutiny by the PAC has clearly led to improvements. By virtue of the excellent reports that we receive from the NAO and the vigorous way in which my colleagues on the PAC carry out their work, all expenditure is made accountable to Parliament.

4.33 pm

Mr. Richard Bacon (South Norfolk): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mr. Steinberg). We have all been delighted and entertained by his enthusiasm for the private finance initiative, especially in relation to his local hospital.

I, too, want to dwell on the PFI. It is a matter of great concern and affects much of what the PAC does, in relation both to central Government projects, such as buildings and computer systems, and to schools, prisons and hospitals.

The work of the PAC is of huge importance and I am privileged to be one of its members. According to figures that the Committee has seen on just three aspects of

[Mr. Richard Bacon]

Government—Customs and Excise, health and social security—between £16 billion and £24 billion of taxpayers' money disappears in one way or another. I do not say that it is all unaccounted for, as not all the accounts are qualified. Neither do I pretend that it is easy to account for all such money, or someone would have done so by now, but the figures show the large scale of Government expenditure and thus the importance of the PAC's work.

The PFI has been the subject of much comment and debate; it is a matter of some controversy. The Institute for Public Policy Research recently pointed out that only 6 per cent. of PFI projects completed by central and local government were subject to independent value-for-money examination by official audit bodies. I discussed the 6 per cent. figure with the National Audit Office, which suggested that it might be slightly higher depending on how it is calculated. None the less, a substantial proportion of PFI projects have not been independently evaluated. The institute called for a full and independent review of value for money in the PFI to check both that the schemes are expected to deliver value for money when signed and that they deliver the predicted benefits once they are up and running. During last year's conference season, the trade unions called for a moratorium on the PFI until a full assessment had been made, although they got short shrift from Treasury Ministers for doing so.

The Health Committee mentioned the PFI in its recent report on its work over the last Session. It noted that its inquiry, "The Role of the Private Sector in the NHS", was undertaken in the knowledge that there had been a great deal of controversy and debate about the merits and cost-effectiveness of the PFI. The Committee sought to discriminate between polemical evidence that was being advanced by both sides in order to reach a balanced judgment. Its report noted:

> "Perhaps the key deficiency identified by the Committee related to the lack of accessibility and clarity in the data used to support PFI decisions."

The Audit Commission recently published a report on the PFI in schools that was critical of some of the early contracts. By measuring PFI projects against a control group of traditionally funded schools, it concluded that the PFI had not yet delivered some of the most important benefits expected of it. I accept that those were early contracts and that lessons have been learned—I am sure that that is what the Economic Secretary would say; that is probably what he is writing down now—but my enduring impression from my time on the Public Accounts Committee is that, across various areas of Government, lessons that should have been learned from experience often are not: they are ignored or forgotten. Regardless of the merits of the case for the PFI, I hope that the Economic Secretary will accept that neither the Treasury nor the Government generally has yet succeeded in building a settled will in favour of the PFI. On the Committee, sceptics include left-wing state socialists and right-wing free market chartered accountants.

Mr. Rendel: And one or two Liberal Democrats.

Mr. Bacon: Yes, even one or two Liberals are sceptical about it. If there is a bandwagon going, I guarantee that a Liberal Democrat Member will jump on to it. With that kind of spectrum, who could possibly go wrong?

If the Treasury wants to persuade people of the merits of the private finance initiative, it has to do at least two things. First, it should be much more open and transparent. Secondly, it needs to do much more to allow competition, by which I mean that it needs to allow PFI and conventional procurements to compete with one another on similar projects and to run side by side in the long term.

Let me take those two points in turn. First, the Treasury simply needs to open up more. If it is right about the PFI, what has it got to be afraid of? It can only gain from greater public understanding of the arguments. It should be open about professional fees, about which I shall say more in a moment, and explain more about how an assessment is made, openly acknowledging the other factors that are involved. If it involves using a balanced score card, it should say so, and explain how that works. People understand that value for money does not always involve buying the cheapest—that is why we are not all driving around in Reliant Robins.

An area in which we need complete transparency is that of professional fees. The National Audit Office's report on the PFI contract for the development of West Middlesex hospital states that the cost of the advisers was made up of £967,000 for financial advisers, £803,000 for legal fees, £204,000 for project management, £128,000 for the quantity surveyor, and £237,000 for "Others", making a total of £2,339,000. What it does not say is that those are not the total fees for the project, but only the fees paid by the Department of Health. The professional fees paid by Bywest Ltd., the PFI contractor for the hospital, are separate. When the witnesses appeared before our Committee, I asked them to supply more details about the other fees, and I await their answers with interest.

PFI contractors are in a position to pay their side of the professional fees only because they know that they have a contract with the Government that in the end will entitle them to receive annual unitary payments from the Government. The taxpayer is therefore financing those fees. Hon. Members have a right to know on behalf of taxpayers how much is being spent in that way. The Treasury explicitly acknowledges that in relation to its building in Great George street. I tabled several parliamentary questions about that PFI project. The Economic Secretary is fortunate that he did not hold that position at that time; the current Financial Secretary had the burden or pleasure of answering them.

The answer to my parliamentary questions was that the fees on the Treasury's side were £3.223 million, and that Exchequer Partnership, the PFI contractor for the Treasury building, paid £22.08 million. The total at 27 June 2002 was therefore £25,303,000 in professional fees. Given that the building cost only £118 million to construct, according to Treasury figures, it is odd that the professional fees should constitute such a high proportion of the total. Common sense suggests that if one pays £118,000 for a house, one would not expect to pay professional fees of £25,000 to the solicitor and the bank. Even allowing for the higher fees that one would expect for a complex project such as the Treasury building, it is odd that the professional fees should be more than one fifth of the total construction cost.

Sir Kevin Tebbit, who is permanent secretary at the Ministry of Defence, said in evidence last year that the fees in relation to the financing of a typical PFI project should be approximately 1.2 per cent. of its net present cost. The net present cost of the Treasury project is £170 million. Under my preferred COTD—cash out the door—measure, the expected payments for the building in the 35-year life of the contract, including the project's inflation assumption, total £838 million. Again, the former Economic Secretary provided the figures in an answer last year.

If we use Sir Kevin's rule of thumb of 1.2 per cent. for financing costs, one would expect that the total fees for the Treasury building, with a net present cost of £170 million, would be around £2,040,000. However, the actual fees relating to the bond issue for the Treasury building are £6,968,000 for Exchequer Partnership and £2,637,000 for the Treasury. Again, the Treasury provided the figures. That is a total of just over £9.6 million, which is 5.65 per cent. of the net present cost. That is nearly five times more expensive than the figure that one would assume using Sir Kevin Tebbit's rule of thumb.

I asked Sir Kevin whether he knew why the fees for the Treasury building were so high. He assumed a somewhat Delphic appearance and replied that it was perhaps not a good idea for him to tell the Treasury how to do its job. However, I should like Ministers to explain why they appear to be spending so much taxpayers' money all over the City. I wonder whether the Treasury has decided that, after three years of falling stock markets and a rather light deal flow, short of bidding for Safeway it is time to help the City of London through some old-fashioned pump-priming. However, if that is so, hon. Members should know about it.

Will the Financial Secretary explain why I received two replies from her to the same parliamentary question on fees? Both answers were received on 27 January. The code numbers for both are the same. Every reference number is identical, but one answer states:

> "I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave him on 27th June 2002".—[*Official Report*, 27 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 619W.],

yet the other states:

> "I shall let the hon. Member have a reply as soon as possible."

That suggests that something has been missed, that the information has not yet come out or that further expenditure has occurred. I await the reply with interest.

Treasury Ministers will know that the bond issue by Exchequer Partnership for the financing of the Treasury project was for £127,790,000, and that, with some mezzanine debt and other shares and stock, the total capital involved was £140, 965,000. What interests me is whether the bond that was issued the other day, on 16 January 2003, by Exchequer Partnership (No. 2) plc for £165,145,000 means that there is now a whole new tranche of fees to be paid on top. If so, how much is involved? Are all the numbers that I am talking about in relation to the Treasury building only half the picture? Does Exchequer Partnership (No. 2), which covers only the eastern end of the building, mean that all these fees should be roughly doubled?

Why in the new Exchequer Partnership (No. 2) bond issue, in the many crates of documents relating to the new bond that are available for inspection at Allen and Overy, or indeed at the Financial Services Authority, is the financial model not disclosed, contrary to previous practice?

Incidentally, what precisely were the benefits to the public purse in breaking the PFI project for the Treasury building into two parts? Members of the Committee went round the building. I walked all the way round it, and it definitely looked like one building to me.

While on the subject of openness, may I say that when I asked the Ministry of Defence about fees it gave me figures only in relation to its side, and not in relation to the PFI contractor, Modus Services? The Treasury has been admirable in answering these parliamentary questions in relation to both sides, and rightly so, because ultimately it is the taxpayer who bears the cost.

The Treasury professional fees are just over 10 per cent. of the total. On the same basis, given that the MOD is paying out in relation to its PFI building fees of £11,190,000, one might expect roughly another £107 million of fees for Modus Services Ltd., the PFI contractor for the MOD building. I do not know whether that is too high or too low. It is certainly plausible. The fees for the London underground are already around £400 million, although how much has been achieved for that is a subject for another day and a separate debate.

The point is that the taxpayer has a right to know. If the Treasury seriously expects people to come on side in relation to the PFI, we must know the facts. It is no good saying, as the MOD did in its answer to me, that the fees paid by the MOD are available but that the fees for the PFI contractor are not.

Geraint Davies: As the hon. Gentleman is focusing on the PFI, may I ask him what he thinks will be the impact of the change of the Treasury's discount rate on the present value of PFIs from 6 per cent. to 3 per cent. and on the number of PFIs coming forward and their relative value to public sector comparators?

Mr. Bacon: I shall come on to the public sector comparator in a minute. Answers I have received from the Treasury, although how much credence one can attach to them is a moot point, show that the Treasury view would be that the discount rate cannot be seen in isolation. I talked to the National Audit Office about the discount rate. Its view is—and this is a point that I shall come to when I talk about the public sector comparator—that, although one clearly needs to take note of the discount rate, even more important is the question of the risk factor, the way in which capital risk costs and risk factors for a variety of different items that go into the calculation are assessed. I was going to say "manipulated", but I shall leave out such a tendentious word.

If we are to get the public on side, the Treasury must be more open about this matter. As I have said, it is no good the MOD's saying that its professional fees are

[Mr. Bacon]

available but that the fees paid by the contractor, Modus Services plc, are a matter for Modus Services plc, as if that is that. We need to make fair comparisons if we are to understand the PFI and weigh it in the balance. The Government have more work to do in selling the PFI. Inadequate and unhelpful replies do not assist their case. Such replies only make one think, rightly or wrongly, that there is something to hide.

The second area I want to address is the question of the Treasury's allowing more competition, by which I mean competing types of procurement. It is all very well saying that the investment programme through PFI is only around 10 per cent. of current Government investment. I attended the seminar held at the Treasury last year, which was very helpful. The then Chief Secretary quoted that figure. I think that he said that £3.5 billion was going through the PFI and about £35 billion was going through conventional routes, but if we look at the current building programmes in our constituencies—schools, hospitals or prisons—it certainly does not seem like that. If one asks my local education authority in Norfolk how much choice it has as to which kind of procurement to adopt, it will reply that the answer is zero choice. It is told "You want some money? This is how you get it." That is hardly the best way to assure ourselves that taxpayers' money is being spent in the most efficient, effective and economical way.

The best test would be a live ongoing test. Procurements could run side by side for different projects in similar areas. For example, one could allow some school contracts to be let under the private finance initiative and others by conventional methods. That would give a better basis for assessing whether the PFI was delivering the claimed benefits and whether mistakes from earlier contracts had been learned. At the moment, we are just assured that that is the case. The fundamental point is that we should subject the PFI to ongoing competitive pressure from other forms of procurement. At the moment, Ministers reassure us that everything is rosy because the project has been compared with the public sector comparator. We are supposed to take that at face value.

On the public sector comparator, which the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Geraint Davies) mentioned, the Ministry of Defence building report "Redevelopment of MOD Main Building" has an interesting chart on page 24. It shows the public sector comparator broken down by different categories. The left-hand column has a figure of base costs for capital expenditure, replacements, operating costs, legislative change and so on. There is also a risk factor. The middle column has a number and the right-hand column has a percentage. For example, the base cost for capital expenditure is £208.6 million. The risk, as a percentage of the base cost, is 29.5 per cent., making a further £61.5 million. At the bottom of the chart is a total base cost of £643.3 million. If all the risks are added up as a percentage of the base costs, they amount to a further £102.9 million. Miracle of miracles, the total is £746.2 million, which is the public sector comparator. Guess what? The PFI came in at £746.1 million.

Mr. Flight: Not £745 million?

Mr. Bacon: No, the PFI was much closer than that. There was only £100,000 in it.

I had a pocket calculator with me at the hearing and thought that the sum looked strange. It was almost dodgy: how could it be that close? Having done some calculations, I decided that a bit of jiggery-pokery had been going on. If we reduce the 29.5 per cent. figure, which is quoted as the risk as the percentage of base costs for capital expenditure, by 0.5 of 1 per cent.—from 29.5 to 29 per cent.—instead of the public sector comparator looking £100,000 more expensive, it suddenly looks £1 million cheaper. If instead of going from 29.5 per cent. to 29 per cent. we go down to 25 per cent., it looks £10 million cheaper. If we go down to 20 per cent., it looks £20 million cheaper. The question arises: how was the figure of 29.5 per cent. reached? What is so miraculous about it? What makes it so special? Why is the risk for "legislative change" 4.6 per cent.? Why is it not 3.6 per cent. or 9.6 per cent.?

I share my concerns about the public sector comparator with the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett). He used to be a building contractor. If his clients queried a price, I can only imagine what their reaction would have been had he said, "Don't worry, chum. I've put in this capital expenditure risk factor here of 29.5 per cent. on top of the base costs. Experience shows that this factor varies between 2 and 51 per cent. So if you take the difference between the two, divide it by two and add a little bit for a rainy day—if you really feel like it, divide by two thirds of the square root of the number you first thought of—then the 29.5 per cent. does indeed seem, well, how can I put it, guv, absolutely bang on the nail. You've definitely got the best possible price available." I imagine that had the hon. Gentleman said that, he would have got an answer involving some plain Anglo-Saxon words, possibly mentioning brass knobs.

The plain fact is that the public sector comparator provides enormous scope for manipulation to get the answer one wants by exploiting the inherent uncertainties of any given situation and the complexity of the financial models.

Mr. Jenkins: As someone who has been involved in the public sector, I have made decisions on purchasing and refurbishing contracts. If a contract came that close to the figure, I would have severe doubts about going down the PFI route. The marginal cost of maintaining my staff, expertise and ability to use my staff in future would make me decide firmly in favour of the public procurement route. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Bacon: I would be grateful if the hon. Gentleman would rephrase his question succinctly. I did not hear all of it because of undoubtedly incisive and eloquent chuntering on the Front Bench.

Mr. Jenkins: If there was a close decision between PFI and public procurement, as someone who has had experience of such decision making, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I would go down the public procurement route because it would mean that I could keep my staff, make a contribution to my overheads and be allowed to compare contracts as I would have a control group capable of putting a package together.

Mr. Bacon: I agree that a control group has merits. One does not have to rely on assurances from Ministers at the Dispatch Box that all the lessons that could be learned have been learned, and that everything is being done in the best possible way with the possible best motive for the best possible result, as one has something that one can look at. That point was made in a report, not by the National Audit Office, which advises us, but by the Audit Commission. A bit of competition between audit bodies does not seem to do anyone any harm. It may be true that those schools contracts referred to in the Audit Commission report were early phase contracts, but that is no reason why we should not go forward with some new conventional procurements so that we can run different systems side by side.

One worry about the contracts that I mentioned earlier is the fact that they are long term. The contract for the Treasury building, for example, runs for 35 years, as does the contract for West Middlesex university hospital. The contract for Norfolk and Norwich university hospital is for 60 years, with a break at 30 years. A short PFI contract lasts 20 years. The worry is whether it is possible to write a sufficiently flexible contract to allow for huge changes that could occur over such lengthy periods. Meanwhile, of course, annual unitary payments are obligatory. I appreciate the point that the Treasury frequently makes about acknowledging the need to pay whole-life costs, but the rational decision may be to let something decline because the resources are needed for something else. We need to consider whether the PFI allows us sufficient flexibility to do that. Running the two systems side by side would be a great way to check that in real time.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): As I was late arriving for the debate, I may not be successful in catching your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, as the hon. Gentleman is talking about the Ministry of Defence contract, it is invaluable to have the NAO evaluation, which compares the PFI with a more traditional redevelopment route. Basic questions need to be asked. If we assume that the MOD has more than 700 rooms, the redevelopment contract comes out at more than £1 million a room. Is any redevelopment costing that much sensible, given that the total cost of the contract is three times that for the new parliamentary building?

Mr. Bacon: I have a lot of sympathy with the right hon. Gentleman's point. Asking simple, fundamental questions is an important part of what our Committee does and I am staggered by the extent to which they are often not asked in Whitehall. When I asked the finance director of the NHS how much taxpayers' cash he expected to pay out, making allowances for inflation, during the lifetime of the contract for West Middlesex hospital, he did not know. He did not know the answer to that basic question. He did not know how much money he was spending, even though he had come to our Committee to talk about precisely that.

One of the Treasury's own advisers described the public sector comparator as "cretinous". The NAO is usually a paragon of understatement. As a member of the PAC, I have learned to savour its understatements like a fine burgundy. One of my favourite reports was entitled "Inappropriate adjustments to NHS waiting lists"—it was about managers fiddling the figures. Yet even the NAO was moved to describe the public sector comparator as "pseudo-scientific mumbo jumbo" which leads to "spurious precision" and

"a temptation to fiddle the figures".

By its elegant and reserved standards, that is little short of apoplectic. Will the Financial Secretary assure us that the public sector comparator will be put out of its misery as a principal tool for decision making on PFI projects? At least, if it is not, I should be grateful for an explanation of how much longer we will have to flog this dead equine, which I am willing to do if required.

Will the Minister acknowledge that, for schemes of the same type, such as school schemes, it makes sense to run some PFI schemes alongside conventional procurements? That would help to measure outputs properly over the long term, and to maintain competitive pressure.

Will the Financial Secretary explain why the professional fees for the Treasury building were so high? How much more is there still to pay? How much cash is the taxpayer going to have to part with in total over the life of the project, including the eastern part of the building? Should I double my figure of £838 million? Why is the financial model for Exchequer Partnership (No. 2) not available for inspection at lawyers' offices and at the FSA? How does that square with the aim of becoming more open, transparent and accountable, which has been central to my remarks?

Finally, it is a huge pleasure to be on the Committee. I should like to thank Sir John Bourn and his staff, particularly the assistant auditors general, especially Jeremy Colman and Caroline Mawhood, with whom I have had close dealings. I also want to thank the NAO press office staff who do a tremendous job in promoting the work of the office and the Committee. Finally, I want to thank the people in the Clerks Office—Nick Wright, Richard Poureshagh and Ronnie Jefferson—who also do a tremendous job. They are very long suffering and hard working.

I look forward to the Committee's work in the year ahead.

5.1 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. Bacon), whose speech was typically robust and well researched. When he mentioned my contribution, I feared that I would be branded as a left-wing state socialist, rather than as a building contractor. I am not sure whether I would not be proud to be branded as such.

I, too, should like to thank the officers working for the Committee and the NAO. The Committee involves an enormous amount of paperwork. I occasionally misplace documents, and the staff have always been polite and efficient in providing replacements. I usually then find the original documents, and end up with two sets. That is wasteful, but I am grateful for the help that I receive.

It is a privilege to be on the Committee. We meet some of the finest minds in the public sector when we encounter the permanent secretaries and accounting officers who work for the various agencies and Departments. I have learned something about the organisational culture of the civil service. As has been said, things are done in the civil service that would not be done in the private sector.

[Jon Trickett]

The British seem to prefer the dilettante culture. A person who is a good teacher will not necessarily be a good head teacher, nor a good athlete a good sports administrator. A good policy theorist should not necessarily become head of the NHS, but promotion in the civil service tends to go to the policy boffins rather than the managers. The British seem to make less of management as a skill than we should.

Secondly, a curious convention in the civil service is that current accounting officers take responsibility for the mistakes or successes of their predecessors. No doubt that tradition is honourable, but does it not militate against good management? In any other organisation, a person making a colossal blunder or a great success would receive the credit. The PAC often interviews people who are not responsible for the decisions or management functions being investigated. The innovation alluded to earlier by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), the Committee Chairman, is very welcome. It will mean that the person responsible for a decision will appear before the Committee, rather than the current accounting manager.

My third point about the civil service's organisational culture is a curious one. We often discover that apparently criminal acts have been perpetrated—not by civil servants, but by those for whom services are provided. Yet there is a marked reluctance across the whole civil service, in almost every Department, to prosecute. Perhaps the British habit of tolerance is a good one, but to tolerate some of the criminal activities that appear to have taken place is taking tolerance a little too far. The Committee would like to see Government agencies taking a more robust attitude towards such matters than they have done, at least for as long as I have been on the Committee.

Moving away from organisational culture, I want to reflect on partisanship within the Committee. It is fascinating to see how the Committee, although it deals with the most tendentious political and other problems that our country faces, avoids the crime—if crime it be—of partisanship. We seem to be able to approach issues in a non-partisan way. I do not mean that I personally, or any other members of the Committee, have abandoned our politics, or the philosophical and moral underpinnings that brought us to a particular partisan position. I am usually guided in my questioning by a particular philosophical, political or moral perspective, but it is a good and worthwhile tradition that we avoid the crime of partisanship, which would diminish the Committee's work.

I intend to speak principally about the private finance initiative, and I shall illustrate the point that I have just made with reference to the PFI. It seems to me that it would be possible to approach it from an ideological point of view—to say that, for ideological reasons, the idea of a public service being provided either on or off the balance sheet of the public sector is either a bad thing or a good thing. However, we have not taken that line, and the Chair of the Committee regularly reminds us that we ought not to be asking such political and policy questions. When we address PFI matters, the civil servants frequently, almost habitually, say that this is not a question of something being on or off the balance sheet, but a pragmatic judgment that has to be made when particular functions, or a particular construction contract, is being taken out to PFI.

The normal argument in support of the PFI is that the Government are simply not very good at handling large-scale capital projects, which is why they are increasingly adopting the PFI. While I have been on the Committee public expenditure has increased substantially, and so has the extent to which the Government have used PFI as a means, or methodology, of achieving their objectives.

Whether or not the Government have not customarily handled capital contracts and building contractors very well, the Government, the Treasury or whoever else makes the decisions has now taken a further step, in saying that not only should building contracts and capital projects be handled externally through private contracts but that the financing of the contracts itself should be undertaken by the private sector.

When we interviewed Sir Andrew Turnbull, he said that the point of privatising—if I may use that word—the financing functions, which are conceptually separate from the building functions, was to use the expertise of private financiers to drive the building contractors hard, and that the leverage that the banks and other funding institutions would exercise over the builders and other main contractors would somehow enhance the private builders' capacity to deliver projects on time.

That is a persuasive argument, but when everything is taken into account I am not entirely convinced by it. Let me examine the way in which the PFI has operated in the schemes that we have considered during the year. We have been talking particularly about the Royal Armouries—in which I declare a marginal interest, because I was the leader of Leeds city council when the project was brought to Leeds—and the Treasury building. We also discussed a more general report called "Managing the Relationship to Secure a Successful Partnership in PFI Projects".

Taking those three papers together, I think there is an overwhelming case for saying that the PFI is not working to the advantage of the public sector. I shall highlight some of my causes for concern, which, as is the nature of the Committee, are pragmatic rather than ideological. It seems to me that, in general terms, the PFI has been biased in favour of the private sector. That has happened in many different ways, as the reports describe. I shall focus on the principles, not the detail.

First, the rate of return that the private sector has achieved from the PFI is substantially higher than that which it would achieve from other contracts. We were told that by the chairperson of the Major Contractors Group—the person who brings together all the building firms that work under the PFI. He told us that the builders were achieving a rate of return on turnover at least 1 per cent. higher than they would achieve on non-PFI building contracts. That is a huge amount of money, given the hundreds of millions of pounds involved. That suggests at the very least a lack of competition between the private contractors.

Secondly, as other hon. Members have said, the discount rate that the Treasury established—6 per cent.—was unusually high and has now been reduced substantially. We were told that it was high because the

Government wanted to encourage the creation of a PFI marketplace, but the discount rate was extraordinarily biased. It probably cost the public purse tens of millions of pounds.

Thirdly, in the early days at least, PFI contracts had no provision to cover the situation where the financier refinanced the scheme after winning the contract. That produced windfalls of tens of millions of pounds of additional profit. As we all know, if we remortgage our house when interest rates are reduced, we can achieve a windfall. Contractors were doing that deliberately and there was no provision in the Government contracts to claw back any of that money. That has clearly changed now but, in the early days at least, refinancing was a major windfall for the private sector.

Fourthly, the risk that was allegedly being transferred from the public sector to the private sector when we went through the PFI, which has been given a number—millions of pounds of public money were involved—was rarely transferred. It would be unimaginable for a school or hospital to be allowed to go bankrupt; the Government would have to stand behind them as a lender of last resort. Precisely that happened in relation to the Royal Armouries museum; the paper is quite clear, so I need not go through it. Even the Treasury accepts, I think—the Committee certainly did—that the public sector stood behind the risk. In that sense, no risk had been transferred.

I want to mention one or two other points about the way in which the PFI operates. First, it must be said that the skill of the civil service in handling contractors has been lamentable. Hon. Members need not take my word for it; that statement was made to the Committee by the Office of Government Commerce, the official Government body now dealing with PFI contracts.

The National Audit Office conducted an opinion survey of those people in the public sector who were handling the PFI contracts. Mr. Gershon accepted in evidence to the Committee that he was unhappy about the blend of skills that the public sector had in negotiating the contracts. In 17 of 72 contracts there was a wholly inappropriate mix of skills among the people handling the building contract.

Worse, Mr. Gershon accepted that after the contract had been let, a wholly new team of civil servants was brought in to handle the contract. The people handling the contract were usually different from the people who had let the contract. The private sector would not make such a mistake. Mr. Gershon accepted my contention that two thirds of all the contracts being managed by the PFI were being managed by civil servants who had little or no involvement in the procurement of the contract—another fundamental error. It is lamentable that, by having inadequate management processes in the public sector, we have allowed the private sector to drive so much of the agenda.

The way in which the PFI was handled in relation to funding competitions raises many questions. Other hon. Members have said that more detailed analysis of its operation is needed. The Committee supported the statement made by the NAO that public finance would be much cheaper than private finance, and the only way to square the circle and be able to claim that the contract as a whole is cheaper in the private sector than it would be in the public sector is—to use a phrase that I have often used—by loading the dice against the public sector.

During our discussions on the PFI, it emerged that the private sector invented an entirely new way of handling contracts through the use of so-called due diligence. It struck me that that use of due diligence, which was invented by the private sector, is a tool that might well now be available to the civil service in its handling of contracts, and that much of the risk that we say we take if we retain contracts in-house could be obviated in that way. Sir Andrew Turnbull and I engaged in what could only be described as a round of shadow boxing on the subject, but I maintain that the use of due diligence by the civil service might well have obviated many of the risk factors that we supposedly handed over to the private sector through the PFI.

When the Committee interviewed the chair of the Major Contractors Group, it came as a surprise to me to learn that the various building contractors who allegedly compete with each other for PFI contracts meet regularly to discuss general matters, though not specific contracts. The fact that such a body exists suggests to me that if they do not discuss such matters at the table, with minutes taken, such discussions may well take place afterwards on the golf course—although I should say that the gentleman we met made some excellent points and I have no wish to impugn his professional integrity.

Mr. Jenkins: The same gentleman—the spokesman for the construction contractors—said that on early PFI contracts, the firms lost on almost every building project. The cost to the companies of building was greater than the money they received. They relied for profit on the rest of the package—the continuing maintenance and operation of the projects. Why did everyone lose on construction but remain eager to take part in the process? That is the worrying question.

Jon Trickett: I thank my hon. Friend for those points. I do not feel that, either in the reports before the House or subsequently, we have come to grips with the operational details of the process.

As I was saying, the possibility of collusion cannot be ignored. Furthermore, the way in which the civil service has operated the tendering process means that often the shortlist of competitors has been reduced to one far too early in the process. Once there is only one person in the ring and that person knows that they are the only one tendering, the capacity of competition to drive down the price to the advantage of the taxpayer is lost. That problem is seen all too frequently in the PAC's reports. The possibility of collusion combined with the practice of reducing shortlists too early in the process make me wonder about the degree of competition.

I make that suggestion because something quite startling emerged from our discussions with the chair of the Major Contractors Group. We were told that the cost of tendering could range from £1 million to £4 million. He told us about a £70-million contract that his company had won, in which the price of entry had been £4 million. The cost of tendering and preparing all the documents that the civil service wanted, was £4 million—in legal fees, quantity surveyors' and

[Jon Trickett]

architects' fees and all the other functions that were required. The number of companies that are capable of stumping up £4 million—or even £1 million, which we heard was often the figure—is limited. Whether or not there is collusion, there must be a strong temptation among the handful of companies that are tendering for such work to say to each other, "Look, we are all spending £4 million, but only one of us will get the contract." I would be tempted, were I in that position—I have been in the building industry—to say that I would make a tight bid on the contract, but not on the next three; £4 million is a lot to risk on a gamble that one's bid might come in the lowest. To be fair to the contractors, such a suggestion was denied, but there must be a temptation. The price of entry to PFI prohibits the small and medium-sized contractors, militating against competition.

In every case, the PFI is supposedly tested against this thing called a public sector comparator. The idea is that the accounting officer will invite tenders from the private sector; as I have suggested, those tenders might have only limited value. The accounting officer will then compare those tenders with a mythical public sector tender, called the public sector comparator. How this is derived is a mystery to the Committee; we have never had it explained or analysed. Even this afternoon, the Treasury has fallen back on the public sector comparator, saying that where it is higher, it leads inevitably to a project being handed to the private sector and becoming a PFI project.

Mr. Bacon: It was a mystery to me, too. Does the hon. Gentleman recall Sir Kevin Tebbit referring to the "Monte Carlo method", which may illustrate the precision with which the public sector comparator is wrought?

Jon Trickett: I bow to the hon. Gentleman's memory. I do not remember that analogy, but I remember phrases such as "mumbo-jumbo" being used by accountants describing the public sector comparator. Accounting officers and permanent secretaries have to rely on something when they hand out £1 billion contracts. I believe that they are exposed to criticism if they do not have a comparative figure because, almost inevitably, we are dealing with a single private sector competitor in the latter stages of the bid. In order to demonstrate value for money, the civil servants have to be able to demonstrate in some way that they are choosing to go down one particular road rather than another. However, the public sector comparator model is riddled with holes and the National Audit Office has told us that it is mumbo-jumbo.

The Committee has agreed to look into the public sector comparator, but suppose the model collapsed, as I suspect it will? We would then be left with the dangerous position in which civil servants were handing out multi-million and sometimes multi-billion pound contracts to the private sector with no demonstration that value for money was being achieved.

If we put that alongside the point that the number of companies in the UK or Europe that are capable of bidding is down to a handful who meet frequently in conclave, we must be concerned about our exposure to the allegation that we are not getting value for money; in the mean time, we are putting future taxpayers in hock to the tune of tens of billions of pounds.

I have made these points on the PFI out of a genuine spirit of concern. I am in any event predisposed to believe that wherever possible the public sector ought to be the provider.

5.25 pm

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): I apologise for not being present for the whole debate. I missed some contributions because my constituent, Sally Clark, has just had her conviction for murdering her two children overturned.

My work on the Public Accounts Committee is among the most rewarding that I have done in the 18 months that I have been a Member. The right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) said that he joined the PAC in 1965, which was six years before I was born. That puts my 18 months of experience into perspective. Nevertheless, I have tremendously enjoyed the work. I remember that, when I was a Government special adviser, what the permanent secretary most feared was not his Minister appearing in Parliament or Opposition days, even when we had a majority of only one, but his appearances before the PAC. That struck a chord with me at the time, and I remember saying that, if I ever got into Parliament, I would try and get on the PAC, which I managed to do.

One of the strengths of the PAC is the fact that it does not get involved in the policy debates that dominate this place. That point has been made by a number of hon. Members in all parts of the House. We follow the money, as Woodward and Bernstein would put it. As a result, we uncover cases of fraud and weaknesses in policy. Another strength of the Committee is its Chairman. I must say that, or I will not be called in subsequent hearings. His relaxed style, with the touch of the rapier, is engaging and effective.

I join other members of the Committee in paying tribute to the work of the National Audit Office, which provides us such a tremendous service. I remember Sir John Bourn telling me that many of the people who work in the NAO could find much better-paid work in private sector accountancy, but choose not to because they are motivated by a sense of public duty and public spirit, and enjoy their work. Among the most enjoyable work are the studies conducted on behalf of the NAO that the PAC considers

I welcome the Financial Secretary as an honorary or de jure member of the PAC. I have mentioned to her before that the Tatton Conservative association provides mutual aid to the Bolton West Conservative association. The PAC is supposed to assess value for money and progress against targets. We have totally failed on value for money, because the Financial Secretary's majority seems to increase the more money we put into Bolton West Conservative association, and we have failed in our target to unseat her. I think that we will be twinned with a more marginal seat, so we are off her back. She will probably be there for some time to come.

The debate is wide-ranging because of all the reports. Hon. Members have picked on those that interested them. The Chairman did a good job of drawing out some general themes. I shall speak mainly about the private finance initiative, as have other hon. Members, and briefly mention a couple of other reports. I was struck by our work on NHS waiting lists and how targets distorted clinical activity. The right hon. Member for Swansea, West told me that when he was a Minister in the Department of Economic Affairs—which, by the way, is why I think he has a deep suspicion of the Treasury—Tony Crosland told him that Governments spend five years undoing what they do in the first six months. The NHS waiting list targets were an example of that. The work of the PAC showed how distorting targets can be, as they were on air quality, [illegible] my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis [illegible] Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) mentioned, I think, when [illegible] was absent.

The work that we did on prisoner reoffending was striking. I know that the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Geraint Davies) was particularly interested in that. I was struck by the extremely high rate of recidivism and the lack of proper support for prisoners in prison through training and drug rehabilitation. I have in my constituency the second largest women's prison in the country, and it has no proper drug rehabilitation programme, despite the fact that 80 per cent. of the inmates are heroin addicts. That is very striking. It is also striking that 40 per cent. of prisoners are homeless when they are released, so it is hardly surprising when they almost immediately—

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am very concerned that the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis) has been making arrangements to visit my constituency and have his photograph taken outside a brand new bus interchange developed by the Labour authority there, but has not had the courtesy to tell me that he is visiting the constituency. Can you give any ruling on this matter?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. That is not a matter for the Chair, but I can repeat what has been said from the Chair on a number of occasions: it is one of the courtesies of the House that hon. Members should inform the Member representing a constituency if they are visiting it for a political purpose. Alas, that rule is not 100 per cent. observed, but it would certainly help cordial relations in the House if it were.

Mr. George Osborne: The work that the Committee did on tobacco fraud, which other hon. Members have mentioned, was also interesting. With the protection of parliamentary privilege, I should like to say that I think that the executives of Imperial Tobacco lied to us in saying that they exported billions of cigarettes to Kaliningrad, Latvia and other such countries in the belief that they would be smoked locally, as they clearly knew that they would be reimported into this country illegally. That is the reason why Regal and Superkings, two of that company's brands, account for 50 per cent. of all smuggled cigarettes in Britain.

I was also struck by our work on widening access to higher education and our discovery—it was not rocket science—that student debt is the single biggest deterrent to going university for people from less well-off backgrounds. I hope that that informs the debate in the next couple of years.

Before I deal with the PFI, I should mention a report whose Treasury minute we have not received, but which is germane. In our work on the Saif Sareea 2 exercise conducted by the Ministry of Defence in Oman, we found that there were serious problems with the equipment used by the British Army in the desert. That included the tanks that would not work because their filters became clogged with sand; the guns that jammed; the boots that melted; and the clothing issued to soldiers that was designed for personnel stopping the Russians on the north German plain in the middle of winter rather than for fighting in the desert. The Ministry of Defence assured us at the time that those equipment problems were being addressed in short order. In the light of current international events, I hope that that has happened.

It is interesting that many hon. Members have picked up on the PFI theme. As usual, the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. Bacon) was well informed and intelligent. He always puts me to shame when he turns up at PAC hearings with a mound of extra work and research. That knowledge reveals itself in the hearings, as it did in his speech.

From a different ideological angle, the speech of the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) was also interesting. I seem to remember that, when I watched coverage of the Labour party conference, one of the rows about the PFI was based on the suggestion that the National Audit Office should conduct an independent study. The Labour leadership negotiated a compromise—this is the way in which it does these things—that involved its asking the NAO to conduct a study. However, it seems to have escaped the notice of the leadership that the NAO has been conducting loads of studies on the PFI and it continues to do so. While it waits for the Government to ask it to do what it is mandated to do by the Labour party conference, it should look at the studies that the PAC has done.

Many studies have been mentioned that deal with specific projects, such as those relating to the West Middlesex university hospital, the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds and Treasury and MOD buildings, as well as earlier reports on Fazakerley prison and Dartford and Gravesham hospital. Our work on public-private partnerships—a sort of hybrid of PFI—includes our investigation of Airwave, National Air Traffic Services and other such shining successes of the PPP. I should point out for the sake of *Hansard* that I say that with some irony.

Of course, today the PFI is a major form of Government procurement, and has been adopted with all the zeal that only a convert can muster. For the first time ever, I take the Chancellor of the Exchequer at his word when he says that more than 400 PFI contracts are committing Government Departments to almost £100 billion of expenditure, that 500 of the 550 school buildings built since 1997 have been PFI projects, and that 90 of the 100 major hospital projects have been PFIs.

In theory—I stress, in theory—there is a strong case for PFIs. In theory, by specifying what service it wants rather than how it should be delivered, a public authority—be it a Department or a council—frees itself from the risks and responsibilities associated with the delivery of those services. Again in theory, risks are transferred from the public sector to the party best able

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to handle them. Again in theory, competitive bidding from the private sector discovers the best supplier and finds the best-value approach to delivery, while payment by results should incentivise innovation and excellence.

However, to judge by the work that we on the PAC have done, theory is not being matched by reality in PFI projects. That is partly because transferring risk, incentivising innovation and finding best value are not the principal reasons why public authorities choose the PFI route. The real reason, as any Treasury Minister knows, is that the PFI is often the only way that a Department or council can get the project that they want through the Treasury. Instead of the large up-front investment that would appear on the Government's balance sheets, one gets the projects now and pays later. In the words of Jeremy Colman, the NAO's guru on PFI, it is the "only show in town." So we find that with the PFI, the costs to the public purse are often the same in the long run—indeed, they are often greater—but the Treasury books look good in the short term.

Because that is the principal driving force behind PFI, the Government ignore many of its problems and drawbacks. The PAC surveyed 121 PFI contracts and looked at the lessons to be learned. Several common ones emerged. First, value for money is very hard to prove or disprove. As the previous two speakers pointed out, the public sector comparator is easy to manipulate and only spuriously precise; indeed, the Ministry of Defence building was a classic case of that.

The second lesson is that the innovation promised by the PFI rarely arises in practice. Innovation means risk, and perversely, PFI bidders are very risk-averse, partly because of the costs associated with mounting a PFI bid. For some reason, the exception to that is IT projects, for which the opposite is true. Such projects show a cavalier disregard of risk. In about 10 days, we are to hold a hearing on the Libra project, which is managed by the Lord Chancellor's Department and looks like a classic case of such cavalier disregard. The NIRS 2 benefits computer system was another classic example of a complete lack of forward thinking about the reforms that an incoming Government might make to social security and pension payments, even though many of those reforms were spelt out in the party manifesto of the time. The computer system could not cope with those changes, so the supplier had to be contacted—it was the only supplier that could do the job—and hundreds of millions of pounds were spent on upgrading the system.

The third lesson that I draw from our work on the PFI is that private sector financing costs are very high in relation to the risks involved. In fact, financing is very rarely competed, and there is evidence of market inefficiencies. A classic argument that is used by people who do not like the PFI is that it is more expensive for the private sector to borrow money. That is true, but it need not be that much more expensive. Government-guaranteed bonds for the channel tunnel rail link are significantly more expensive than gilts, although the risk is identical.

The fourth lesson is that PFI deals continue to be costly to negotiate and complicated, even after 10 years of experience. High bidding costs deter bidders and reduce competition. I have lost count of the number of hearings in which it emerged that there was only one bidder for the PFI contract at the end of the process. In such cases, the Department handling the negotiation had to pretend that other bidders were involved in the process. I would be amazed if the people bidding did not know that they were the only bidders. Of course all that ends up being paid for by the public sector.

The final lesson that I learned is that risk transfer—again, this point was made by the hon. Member for Hemsworth—is not as extensive as it seems because, ultimately, delivery risk can never be transferred when it comes to Government projects. The Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds is a good example. That prestigious project obviously meant a huge amount to that city. However, visitor numbers were far below those projected, the PFI company got into all sorts of trouble, and the Government had to bail it out: they could not afford to let that brand new museum close because that would have been too embarrassing. At the time, the PAC concluded:

> "If a department is unwilling to accept the consequences of risks being borne by the private sector under a PFI deal, it should not transfer these risks in the first place."

Mr. Jenkins: The hon. Gentleman started his contribution on the PFI by saying that he agreed with it in theory, but he then said that its implementation was flawed. Is he saying, with hindsight, that the theory was wrong or does he still believe the theory to be right but that we are failing to get to grips with its practical mechanics?

Mr. Osborne: The hon. Member for Tamworth (Mr. Jenkins) anticipates my concluding remarks. Of course, Tamworth is a historic town for the Conservative party because of the Tamworth manifesto, which I mention for the historians who are present.

While the PFI is primarily seen as a means to get projects past the Treasury, the Government will never realise its true potential or the benefits that I have identified in theory. Indeed, the worst argument for the PFI is, ironically, that advanced by the Chancellor, who says that all those new schools and hospitals could not be afforded otherwise. Even though PFI contracts are substantial, they make up only 9 per cent. of total public investment, so they could be afforded if they were properly structured on the Treasury books. After all, they ultimately appear on the Treasury books.

If the PFI is to bring private sector innovation and expertise to the public sector—I should like that to happen, as it would deliver real risk transfer and value for money—there needs to be a change in mindset in the way that the Government approach the PFI. They need to focus on the outputs, not the inputs. They have to believe that the public get a better service when the private sector is allowed a freer rein in operating projects.

It is striking that the PFI has worked pretty well in prisons. PFI prisons are often much better than public sector prisons—for example, in terms of prisoner reoffending—because they are given a free hand to operate with different staff levels, wage rates, pension arrangements, working rotas and so on. They operate with the efficiency of a private sector employer—not with the inefficiency of public sector employer—but the

Government find it politically unacceptable to let that happen in the big public services, such as schools and hospitals. They are, frankly, under too much pressure from the public sector unions.

It is striking that the Prime Minister got the biggest applause at the Labour party conference—I watched it on television, although other hon. Members will have seen it in person—when he said that he would "work with you", the unions,

> "to end the two-tier work force".

Of course that line got huge applause because it meant that the Government would not allow PFI contractors to have the same freedom in employing people as the private sector.

Mr. Bacon: Was my hon. Friend struck, as I was when we visited the London Heart hospital a couple of weeks ago, that the private sector employees in the hospital were being paid higher rates than the NHS staff?

Mr. Osborne: Although I did not take part in that visit, I was struck by the conclusions that my hon. Friend drew from it.

In conclusion, we still have a long way to go if we want to realise the true potential of the PFI, which is about improving service delivery to the public and saving money for the taxpayer. We have a long way to go until a change in the Treasury mindset allows the PFI's true potential to be realised. We have a long way to go before we break the assumption that public services, paid for by the public, have to be delivered by the public sector.

5.44 pm

Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): It is a pleasure, as always, to follow the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne). I also extend my great thanks to the Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), who always gives sterling support to the Committee. I thank the Public Accounts Committee Clerk and, like all other Members who have spoken, the National Audit Office in particular.

The reality is that the National Audit Office, which has in the region of 700 auditors and accountants, is responsible for auditing a third of the country's GDP in terms of all Government expenditure. If we compare the cost of that with the cost of accounting for the other two thirds, which is billions of pounds of private sector money, we get some sort of indication of the value for money provided. It is not simply that for every £1 we spend we get an extra £7 back; we are getting expert people at low cost because they are committed to public service. We should all pay tribute to them today.

I mentioned in one of my interventions on the Chairman of the Committee how pleased I was that we were also beginning to take bites out of the private sector, as it had been insinuated that chunks were being taken out of the public purse. It is a matter of public concern that smuggling of tobacco products amounts to about £3.5 billion of lost income to the Government and, therefore, to the taxpayer, which is equivalent to a penny on income tax. It was of particular concern to hear that some 70 per cent. of Imperial Tobacco's exports of Regal and Superking cigarettes were being smuggled back, mainly in massive cargo crates through organised crime, thereby avoiding tax. I am therefore pleased that we have taken a step forward, and I hope that we will not hesitate to do so if such opportunities occur again.

I hope to touch briefly on a number of key reports through which the Committee has added value. Some of our hearings and evidence point to the future of policy development and, indeed, to better value for money from the point of view of the Treasury.

First, I want to focus on our 53rd report, "Reducing Prisoner Reoffending". Basically, every prisoner in our jails costs the taxpayer about £34,000. We have about 73,000 people in our jails—the biggest prison population in Europe apart from Portugal—costing about £2.1 billion. The question is: if it costs £15,000 to send a pupil to board at the best public school in Britain and get him or her to be a top-level taxpayer, why are the Government spending £34,000 to generate repeat offenders 60 per cent. of the time, costing enormous amounts? Other than that £34,000, there are costs in terms of extra police, higher insurance, court costs, fear and anxiety.

The Government, of course, have been effective in reducing crime—it is down by about 27 per cent.—especially crimes such as burglary, and vehicle and violent crime. Contrary to public views, they have also taken a tough approach to sentencing. The number of people sent to prison on a first offence is up 50 per cent., and a mandatory sentence of three years is applied to third-time burglars. Despite that, the press talks about Lord Irvine and Lord Woolf saying that we should be soft. In fact, we have an enormous prison population that has grown by 60 per cent. in the past 10 years.

The key question is: how do we stop those people reoffending? Some 60 per cent. of them will go out and reoffend, costing about £11 billion a year. If we look at the profile of those in our prisons, we see that some 75 per cent. of them have been permanently excluded from schools, which was one of the key findings of our hearings. Pupils in those circumstances would often have tuition for one day a week, while, for the other four days, they would wander around, having misbehaved to start with. Consequently, they would start stealing mobile phones and so on. They arrive in jails—universities of crime—with virtually no education, having been on the street committing petty crime, and, before we know it, they are introduced to a new criminal fraternity who teach them how to become better at committing crime. We found that only between £200 and £1,600 a head of the £34,000 that we spend keeping people incarcerated is spent on education. That is not much to get them into a position where they can work again.

As the Committee heard, studies of reoffending over many years have established that the three drivers that prevent it are work, family support and having a home. Prison does not prepare people by giving them education and retraining for integration in the labour market. Furthermore, due to the overcrowding in our prisons, more than 25,000 prisoners are more than 50 miles from their families and 11,000 are more than 100 miles away. New offenders going into institutions have no family support to enable them to study or work for rehabilitation and they are moved around constantly because of the overcrowding problems.

[Geraint Davies]

The situation is much worse for women. Half of women prisoners have children. Two thirds of the 10,000 children affected are under 10 and four in 10 of the families will be permanently broken and lose their home. We need to think carefully about the management of our prisons and our prisoners and its impact on repeat offending, which amounts to an extra million crimes a year, and the costs involved. As the hon. Member for Tatton pointed out, about 40 per cent. of prisoners leave jail and are homeless, which massively reduces their prospects of getting a job or not reoffending.

There are many lessons to be learned from our reports. The Government have responded to some of the issues. For example, the Department for Education and Skills is taking responsibility for prison education. Some prisons have set up links with housing providers, but the situation is mixed to say the least.

Our report is instructive about the provision of small local units, with boarding and intensive education. They could draw on the lessons that we have learned from the use of pupil referral units. In my patch, excluded children are given the opportunity of full-time education in pupil referral units and 70 per cent. of them go on to further education. In the past, many of them would have gone into the prison system.

If such special, intensive education units can be shown to convert people back to the straight and narrow, into the world of work and earning money, they could be options for sentencing in the courts system. People could be given options akin to drug treatment and testing orders, where they are blood tested for drugs for two years and so on and if they breach the order they go to jail. In this case, people could spend a compulsory two years in a centre that would equip them for work instead of spending nine months in a normal prison. Failure to comply with behaviour and learning standards would lead to default of the order and a return to jail. Such reforms of our prison system could convert serial offenders into taxpayers and I hope that the Government will focus on that businesslike approach.

Children who are at risk of ending up in prison could be identified much earlier, during their school life. Initiatives such as sure start and education action zones should be celebrated and built upon. Children who lag behind at school can become misbehaving pupils, minor offenders and then serial offenders. We need to invest in those children early in their lives for the sake of the whole school environment and for society at large.

Our report on access to higher education is obviously topical. Investment in higher education should be a capital item in the national accounts, not a revenue item. If we compare the amount of tax delivered over a lifetime by a graduate and someone with three A-levels, we find that an extra £50,000 comes back from the graduate. As a business proposition—in terms of borrowing money to invest—that recovery of tax revenue provides a strong argument for the Government. Indeed, the Government could also investigate PFI opportunities in that regard. We found in Committee that there are three barriers to access to higher education, the first of which is secondary schools. Some 90 per cent. of those with A-levels go on to university. My area of Croydon contains some of the fastest-improving schools in the country. That has been achieved through a combination of things, one being leadership in tackling some of the problems at an early stage through, for example, education action zones. Other studies that I have seen show that social background is a major factor in determining the outputs of schools.

The ambition of students to go to university depends partly on the experience of their parents. Sadly, one in five adults are functionally illiterate and one in four are functionally innumerate. By that, I mean that one in five cannot use the "Yellow Pages" effectively and one in four would have great difficulty in calculating their change if they bought groceries in a shop. Given that starting point, it is difficult for pupils from such backgrounds, which are often dominated by overcrowding, television, no access to books and no history of education, to reach a platform from which to break through into higher education.

When we considered the issue of debt, we found that 46 per cent. of full-time students are already in full-time employment, and that of those giving up their education, nearly 40 per cent. do so for financial reasons. Poorer people are more likely to drop out. Some debates in the House have focused on the idea that the average return of a graduate is about 50 per cent., but I would suggest that the key issue is not the average return, but the marginal return from the marginal group to whom we are trying to provide more access. The current proposal, which I am sure that the Public Accounts Committee will consider, is for 9 per cent. extra in tax on earnings over £15,000, which, with the addition of 22 per cent. basic rate tax and 12 per cent. national insurance, would generate a marginal tax rate of 43 per cent. That compares with the higher band rate of 41 per cent. Some people might think, "It might be worth my while getting three A-levels and not going to university."

Mr. Rendel: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the Government have been unable to provide any evidence to show that there is a margin between what a graduate earns and what an average person earns that is any different from what that person would earn even if they were not a graduate? The graduate premium is not based on any evidence. All we know is that those who happen to be graduates earn more than those who are not, but that is not necessarily to say that they would not have earned that much in any case.

Geraint Davies: The evidence that I have seen suggests that there is a causal relationship not just a correlation. Some higher-earning graduates pay about £140,000 extra tax in a lifetime, those in the middle pay an extra £30,000 to £40,000, while those at the bottom end may pay slightly less. It is a moot point. Obviously, if one takes certain degree courses, such as medicine, veterinary science or law, which provide added value through knowledge, as opposed to a mere screen for one's IQ, one will get a return from that.

That means that at a time when people are expected to pay for their degree at a later stage, there will be greater demand for degrees that have a perceivable return as opposed to, for example, humanities degrees. Someone might say, "I can get a humanities degree, but I won't have the added value of being a medic." It has been suggested that the extra top-up fee will be applied to more popular courses such as medicine. In that case, poor students, who currently have to pay £1,000 in tuition fees, will have to pay £3,000, minus the £1,000 grant. They will have to pay twice as much, albeit that the payment is deferred.

Poorer students may have to jump bigger hurdles if they choose courses that offer higher salaries later. I appreciate that that is a sophisticated point, but it is nevertheless important. Of course, the Government have offered to write off debts if students enter public service. That is good for public service, but market distortions and so on must be taken into account.

There are choices and challenges. I should have liked national insurance to be extended beyond its current level, up to where the 40 per cent. tax starts as a surrogate graduate tax. I attended a large comprehensive school and was the only one to get into Oxford university that year. No one had gone to Oxford in the previous year and no one went in the following year. If I had had to face extra costs of £7,000, I would not have gone.

The Government are clearly chasing an entry target of 50 per cent. for 2010. They want to provide better access. Whether they achieve the target is an empirical question, which the Public Accounts Committee will again consider.

Let us consider the report entitled "Postcomm: Opening the Post". As other hon. Members have said, our impact on the postal service in Britain was significant. Consignia was about to restructure and lose 30,000 jobs and the over-zealous regulator was prepared to enforce liberalisation in the marketplace ahead of our European counterparts. That would have meant that competitors from Germany, and especially Holland, could have come here, cherry-picked, taken the heart out of the postal service and undermined universal service provision.

People in Britain have rightly been used to a postal service that delivers mail anywhere in the country for the same stamp. It was suggested that there was a danger of cherry-picking. The regulator implied that there was no cherry-picking and that the direct costs were covered in rural parts of the country. That is fallacious. Clearly, if an operator takes 90 per cent. of all postal services and simply uses Royal Mail stamps for the other 10 per cent. so that Royal Mail picks up the fixed costs of the deeply rural areas, that constitutes unfair competition.

I am glad that our intense scrutiny and the regulator's lack of rigour, which was shown in our hearings, meant that the arrival of competition is delayed. The regulator claimed that whether the playing field was uneven and other such matters were not in his remit.

Mr. Steinberg: I am sure that my hon. Friend remembers that the regulator objected to the increase of 1p in the price of a stamp. The Post Office suggested that that increase, which it was not allowed to make for many years, would have solved many of its problems. Does my hon. Friend agree that the regulator therefore put the Post Office in a worse position?

Geraint Davies: That is an important point. We found that, in the past five years, although the Post Office's turnover had increased from £6 billion to £8 billion, it had moved into negative profitability. The reason for that was that the real cost of a first class stamp had gone down by 8 per cent., because the Post Office was not allowed to raise the price of stamps. Yet when the British public were asked "What do you think about value for money?" nine out of 10 would reply, "It's very good value." The cost of a stamp here was about 30 per cent. less than in Germany and elsewhere.

We were finding that, in essence, the regulator was working against the public interest. The withdrawal of benefit income is causing the widespread destruction of postal services in the rural community. The amount involved is £400 million, which is a penny on stamps, and I believe that the public would agree to pay the extra penny for those extra services. But the public are not given that choice, because of the way in which the Post Office is set up and is commercially run, without factoring in social value as well.

Mr. Steinberg: When I asked the regulator about an increase of a penny on a stamp, he said that it was his ambition to see the price of a stamp decreased. That being the case, I think that the regulator was working against the Post Office rather than for it.

Geraint Davies: It was my experience that the regulator was completely out of touch with the public interest and was acting in a very narrow way. He clearly did not like Consignia or the people in it, and wanted to move forward irrespective of the outcome to the Royal Mail. Luckily, the public mood and the sterling work of our Committee managed to stop that and delay liberalisation.

The final report that I wish to allude to very quickly is the 61st report, on the management of surplus property by the NHS. The NHS is to sell off £700 million worth of land and property by March this year. The difficulty in London is that an extra 800,000 people will move in, requiring health services, which cannot be provided if less land is available. Individual trusts have been selling off individual bits of land and property, without a strategic approach. I believe that in London there should be an audit of all public sector land—highways, health, police, rail, local authorities and so on—with the aim of taking a strategic view on land use over the next 10 years in terms of the public interest. The National Audit office could take a lead in this audit, which would be done not just for health needs, but for housing needs and the like. It would be better than a piecemeal approach, which ultimately would not deliver the best use of land for operational and accommodation needs.

We have been talking about the issue of PFI. Clearly, the arguments for PFI are about risk transfer, added value and innovation, as well as off-balance-sheet financing. But a key issue is the fact that the discount rate that the Treasury now applies has gone from 6 per cent. to 3 per cent. I support that, but it will make for a much more competitive environment in which new PFI ventures will seek to make money. Therefore, I think that fewer will come forward, and accordingly I support the Audit Commission's recommendation that

[Geraint Davies]

we twin-track traditional public procurement ventures, in terms of building hospitals and the like, alongside the newer forms of financing, so that we have a proper test.

Mr. Love: As the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee are supposed to scrutinise public expenditure with a view to value for money, and as the Audit Commission has questioned whether PFI in the education sector provides value for money, I wonder whether either the National Audit Office or the Public Accounts Committee has yet had an opportunity to discuss the Audit Commission's very important recommendations.

Geraint Davies: We have not, but the Audit Commission's report echoes the findings of the NAO, which are that some of the early PFIs provided less value for money, but that the more recent ones exhibit the effects of a learning curve, much of it informed by the work of the NAO and the Audit Commission itself, and are delivering much better value for money.

The point that I am trying to make is not that PFIs have been historically problematic, but that, given the upfront costs of competing PFIs, making them much more competitive, reducing the discount rate, providing clawbacks and so on, may discourage some private sector operators from coming forward, which is fine. We do, however, need to engage public sector comparators and procurement to ensure that there is real competition between both public and competing private sector providers. I am sure we will do that.

In essence, it has been another great year for the PAC. On prisons, the question of whether we can deliver better value for money for taxpayers out of the £34,000 investment should be considered, as should land use by the NHS. There is much thinking to do on higher education and a range of other issues, including PFI. As I said, we can do that because we have an alternative civil service of 700 or 800 accountants supporting us. The work of the PAC in providing financial scrutiny for the House of Commons continues its great tradition as the premier Select Committee of Parliament.

6.10 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I, too, wish to pay tribute to the enormous amount of useful work that the Public Accounts Committee and its Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), have carried out in the past 12 months as they followed the money and investigated the efficiency and quality of those in the public sector responsible for how taxpayers' money is spent. I also pay tribute to Sir John Bourn, the Comptroller and Auditor General, and his colleagues whose reports do so much to inform the Committee's work.

I have spent many hours reading the Committee's conclusions in the nearly 70 reports that have been produced over the year. They are a veritable gold mine of information. I regret to say, however, that most of them constitute a depressing litany of the failings, wastes and inefficiencies of the public sector. I hope that all those hon. Members who seriously care about the effectiveness of public expenditure will read through the reports, even if they have been unable to attend the debate.

It is a great shame that, except in limited subjects, the media have not and do not, give much coverage to the reports, because they represent the only independent, unbiased investigation of what goes on in the public sector. Some hon. Members may have read what Professor Minford said in December about the national statistics for 2001. According to him, although 8 per cent. more money was spent on public services, the public received only 3.1 per cent. in extra volume in terms of more or better services. After adjusting for 1.9 per cent. inflation, that constituted 6.1 per cent. of real extra spending and 3.1 per cent. of extra volume, so there was an overall shortfall to the taxpayer of 50 per cent. Given that spending on public services is rising at close to 10 per cent. per annum, that implies that about 1 per cent. of gross domestic product has been transferred from the private to the public sector by additional taxes, 50 per cent. of which has been poured into a black hole. The effectiveness of the public sector is crucial if we are to achieve what both sides of the House want to achieve.

I have no doubt that the overwhelming majority of the 7 million people who work in the public sector are conscientious and do their best, but the PAC reports tell a story of money being dissipated ineffectively, of bureaucratic incompetence and of waste, mismanagement and inefficiency—all, dare I say it, the diseases of monolithic state provision and production, which lack customer power. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) asked about quantifying waste. I added up what I found and it came to at least £18 billion. I recollect other colleagues placing the figure as high as £24 billion.

The Cabinet Office reports focus on value for money, but find that there is a lack of adequate consultation with customers to identify barriers to effective policies. There is inadequate consideration of the effects of policies by one Department on another, inadequate involvement with those who have to implement policies, and insufficient flexibility to adopt new methods of delivery. They find that Departments lack the confidence and data to terminate policies that are not working or are no longer cost-effective. None the less, £400 million per annum is being spent on policy-related research. On joint working and cross-cutting, the PAC, I am afraid, damningly comments that the civil service does not really know what makes sense.

The Government implicitly recognised the need to seek to achieve value for taxpayers when they set up the system of regulatory impact assessments in 1999. As Members will know, their effectiveness has been criticised in both Whitehall and the business community. In its review of RIAs, the Committee found no adequate Whitehall proposals for improvement, substantial variation in the quality of assessments, insufficient use of RIAs to support the Government's arguments against European Union regulations, and the need for external evaluation of RIAs by, for example, the National Audit Office to improve their effectiveness.

Geraint Davies: The hon. Gentleman said that a significant amount of money was going in, but there was insufficient output in his view. Does he accept that any organisation with a history of massive underfunding that then receives money should first return to normal working practices? After more investment, its output or the rate of return increases. The hon. Gentleman's recipe for slashing public investment by 20 per cent. is therefore counter productive.

Mr. Flight: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman should fall for his party's Goebbels-like misrepresentations. Had he read my article, he would know that I was talking about the scope for cutting waste in certain areas—in central administration, for example, by up to 20 per cent. Similar conclusions fall from the reports of the PAC, of which the hon. Gentleman is a member. He is missing the wood for the trees—the history of the Committee's reports shows that, for a number of years, it has sought to deal with public sector inefficiencies and the reduction of waste. It is strange that some Members should sit back and say that the Committee is doing an excellent job—indeed, it is—while waste and inefficiency continue.

When looking at achieving better value for money from professional services, the PAC found that Departments had not responded adequately to major initiatives and that there was a lack of information on professional services expenditure, and the Comptroller and Auditor General identified a failure to save £65 million. Departments employ more than 3,000 internal economists, statisticians and lawyers, and, in recent years, have spent an estimated £1 billion on consultants. As one report comments,

"framework agreements for the use of professional services should enable discounts of up to 20 per cent. to be achieved".

Those recommendations are all wonderful—similar points have been made today—but why are they not being implemented? The PAC Chairman dwelt at length on several reports on health provision and the NHS. Several Members, particularly the hon. Members for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) and for City of Durham (Mr. Steinberg), focused on the report on clinical negligence. I find that report acutely disturbing. The problem is not new, but it is growing and it is not being tackled. In March 2000, 23,000 cases were outstanding, taking an average of five years to resolve. Provisions for expected payment of outstanding claims amounted to £4.4 billion. As was said earlier, allowing for the associated legal costs, there is a drain on health spending of £7 billion. In addition, the national health service will incur administrative costs to deal with those problems.

Legal costs exceeded the sums paid out in 65 per cent. of settlements. As of March 2000, a quarter of NHS trusts had not achieved even basic risk management standards set by the clinical negligence scheme, and two thirds had not achieved more than the basic standards. If ever there was a territory overdue for major change and reform capable of effecting substantial savings, that is it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough and other hon. Members referred to the report on NHS waiting lists. Above all, the report describes the changes in culture and practice that are needed and that go beyond money. It cites doubts about the reliability of the figures, and suggests that they do not truly measure the time between seeing a GP and receiving treatment. As my hon. Friend pointed out, the report confirms that targeting in the NHS is resulting in clinical priorities not always being adhered to. It also states that, in some cases, the forced ties between GPs and local hospitals are resulting in increasing waiting lists, and undercapacity elsewhere outside the tied hospitals.

Reference has been made to the fact that staff in 10 hospitals were found to have been engaged in gerrymandering waiting-list data to hide missed targets. It was especially worrying to read that confidentiality deals were wrongly concluded, and that severance packages were paid to people who had departed under a cloud. The report also raised doubts about the ability of 189 trusts to handle complex disciplinary cases.

My hon. Friend also referred to the fraud figures in the Department for Work and Pensions. They are depressing to read. As other hon. Members have noted, not only is more than £3 billion being lost to fraud and errors, but there is no apparent probability that the targets to cut that amount—by 10 per cent. this year, 25 per cent. in 2004 and 50 per cent. in 2006—are likely to be met.

The Committee found what I can only describe as gross inefficiency and mismanagement in the medical assessment of incapacity and disability benefits. Fifty per cent. of cases are appealed; 40 per cent. of the appeals are successful, and 25 per cent. of appeals arise from decision-making failures in the Department. The report found that £40 million a year is lost in paying incapacity benefits to people who are no longer eligible. Worst of all, of 25,000 people called for examination each year, 17,000 are sent home because of overbooking.

The Committee also looked at the implementation of the national probation service information system strategy. It found that, although 49 out of 54 offices had installed the information system, only 16 were making serious use of case records available on it. There was also a lack of knowledge about how to use the system. As other hon. Members have noted, it is a disgrace that more than 40 per cent. of the fines imposed by the courts are not being collected. It is not just a matter of losing £160 million a year; it makes a mockery of our justice system.

Other hon. Members focused on higher education. I shall not repeat what they said, but I noted that it was reported that £725 million had been spent on additional courses at further education colleges. However, that report also states that some 38 per cent. of the additional lessons were rated as at best satisfactory or worse, and that many students left college without achieving qualifications.

The Committee found that losses to the Revenue from excise fraud amounted to between £6.4 billion and £7.3 billion, excluding value added tax, but that the courts had confiscated only £23 million between 1994 and 1998. The relevant report points out that, despite attempts to tighten up, the root of the problem is diagnosed as the excessive differentiation between United Kingdom and continental European duty rates, which represent an ongoing incentive to fraud. The report has found that, as Customs tighten up in one area, fraudsters tend to move to another.

The report also refers to VAT missing trader fraud, which is a major problem. It is unclear whether Customs and Excise started investigations and prosecutions without telling the Treasury, or whether the Treasury

[Mr. Flight]

has been a little economical with the truth as to when it knew the extent of the problems and what Customs officials were doing.

The report on the Inland Revenue appropriation account for 1999–2000 points out that the Comptroller and Auditor General does not have access to employers' records to test the accuracy of tax credit payments, which rose to £4.5 billion last year.

The report on the contract extension for NIRS 2 makes the point that the then Department of Social Security had made a major mistake in not assessing the impact on pensions and national insurance legislation, or the risks and costs involved. It also said that the Accenture arrangements, and the out-performance of its targeted productivity by an enormous margin, suggested that the prices had been far too high. However, the report noted that the Department was locked in, and expressed grave concern about the £4 billion value of the contract to be rolled over next year.

Offenders in prison have already been referred to. Given that so much is spent per prisoner, it is incredibly depressing that six out of 10 are recommitted within two years of their release. As well as the other factors that have been mentioned, breaking the cycle of crime requires, in particular, effective action on drug abuse.

The Committee is virtually the only body monitoring the efficiency of the Ministry of Defence and of defence procurement: I do not think anybody else has commented on that territory. The 2000 report found that up to £102 million had been wasted in pursuing ineffective solutions to the Bowman equipment problem, and £155 million written off in connection with medium-range TRIGAT. It found that with TRIGAT in particular, the MOD took far too long to meet the armed forces' needs: the project took 26 years, and delivery was still not expected until two years after it had been cancelled.

The 2001 report describes progress as a result of smart procurement, but says that project cost control remains weak and performance measures confused. It recommends that the UK follow a more flexible approach, along the lines followed in the United States, to contract for development work more closely with the industry. A separate report on Ministry of Defence property management found that poor practices and weak oversight had left the Department open to the risks of fraud.

The PAC found that Department for International Development targets were also deeply compromised. The Department's fundamental target was to reduce world poverty, but the EU received 55 per cent. of the budget and was doing very little to direct help to poor countries. The Committee also found that, in general, the Department's targets were not well geared to informed decisions on the ground, nor well communicated.

Others have referred to flood risks. The report found that there was too much overlapping bureaucracy, waste and inefficiency. Fortunately, in West Sussex the chief executive used emergency powers and took the necessary measures to stop Chichester flooding. He reported that had he not used those emergency powers, it would have taken him more than a year to deal with the bureaucratic barriers that he would have been required to negotiate to implement the necessary measures.

Others have already commented on the report on improving air quality. It says that the targets were limited by gaps in evidence on the health effects of air pollution, and it comments on the absence of contingency plans if the targets were not met. The Department's approach to assessing whether the benefits of further possible improvements in air quality justified the massive costs that would be involved, failed to assess whether reducing one pollutant might increase the levels of others. The report notes that basing financial values on the expected benefits was nonsense. It seems to be saying, in polite language, that the whole exercise was pretty much nonsense.

Another of the Committee's reports has reviewed, over the past year, the scandalous way in which the sale of Britain's gold reserves was effected in the summer and autumn of 1999. It confirms that excessive transparency as regards announcing the sales resulted in hitting the bottom of the market cycle. I also make the point, which the report does not cover, that at the time many or several leading investment banks that had borrowed gold under the Bank of England's gold window were actually short of gold.

There is a report on the landfill tax credit scheme, which it says is administratively too complex, lacks accountability and transparency and has administrative costs of some 9 per cent. per annum.

The report on shifting to resource accounting is also depressing. It says that one third of 12 Departments' accounts are qualified and that, whereas the Home Office and DEFRA made virtually no improvement, 27 Departments failed to meet statutory deadlines for rendering their accounts for audit.

Therefore, right across the board it is a story, by any normal standards, of inefficiency, waste and ineffectiveness. Others have paid special attention to the territory of the private finance initiative and public-private partnerships; I particularly agreed with the conclusions drawn by my hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne). Obviously, this area has had some media coverage. The common theme was the need for more post-implementation professional management of PFI projects. Although there was well-recorded criticism of inadequate participation in gains achieved from refinancing, I was pleased to note that 58 per cent. of authorities with performance reviews had made deductions in their payments due to failure to meet particular performance standards. In the example cited of the Treasury buildings PFI, the report stressed the need for third-party competitive funding and the inappropriateness of the 6 per cent. discount rate, which was effectively rigging fair value comparisons. I hope that in future the Committee will look into not just the major MOD building refurbishment, but the drains and urinals project, where more than £20 million has already been spent on legal expenses.

Mr. Love: Down the drain already.

Mr. Flight: Correct; there is a bad smell coming out of it.

The report on the channel tunnel rail link is perhaps the most damning, because the Government ended up guaranteeing £4 billion and more of bonds, with, in essence, a reward to the equity promoter for having failed. That is the reverse of what the transfer of the operating risk should be about.

Others have mentioned the £700 million NHS property deal. Not much was said, but I read into what was said that the Committee thought that the NHS might have done a pretty bad commercial deal.

We have today's NAO report on the mismanagement by the Lord Chancellor's Department of the Libra magistrates court computer-linking project, which, if I understand what is being said, will waste some £300 million.

No one mentioned the report on the millennium dome, the biggest epitaph of incompetence of the lot, but perhaps it has been commented on in many other places.

Mr. Love: It is a tour de force that the hon. Gentleman has managed to cover so many reports, but is the conclusion that he draws from them that it is still possible to cut 20 per cent. from public expenditure?

Mr. Flight: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should have a little medical attention to his ears. As the Committee must be well aware, there are many areas in which there is very substantial scope for less waste, and in some areas the potential may be as high as 20 per cent., but no one—certainly not I—has ever said that that was across the board. Indeed, in the report to which the hon. Gentleman is implicitly referring, I twice made the point that there really was not the scope to cut expenditure overall in health or education, two of the main spending areas.

However, I find the contents of the reports disappointing, given the Government's professed keenness to get good and fair value, and look at cutting out waste. I hope that the Financial Secretary to the Treasury will have plenty to say about the pile of reports, because they detail more than enough waste to achieve substantial cuts in expenditure.

Public service agreement targets are mentioned in many of the reports, such as those on the health service, the Inland Revenue's progress, the introduction of e-services, higher education, reducing benefit fraud, and many of the other areas in which our £650 billion in taxes is spent. The Government introduced PSA targets in 1998 with the intention that they would demonstrate to the public that the public services were being run more effectively and that the promises of improvement were being kept. Since 1998, three separate sets of agreements and targets, totalling more than 600 and spanning more than 20 Government Departments, have been issued.

So far, almost 40 per cent. of the targets set in 1998, excluding those that have been rolled over, have been failed or are on course to be; similarly, 75 per cent. of the targets set in 2000, again excluding those rolled over, have been failed. No doubt, those percentages will improve substantially once the rolled-over targets have been included. The latest forecasts for performance against PSA targets were due in autumn last year, but as we approach February 2003, five key Departments have not reported. They include the Department of Health, the Lord Chancellor's Department, which seems to be most often in the dock of the PAC, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Foreign Office—all of which are responsible for major spending.

Two things strike me about that: first, to be so late in reporting illustrates great sloppiness in the public sector; secondly, a major improvement on the success achieved to date is needed. Of the Departments that have reported, Customs and Excise stated that one of its targets was crude and selective, and other Departments refer to a considerable amount of out-of-date information and a significant number of targets not met.

While the targets regime is first the responsibility of the Select Committee on Public Administration, I hope that the Public Accounts Committee, in pursuing the three key themes that have characterised its work, will examine the targets system. Evidence has emerged to date that the targeting regime has not improved efficiency, economy or standards of delivery, but has tended to pervert the focus of efforts in the public sector to the satisfying of targets rather than to doing the job well and properly satisfying customers. It also produces entrenched hierarchies in which the checked are subservient to the checkers, which is especially disheartening for staff. Brain power is deflected to setting targets rather than to improving delivery, and in the cases referred to by the PAC Chairman, the regime has led to cooking of the books. I hope that we will have a proper appraisal of targets next year.

6.38 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Ruth Kelly): I shall speak more briefly than I intended to, in order to allow the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee a couple of minutes in which to respond to the debate.

This stimulating and wide-ranging debate has confirmed my view that the PAC continues to make a major contribution to our system of parliamentary scrutiny and accountability. The programme of the Committee in each Parliament is always impressive in scope, and in forensic skills the Committee has few equals. The Committee's effectiveness is greatly assisted by the able chairmanship of the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), who ensures both that the Committee performs its task rigorously and that hearings are conducted in a fair manner. In doing so, he has helped to maintain the rich tradition of the Committee, which dates back to the Gladstone era.

The Committee is helped in its task by the assistance provided by the Comptroller and Auditor General, Sir John Bourn, and the staff of the National Audit Office. The independent watchdog has an important role to play in holding the Executive to account. Its financial audit work and value for money studies continue to provide high-quality analysis that helps to raise standards of financial stewardship, efficiency and effectiveness in Government Departments.

The Government certainly share a common agenda with the Committee. We both want to see that public money is used wisely, economically, efficiently and effectively. We want high-quality public services to be delivered, Departments to follow best practice in project management and risks to be identified and managed effectively. These are not party political issues, and some

[Ruth Kelly]

of the cases that the Committee has studied over the past year are rooted in the actions of previous Governments in the early to mid-1990s.

Much progress has been made by Departments over the past year on these fronts and I will want to come back to those points later in my speech. First, I should like to reflect on the work of the Committee over the past year. The Chairman's speech reminded us of the broad range of topics that the Committee considers. I know that this important work involves a heavy commitment from everyone concerned. It is immensely to the credit of Committee members that the Committee continues to make recommendations that help to raise standards of performance in Departments and to ensure that past experience is applied in implementing the projects and programmes of tomorrow.

The Chairman highlighted several reports by the Committee and reminded us of their key findings and recommendations. His examples illustrate the importance of the issues that the Committee looked at. I am particularly pleased that he mentioned the hearing on the acquisition of the London Heart hospital. It is good to hear praise for a successful venture, as well as criticism for things that have not gone so well.

One comment that cannot be made about the Committee is that it lacks a human touch. Its findings and recommendations very often hit on issues that impinge on the lives of individual citizens. Let me give two examples to illustrate that. The first is crime, an issue that concerns everyone. In its report on prisoner reoffending, the Committee found that nearly six out of every 10 prisoners are convicted of one or more offences within two years of being released. Breaking that cycle of crime requires action to address drug misuse and offending behaviour, and to improve literacy and numeracy.

For those reasons, the Committee recommended that the Prison Service should develop programmes that meet the needs of short-term prisoners, as well as longer-term prisoners, to lower the risk of their becoming repeat offenders. In response, the Prison Service was able to say that it was setting challenging targets to improve its regimes and to expand the provision of skills training, drug treatment and resettlement activities. The Prison Service pointed to its work with the probation service to develop pilot programmes, specifically for short-term prisoners.

A second example is obesity, and I much enjoyed the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mr. Steinberg) on that subject. The Committee found that most adults in England are overweight, and that one in five—around 8 million in total—are obese. Obesity causes much human suffering by contributing to chronic disease and premature mortality, and it entails a substantial cost to the NHS and to the wider economy.

No single Department can tackle the issue on its own. The Committee sensibly noted that a joined-up approach was needed across Departments and local agencies to tackle this problem effectively. The Committee particularly noted the emphasis that needed to be placed on children and young people leading healthy lifestyles.

The Committee made a range of recommendations, going right across government and addressing a diverse range of issues, including food labelling and advertising, physical exercise by children and the provision of advice on weight control. This case illustrates the Committee's capacity to grapple with complex issues that are highly relevant to the man in the street. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham took his comments to heart and instituted a change in his regime.

The Government's response highlighted the steps that the Department of Health, the Department for Education and Skills, the Department for Transport and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport were taking with other partners to improve diet and physical activity levels and the significant investment being made to transform physical education and school club links over the next three years.

Several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) and the Chairman of the Committee, mentioned the report on NHS waiting lists. Its findings make sober reading. Not only had some hospital managers and staff made adjustments to their waiting list data to hide the fact that they were missing Government targets, but in some cases those actions had prolonged the suffering of patients. Such serious findings demanded a serious response. NHS trusts have been advised that clinical priority must be the main determinant of when patients are seen, and that any misreporting of figures will be treated as a matter of great importance. Action has been taken to improve data quality and ensure correct reporting. It is unacceptable for data to be manipulated.

Although I accept the kind words of the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne) about my re-election prospects in Bolton, West, I do not accept the charge that he made, and I make no apology for setting those targets in the first place. Targets are an essential part of good performance management; they provide a clear focus for all those involved in delivery. Measuring performance enables success to be rewarded and failure to be corrected.

The Chairman repeated the Committee's continuing interest in the efforts being made by Departments to tackle fraud. As he said, we are fortunate in this country to have very few serious cases of fraud, but that does not provide grounds for complacency. Departments are frequently reminded of their responsibilities to reduce the risks of internal and external fraud and, in those cases where it occurs, vigorously to investigate the cause and the culprits. For its part, the Treasury continues to provide advice to Departments on managing the risk of fraud, and alerts them to cases that have lessons with wider application. We wish to entrench a culture of fraud deterrence in each and every Government Department.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), in his usual trenchant fashion, referred to the Government's record on fraud and asked whether attempts had been made to quantify it. The Treasury publishes an annual report on internal fraud and theft in Government Departments, the level of which has been fairly stable for many years at about 600 cases a year, with a value of about £2 million per annum. Of course, we must always to do more to make sure that the figure reduces further.

The Chairman of the Committee mentioned social security benefit fraud, as did the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs. The Department for Work and Pensions is working hard to reduce fraud and error in the social security system. I emphasise that not only are the figures very large, involving thousands if not hundreds of thousands or millions of cases, but at present it is impossible to distinguish between fraud and error, so the overall figures capture a rather complex situation. The DWP is working hard to combat fraud and error and is trying to have its accounts accepted in an unqualified way as soon as possible.

The Chairman of the Committee mentioned delivery as one of his key themes. In that context, my hon. Friends the Members for Tamworth (Mr. Jenkins) and for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) asked whether the skills of senior civil servants were appropriate for delivering public policy. I certainly agree that delivery and the skills of senior civil servants need to be improved. The Government are taking several steps to enhance project and programme skills, and to champion career paths that embrace responsibility for delivery.

Several hon. Members referred to the role of the private finance initiative in improving public services, and I note the close interest that the Committee takes in such deals. The PFI is ensuring that unprecedented new investment in public services is delivered on time and to budget. It has generated £30 billion of investment since 1997. In the right circumstances, the PFI can ensure that the public and private sectors work together to deliver better quality services for the public. Like all innovative projects, some will fail and lessons will be learned.

The Committee's work has been very helpful in that process, but there have also been many very successful projects. I was glad to hear that my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham had moved from being a sceptic and was starting to warm to the PFI. That is encouraging. Unfortunately, my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth is not yet persuaded, but I remind him of the words of an assistant auditor general of the National Audit Office who said:

> "The evidence is that on the whole PFI deals deliver to time and to budget. You get what you want, you get it when you want it and it costs you what you thought it was going to cost. Conventional public projects have a very bad record in that respect".

None the less, the Government's approach to PFIs has developed considerably since early contracts were established and there have been many improvements in the system, some of which were made on the initiative of the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee. However, I also remind the House that traditional projects were, on average, almost 50 per cent. over budget between 1975 and 1995. That is not an enviable record.

We welcome the PAC's continued scrutiny and I hope that it will turn its attention to other issues that have been the subject of considerable interest today, such as the use of the public sector comparator and how it can be improved in assessing future projects.

I note the comments of the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. Bacon) and I am aware of his great interest in the Treasury PFI project. I was extremely pleased to hear his comments about the quality of parliamentary answers from the Treasury. He made many detailed points and I shall certainly not try to address them all now, but I shall study *Hansard* and provide a full reply to each of them.

On the Sharman report on audit and accountability, I was pleased to hear the warm words of the Chairman of the Committee about the Government's response. Indeed, I think it is fair to say that, when the response to the report was published, the Committee was pleasantly surprised by the fact that it went further in some respects than Lord Sharman had suggested. I pay tribute to the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) and his colleagues on the Committee, who played their part in ensuring that the Government took on board many of the comments that were made.

To remind us of the situation at the time, let me say that the Government had not been opposed in principle to changes in audit and access arrangements. For instance, we had provided the Comptroller and Auditor General with access where he had required it in the past. The Government's policy had been that he should be the auditor of all new non-departmental public bodies established since 1997. However, we had some genuine concerns about how wider access and audit facilities would be used and the impact that they would have on the affected bodies.

For example, would new statutory powers of access to documents held by private sector bodies and individuals lead to big extra burdens on the private sector? We did not, for example, want access powers to prevent small companies from doing business with government or to introduce unnecessary bureaucracy in arrangements for grants paid to small bodies. We also asked whether the NAO would be able to manage the additional work load involved in auditing more non-departmental public bodies without the quality of service suffering, and whether it would continue to provide the range of assurance and services that private sector auditors provide when they audit such bodies.

To his great credit, Lord Sharman fully recognised the need for protocols and assurances from the auditor if greater powers on audit and access were to be given. Following his recommendations, suitable protocols and other practical arrangements were discussed with the NAO. In the light of those assurances and arrangements about the way in which the Comptroller and Auditor General would use his powers, the Government accepted Lord Sharman's main recommendations and, indeed, went further in some respects.

On the specific points raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West, we have consulted the Comptroller and Auditor General on the necessary orders providing him with statutory powers of audit and access. He has said that he is content, and I believe that the orders will be laid before Parliament next week. So I can confirm that, if Parliament agrees, the new powers will be in place in the coming financial year.

My right hon. Friend also asked about access to non-departmental public bodies that are companies. Department of Trade and Industry officials work closely with NAO officials to ensure that the legal position is understood. The Government support Lord Sharman's recommendations, and we certainly would support any change—if it is possible—to take place through the forthcoming companies legislation.

On the CAG's access to the BBC, I do not want to discuss the matter further today, other than to say that I have taken note of the feelings expressed on the Floor

[Ruth Kelly]

of the House. The Government are considering the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee, and we will respond in due course. I also heard the comments about access to the Financial Services Authority. The Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 empowers the Treasury to institute value-for-money studies of the FSA itself, but my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has said that he will consider inviting the CAG to carry out such studies if the subject matter is suitable.

This debate has again demonstrated the enormous value of the Committee's work and its enduring contribution to the process of parliamentary scrutiny. It is in the interests of the House and of the ordinary taxpayer that it continues to maintain this proud tradition.

6.57 pm

Mr. Leigh: May I thank the Financial Secretary to the Treasury for her remarks, and in particular for her commitment to introducing the order relating to Sharman next week? That is very welcome news for the Committee. I further thank her, and my hon. Friend the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, for their summing up of this debate. They seemed to reach rather different conclusions about our work. I suppose that that shows that success in policy making is, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder. Perhaps we can all agree that, whichever party is in charge, there is always room for cutting out waste, and that is precisely what we try to do.

I thank the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), who leads the Labour group—if I can describe it that way—on the Committee, and the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel), who leads the somewhat smaller Liberal Democrat group, for their support in making our work this year such a success. I also thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments on the BBC, and the hon. Member for Newbury for his comments on prisoner reoffending. The hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Geraint Davies) obviously takes a great interest in that subject, and I thank him for his comments as well.

I thank the hon. Member for Tamworth (Mr. Jenkins) for taking part, and for his comments on agricultural fraud. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) for what he said about the essential need to promote project managers into the position of permanent secretary. I also thank those who took part in the mini-debate on private finance initiatives, which was today's central theme. My hon. Friends the Members for South Norfolk (Mr. Bacon) and for Tatton (Mr. Osborne), and the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) offered some interesting facts and arguments about the PFI. This debate will run and run, and although it is true that we are getting better at delivering these projects on time and on budget, real concerns remain about transferring risks, about taking these matters off the balance sheet, and about public sector comparators. Anybody who takes an interest in the PFI should study this debate.

Our Committee has had its day in the court of Parliament, and I believe that we have proved today that we are doing a good job in holding the Executive to account. I commend the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House takes note of the 1st to 63rd Reports of the Committee of Public Accounts of Session 2001–02, and of the Treasury Minutes on these Reports (Cm 5393, 5450, 5470, 5477, 5481, 5487, 5512, 5524, 5549, 5600, 5612, 5636 and 5676; and HC 1261, Session 2001–02).

PETITION

Fireworks

6.59 pm

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore): I humbly submit the petition of Tina Griffiths and more than 20,000 of the people of Ogmore in South Wales, who declare that the current controls on fireworks are in need of improvement.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urgently reviews fireworks legislation, and in particular to require all public firework displays to be controlled by licensed pyrotechnicians, to restrict the times of year fireworks can be bought, to restrict the times of day fireworks can be set off, and to license all vendors of fireworks to meet strict safety criteria and to give trading standards the power to revoke the licence of any vendor caught selling fireworks to underage children.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Council Tax (Lowestoft)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jim Murphy.]*

7 pm

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): It may seem incredible that, more than 10 years since the introduction of the council tax, there is still a major dispute about bandings—not the case of an individual householder, but that of a group of residents who live in homes that form part of an estate. It is the longest-running case that I have on my books. It began even before I was first elected in 1997, and I inherited it from my predecessor. I believe that it has become rather famous in the folklore of the Valuation Office agency and the valuation tribunal service. It has involved a succession of the VOA's senior officials, top regional tribunal staff, the ombudsman, the adjudicator's office, a Minister in the previous Government and, indeed, very briefly, when she first became a Minister in 1997, my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General, picking up correspondence from her predecessor.

The reason for this long saga is simple: injustices do not go away. The residents of Crestview Drive, Lowestoft feel a strong sense of injustice over their dealings with the VOA. My experience is that most people with a complaint usually give up after a period of time, even if it is not resolved. The fact that these residents have not abandoned their campaign is significant and says much about the case. I have probably spent more time on this case than any other from my constituents, but it is worth taking time in the House today to review what has happened, to draw out the key issues and to suggest a way forward.

I said that council tax was introduced more than 10 years ago. We know that that was done in a hurry by the then Government to escape from the disaster of the poll tax. But imagine how a group of residents felt when two years after their property bands had been established, they were told by the VOA that they were wrong and that they would be raised from B to C—and imagine how they felt when, a year later, some of them were told that their homes were not in fact band C and would be raised even further to band D.

For those people, most of them pensioners, that was a disaster to rival the poll tax. It gave rise to two reactions. First, it gave rise to the feeling that the VOA was incompetent—and that reaction is not surprising. However, it also made people look seriously at their road and their estate and compare their council tax bands and properties. The irony is that most of the estate was built by the same builder, with standard bungalow types, so it should be very easy to establish broad comparability and therefore a sense of fairness, especially in the eyes of residents, but the VOA has consistently been unable to do that over all these years.

I must say that the VOA has given over an enormous amount of time to the case, and some of the staff have tried to be as helpful as possible. That the case remains unresolved is due to one or two flaws in the system, but it is predominantly down to the intransigence of one official, the district valuation officer of the East Anglia valuation office. People can eventually accept that a bad mistake happened in the first place, but they cannot accept a refusal by officials to adopt a common-sense approach and fairness in the subsequent attempts to rectify the situation.

In October 1995, the director (east) of the VOA admitted in a letter:

> "It is with very much regret that I have to agree with your comment that the VO has made a complete shambles of banding the properties in Crestview Drive."

The ombudsman later recognised that there was

> "prima facie evidence of maladministration."

However, in March 1996, the then Economic Secretary, Angela Knight, declared:

> "the senior official who conducted the inquiry has confirmed that on the evidence available the bandings of the bungalows in Crestview Drive and the adjoining side roads are now correct."

If only that were the case. Over the next four years, many homes on the estate regularly had their bandings altered, some by the VOA and some following tribunal decisions. Residents could see no consistency and lost confidence in the VOA.

What angered the residents most of all, however, was that whenever they pointed to comparable properties on the estate that were in bands lower than those to which their homes had been raised, the VOA would never accept that the mistake was with the original properties whose bands were raised, but proceeded to raise the banding of more and more properties on the estate. First, other properties in Crestview drive had bands put up, and then the closes off Crestview drive. The VOA even set about the older part of the estate, but I shall say more about that later. After each stage, the VOA stated that all the bandings are now correct, only to make further changes later. For example, No. 7 Sharon drive was once band C, increased to D, and then reduced to C again, although a director of the VOA later wrote to me and said that it should be a D.

My constituents have used various means available to them to try to gain redress. They took their case to a tribunal, but at that stage were inexperienced and, significantly, both the clerk and the chairman of the tribunal have told me that it was not a satisfactory hearing. That is why, when I became involved in the case later, the valuation tribunal co-operated with the adjudicator's office in identifying grounds on which an unprecedented second tribunal could be held, which took place in Lowestoft in November 1998. By that time senior VOA and tribunal staff had walked the area with me and could see that it appeared that there were clear discrepancies between the two parts of the estate in comparing properties and their bands.

The second tribunal was really significant, and revealed clearly the problem that we were dealing with: the district valuation officer for East Anglia. Although the joint appeal by eight residents was dismissed—the residents recognised that it had to be on the narrow grounds on which it was made—the tribunal decision deliberately contained a very important statement that helpfully provided a way forward:

> "The Tribunal has been asked by all parties to comment on the original bandings of the appeal properties".

[Mr. Bob Blizzard]

Although the tribunal said that there was evidence supporting the current bandings, it also rejected much of the evidence of the district valuer—a Mr. Bond—and said:

> "The Tribunal has also considered all the sales evidence on the estate as submitted by Mr Bond . . . This evidence and its associated banding has caused concern to the Tribunal."

The tribunal concluded:

> "This could question bandings on Crestview Drive being placed purely on sales evidence".

The tribunal looked at and commented on the case made by the residents that the banding of their properties should be compared and equalised with bandings on the eastern or older part of the estate. It recognised that

> "The Appellants have made this case on the assumption that the eastern area has been correctly banded."

After all, bands had remained unchanged from the original bands of six years earlier. The tribunal stated:

> "In conclusion the Tribunal does not consider there to be a significant difference in value between the two parts of the estate."

It therefore upheld what the residents had contended all along. It went on to say:

> "The Regulations make provision for the Listing Officer to correct initial inaccuracies in the Valuation List."

That seems to be a bit of a steer.

That clearly paved the way for the VOA to put the relatively small number of Crestview properties into line with the hundreds of properties on the other part of the estate, especially as the tribunal most unusually and deliberately did not confirm the bandings of the Crestview properties as correct—a point that it later repeated in writing. At that stage of the case, I honestly believed that resolution would occur. Everyone seemed to be working towards that, except the district valuer, who, instead of altering the Crestview bandings, proceeded to carry out a review of hundreds of properties on the eastern estate, and eventually proposed to raise the bandings of about 120 of them seven years after they were first established. That was later described to me as "lunacy" by a senior VOA official, whom I shall not name.

What is worse is that the head of profession of the VOA had written to residents in March 1996 telling them that he had asked Mr. Bond to investigate discrepancies in that eastern estate and to take action to correct any anomaly. No bandings on the eastern estate were altered at that time. After the review, Mr. Bond repeatedly told residents that the bandings on the eastern estate were correct.

When I challenged Mr. Bond on his action in trying to raise bandings in the eastern estate that he had previously insisted were correct, and which, as Members might imagine, caused anxiety to residents there, he said that he was looking at the bandings because

> "I was invited to do so by the local valuation tribunal."

That caused outrage at the tribunal service and the president wrote to Mr. Bond pointing out that his statement was not correct and demanding an apology, which he eventually received.

That episode demonstrates where the problem lies and is why I used the word "intransigence" at the beginning of my speech. Thankfully, owing to the good work of another VOA officer, the proposed band rises were dropped.

Another way of trying to resolve the problem was through an independent review of bandings in the Crestview area by another VOA district valuer. Although the VOA argued that the report showed no clear overall case for altering the Crestview bandings as the residents wanted, it none the less produced a different set of bandings from Mr. Bond's for many properties from the same sales evidence.

That reveals one of the key issues in this case: marginality and how to deal with it. Many of the properties are marginal between bands C and D. In one place there are two absolutely identical bungalows, but one is in band C and the other in band D—apparently because one has a footpath running alongside it.

Surely, the only sensible approach is to stand back a little and try to achieve broad comparability of properties in an area. It is clear that officials burying themselves in sales evidence can come up with different bandings from each other and indeed from residents' calculations, using their own sales evidence.

If someone had at an early stage simply tried to "straighten the pack" a little instead of ploughing on, raising bands over a wider and wider area, the case would have been sorted out, but instead the scope of the problem became ever wider. Many appeals were sparked off, with results that created further perceived inconsistencies.

Throughout this affair, I have been made aware of an apparent flaw in the tribunal process. The published guidance for appellants encourages them to show evidence of sales prices and/or bandings for similar properties. Residents in the area have on occasion taken forward masses of such evidence, but had it ruled out of order. I do not understand that.

What is to be done? First, will my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General study carefully what I have said today and will she be willing to receive a dossier of documentary evidence from me to support it?

Secondly, until last year all discussions with the VOA concentrated on trying to get the injustice in the bandings put right because that was what residents wanted. However, last year the question of compensation from the VOA emerged. Residents are now aware that the national review of banding is not too far off. The VOA has said that it will offer compensation, but only for those residents whose properties had their bands raised twice—from B to C and then to D. I certainly agree that those people deserve compensation.

However, the problem is wider. The crisis sparked off by the original shambles to which the VOA admits affected more residents than those who were twice re-banded. It involved a wider group—more than 20 people—in a great deal of anxiety, stress and inconvenience, owing to their protracted dealings with the district valuer, whose record I have just laid before the House.

I note that back in 1995 the director (east) of the VOA wrote:

> "Some very serious errors have been made and these are recognized and I cannot but apologise for the effect that this has had on the residents in general in Crestview Drive."

I ask the House to note carefully the words "in general" in the admission of the fault. I am also aware of more recent changes to the VOA's code of practice on complaints and compensation, which have given the agency more flexibility.

Will my right hon. Friend ask the VOA to widen its definition of the people whom it is prepared to compensate? If it can do so, the case will finally be settled; it certainly deserves to be settled.

7.15 pm

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) on securing the Adjournment debate. Those of us who listened to his speech can sense the frustration that he and his constituents feel on this long-running issue. I have been provided with the explanation of what has happened in his area with the decisions of the listing officer, the role of the Valuation Office agency, the appeals to the tribunal and the results of the tribunal hearings. He referred to the outcome of the tribunal hearing, but it is not always in such hearings that bandings are confirmed.

In fairness to my hon. Friend and his constituents, I should, rather than adding to the explanation of how we reached this point, move directly to the outstanding issues. I shall explain what can be done to try, as he pleaded in his closing remarks, to come to a sensible conclusion so that a line can be drawn and we can move on to the revaluations that will commence in 2005.

My hon. Friend's constituents remain concerned about three matters. He mentioned a meeting that he had in January 2002 with the director of council tax, when the full range of difficulties involved in the case were rehearsed. It was agreed that the VOA would investigate the potential for providing compensation under its code of practice on mistakes, and compensation was subsequently made to occupiers where there had been an increase in banding on two separate occasions, which is viewed as an error in the code of practice. As he said, that relates to 10 properties, whereas residents believed that 28 complainants should receive compensation.

The other outstanding matters are as follows. The residents remain unhappy, first, with the bands applied to their bungalows; secondly, with the bands applied to similar properties nearby; and thirdly, with the conduct of the listing officer and VOA in dealing with the issues that were raised.

The valuation tribunal system has considered the first issue. The listing officer cannot make the sought alterations, even if he believed that to be the correct course of action. I understand the frustration of my hon. Friend and his constituents. The provisions allow for appeal against the banding of the dwelling to the valuation tribunal and from there, on a point of law, to the High Court. The residents have raised valuation issues that have been aired before the tribunal twice. The appeals system makes no provision for rehearing or appeal in the event of further or better information coming to light.

The second issue is whether the other properties in Crestview drive and the nearby roads that are disputed by taxpayers are correctly banded. The residents and the listing officer have a difference of opinion on the valuation of the relevant properties. The valuation tribunal system has considered that. There is no statutory provision for resolving the residents' continuing dissatisfaction.

The VOA has already accepted the third issue. Apologies have been tendered locally and nationally. There is little to be gained from further apology, but the VOA none the less regrets the handling of the rebanding process and the earlier piecemeal reviews.

VOA policy on financial redress is to compensate people when a VOA error has caused them financial loss or worry and distress. The VOA believes that the bands in the Crestview drive locality are correct and in line with the valuation tribunal decisions. It also believes that the residents are correctly liable for payments based on the increased bands. However, it will consider making ex gratia payments for worry and distress. It has offered to make such payments, amounting to £650, to each of the residents whose dwellings have been subject to two band uplifts.

The VOA has reflected further on the matter. It understands, because of the handling of band alterations over several years, why many residents might have lost confidence in the agency's ability to achieve a correct and fair valuation list for the estate. It therefore appreciates that that has caused worry and distress to many residents as evidenced by the correspondence that was sent to the agency directly and through my hon. Friend.

The VOA has agreed that the handling errors had a significantly adverse effect on the personal lives of several residents, not only those who live in the dwellings that were the subject of the two separate band uplifts. For that reason, it has offered to make an exceptional ex gratia payment of £650 to each of the affected residents.

The VOA considers it appropriate to make the payments to those who have shown their anxiety by signing a document that expresses their wish to accept such a sum in compensation. My hon. Friend forwarded the document to the agency last year.

I hope that, having reflected on my comments, my hon. Friend will agree that the matter is closed, on the understandings that I have given the House. I hope that he will agree that, this evening, he, the local residents, the VOA and I can draw a line under the matter, and that we can move forward to the 2005 debate.

Notwithstanding the fact that the VOA itself has apologised, both locally and nationally, and that I know that the officers in the Department have done all that they possibly can within their statutory obligations to assist in this matter, I too apologise to my hon. Friend and his constituents.

I sincerely hope that we can now close this matter and move on.

Mr. Blizzard: May I say on behalf of my constituents that they will be extremely grateful for what my right hon. Friend has said tonight regarding the

[Mr. Blizzard]

compensation? On their behalf, I thank her and the VOA for bringing this matter to what I now believe will be a conclusion.

Dawn Primarolo: I am very grateful for my hon. Friend's comments. His behaviour is a salutary lesson to all hon. Members that we should all persist in advancing a view on behalf of our constituents, whatever the circumstances. I am grateful for the gracious way in which he has responded to what I have said this evening. I therefore hope that the matter is now closed.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-six minutes past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 30 January 2003

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

GM Crops

1. **Mr. Simon Thomas** (Ceredigion): If she will make a statement on the commercial planting of GM crops. [94156]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): No GM crop currently has all the regulatory approvals needed for commercial growing in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Thomas: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but I am looking to the future. May I refer her to the report recently published by the Health and Community Care Committee of the Scottish Parliament, which states that

> "allowing GM crop trials to continue does contravenes the precautionary principle"?

In any future discussions that she has at a European level—of course, that is where decisions are now taken on commercial planting of GM crops—will she undertake to ensure that no planting of such crops will take place in Wales or Scotland without the express permission of the devolved Administrations in those countries?

Margaret Beckett: Obviously, what happens in Wales and Scotland is an issue for the devolved Administrations and not just the United Kingdom Government. I am not entirely sure whether I am familiar with the specific report to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but it has always seemed to me, just as it did to my predecessors, that the right way of proceeding is to examine the evidence and conduct proper trials. That is what the Government are endeavouring to do.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): Further to those points, is my right hon. Friend aware of the position of the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly in saying that the field trial results should be available before the public consultation on which she is embarking is carried out? The steering group of the GM public debate board has said that it finds it extremely difficult to envisage effective consultation without common timing throughout the UK. Will she take those points into consideration and understand that we, the public, feel very strongly that the results of the trials should be available to inform that public debate?

Margaret Beckett: Of course, I always take seriously the views and concerns of the steering group, but it is not entirely clear to me that the public feel quite so passionately about the precise timing and conduct of the debate. As we are beginning to embark on the inquiry process, what I most want to know is what questions the public wish to have answered. I want to know what information the public want, as opposed—I say this with great respect to all those who are engaged in the dialogue—to what everybody is telling us that they want. I want to hear from the public themselves what they want to know, so that we can do as much as we can to give them the information that they seek in order to allow them to form their own views and judgments.

I cannot remember my hon. Friend's precise words, but I am not sure whether she represents entirely accurately the views of the Scottish and Welsh Administrations, although they have certainly taken more of a view that the issue should be bound up with the crop trials. My worry has always been that, if we were to make the crop trials themselves the main feature of the dialogue and debate, we would be accused of not having a proper debate, but merely one about paving the way for decisions. That is not the case.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): May I encourage the Secretary of State to be far more robust and proactive and to put far more time and resources into the public debate about GM crops and genetic modification in general? Will she ensure that the argument is not allowed to rest solely in the hands of the self-serving scaremongers who apparently represent a lot of views in this country? The vast majority of my constituents are hungry for knowledge, keen to make sensible judgments and, where progress can be made and benefits from GM shown to exist, they are ready to embrace them.

Margaret Beckett: The hon. Gentleman clearly expresses one of the many strands of dialogue and debate on this matter. I note yet another plea for more expenditure from the Conservative Benches, but I fear that the £300,000 or thereabouts that we are prepared to put in seems a large sum. We are certainly very anxious to encourage informed dialogue on the issues.

Andrew George (St. Ives): If the Government really want to reconnect with farmers, as is stated in their farming strategy, which was published last month, why are some elements of the Government so keen to push GM technology on farmers when consumers are at best showing no interest and at worst advancing good arguments as to why farmers should remain GM-free? Whose interests would be served by pushing GM crops on farmers? The Prime Minister seems keen on the issue and Lord Haskins is also keen to lock farmers into contracts, but if the farmers want to reconnect with consumers, they would be best advised to leave well alone.

Margaret Beckett: I am not aware that anybody is trying to push GM crops on farmers. Certainly, no one in the Government is doing so. I remind the hon. Gentleman that a perfectly proper legal process is under way whereby an application was made to conduct a process of assessing the possibility of commercially growing some of the crops in this country. It was decided by my predecessors that a proper trial should be conducted of the effects of growing such crops on the immediate environment. It is being conducted and that seems an entirely sensible way of behaving.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): In introducing crop trials into this country, has the Secretary of State taken note of the experience in America, where the Organic Soil Association reports that in one Canadian province the whole organic rape sector was lost owing to the carrying out of such trials? Will she carefully consider the experience in America before introducing trials of any great magnitude in this country?

Margaret Beckett: I am aware of the report that the hon. Gentleman cites. He will be aware that there are a plethora of such reports, which do not all say quite the same thing. The question focuses on crops that are being trialled in this country, which are not necessarily comparable. For example, one of the problems identified in the Canadian studies was that of gene stacking. That can occur only with crops that can cross-pollinate each other, which is not the case with those that are being trialled in this country.

Livestock Movements

2. **Phil Sawford** (Kettering): If she will make a statement on the 20-day standstill rule for livestock. [94157]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): We announced in a written statement on 23 January that, subject to satisfactory further consultation with the livestock industry, we intend to reduce the standstill for cattle, sheep and goats to six days with effect from 4 March 2003.A supporting document explaining that decision has been placed in the Library and published on the Department's website.

Phil Sawford: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. I am sure that many in the agricultural industry will welcome those changes, because the previous arrangement was having a serious impact, especially on smaller farmers. As the restrictions are intended to combat the spread of serious contagious diseases, which could be catastrophic, will my right hon. Friend give an assurance to the House that she will take action against any farmers, landholders, dealers or others who seek to break or circumvent the rules?

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He will know, and other hon. Members will recall, that the Government were strongly advised by the Royal Society inquiry and the Anderson inquiry to maintain restrictions until an assessment could be carried out. I assure my hon. Friend that one of my reasons for mentioning the consultation with the livestock industry is that the changes are subject to the industry's commitment to a package of measures to improve the level of biosecurity and disease surveillance. In everything we do, we must be sure that we do what we can to minimise the risk of disease entering the country, while, much more importantly, minimising the risk of the spread of disease. We shall certainly keep that well in mind.

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): I, too, welcome the reduction of the standstill rule to six days, as will Northumbrian farmers. However, does the Secretary of State recognise that some of the other proposals that are out for consultation are causing real concern? I want to highlight in particular the movement restriction that limits the movement of sheep sold through livestock marts to 150 km, or 90 miles. That means that Northumbrian farmers will be unable to move sheep to the abattoirs that are used by all the major supermarket companies, and will be able to sell sheep into that market only by selling directly to the supermarkets, whose prices, as we know, will not be generous.

Margaret Beckett: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for welcoming our proposals. Of course I understand that there will be concern about some issues. The point of the consultation is to enable us to consider them all, and we shall certainly do so.

Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): On the evening of 16 January, I spent an interesting three hours with 18 sheep farmers from the north York moors, who will be very pleased to hear my right hon. Friend's confirmation of the reduction in the standstill rule from 20 days to six days. They asked me to press not only the Secretary of State but her noble Friend Lord Whitty to consider how soon they would be able to switch the six-day rule on to an emergency basis, so that in the event of a future outbreak the regulations could be introduced at that time of difficulty in the industry. Will my right hon. Friend address that issue?

Margaret Beckett: It depends a little on what my hon. Friend was being urged to advocate. If people are anxious that we might need to increase the six-day period in a more difficult situation because of the implications of a disease, I assure him that the Government would review the matter at an appropriate time. However, if some people in the industry advocate a return to the days of no movement restrictions, I find that hard to contemplate. No Government would be keen to risk that, not least because of the huge consequences of the recent outbreak for the industry and a range of other economic interests in rural areas.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): It would be churlish not to welcome the Government's late conversion on livestock movements—*[Interruption.]* I say "late" because the industry and Conservative Members told the Government weeks, even months ago to change the 20-day rule because of the damage that it was inflicting. Hon. Members of all parties highlighted that. Does the Secretary of State understand that the Pauline conversion will be useless if the changes to the operating procedures cripple our essential livestock markets, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) suggested? The threat to those markets is profound and it has been well highlighted in *Farmers Weekly*, as the Secretary of State knows. Will she guarantee that changes to procedures on keeping animals overnight, washing and disinfecting vehicles and the distances that animals travel will be genuinely practical and cost neutral to the industry? As she is so worried about the import and spread of disease—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman gets one question.

Margaret Beckett: I have not forgotten that one of the hon. Gentleman's Front-Bench colleagues—I do not believe that it was him—could not understand the reason for maintaining the 20-day standstill. That was an extraordinarily foolish comment given that the Government had been strongly advised by two independent inquiries, and continued to be advised by the chief veterinary officer and our chief scientific adviser to maintain such restrictions.

Far from being a late conversion, we moved to change the rule as soon as we received clear, further evidence, which we were advised to seek. As I said to the hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson), we will do our best to ensure that the steps that we take are as practical as possible. The hon. Gentleman claimed that the changes would be useless if they cripple markets. I stress to him and to those on whose behalf he claims to speak that nothing crippled the markets as much as the recent outbreak of foot and mouth disease.

Nightingale Hall Farm

3. **Mr. Hilton Dawson** (Lancaster and Wyre): What action she intends to take in relation to the operations of the animal rendering plant at Nightingale Hall farm, Lancaster. [94158]

The Minister for Rural Affairs and Urban Quality of Life (Alun Michael): The responsibility for regulating air pollution, including odours from animal by-product rendering plants, lies with the local authority, in this case Lancaster City council, subject to appeal to the Secretary of State.

Mr. Dawson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that reply. Is he aware that the revolting stink at the fats and proteins plant at Nightingale Hall farm in Lancaster has blighted the lives of thousands of people in the city for decades? Will he accept my congratulations on being close to achieving the effective regulation, which eluded us in 18 years of Tory Government and the blighted 27 years of my Conservative predecessor? Will he comprehensively resist any weakening of the odour boundary condition that he has suggested that he is minded to impose to protect my constituents, and thus ensure that he enjoys the honour and approbation of the fine, historic city of Lancaster?

Alun Michael: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the manner of his further inquiry. Smells from rendering are known to be especially offensive and I appreciate that there has been a long-standing problem in his constituency.

On stringency, my hon. Friend knows that the Government issued revised guidance on air pollution standards for renderers in 2000, which toughened previous standards and specified that plants should operate without offensive smells exceeding the process boundary, except in limited circumstances. A "minded to" decision letter was sent on 17 January about the plant in my hon. Friend's constituency, and comments were requested by 14 February. We will issue the final decision as soon as possible after considering the comments.

Corporate Environmental Reporting

4. **Sue Doughty** (Guildford): What steps her Department has taken to encourage corporate environmental reporting; and if she will make a statement. [94159]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): We have pursued action in several different ways. Most importantly, the Government have set out proposals for strengthening the statutory regime for company reporting in our White Paper "Modernising Company Law".

Sue Doughty: I thank the Minister for that reply, but does he recall that in October 2000, the Prime Minister set a challenge to the top 350 companies to bring in environmental reporting by the end of December 2001, and yet a year later, only approximately a quarter are doing so? What is the Minister going to do to make that happen faster?

Mr. Meacher: I am very keen that that should happen faster, and I certainly have sympathy with the hon. Lady's point. However, between 60 and 70 per cent. of companies in the top FTSE 100 now provide environmental reporting, and some of them at considerable length. About 30 per cent. of the top FTSE 350 report on their activities, with another 40 per cent. making some form of public statement about their environmental engagement. Matters are progressing, and as I said, the White Paper "Modernising Company Law" requires that about 1,000 of the most economically significant companies in the country include information on environmental, social and community issues in a new operating and financial review—which they will be asked to produce—where those matters are material to, or relevant to, the understanding of the business. After five years of exhorting industry, that is now the right way forward.

Linda Perham (Ilford, North): I welcome what the Minister said in his initial response, but will the Government's commitment to greater corporate responsibility and the public reporting of corporate environmental standards, which they made last year at the Johannesburg world summit on sustainable development, result in the implementation of the intergovernmental agreements through national regulations in this country?

Mr. Meacher: I have already explained what we propose to do about environmental reporting. The wider issue of corporate social responsibility was on the agenda, and a decision was reached within the text of the WSSD. We are certainly keen to follow that up, and discussions are taking place within the Government as a basis for further, wider international discussions on how proper measures on corporate social responsibility can be implemented.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): Is it not time for the Government to set more of an example to the private sector in terms of corporate environmental reporting? Can the Minister confirm that every Government Department is obliged to prepare a sustainable development report to show how its policies and expenditure plans help to deliver the Government's environmental objectives? These reports are currently kept secret, and rather than lecturing the private sector about its responsibilities, will the Minister commit himself today to making those Government reports public, and thereby start to practise what he is so keen to preach?

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Gentleman is not quite right. The Government Green Ministers Committee, which I chair, has published three annual reports that give detailed information on a whole range of indicators on the performance of all Government Departments. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman may shake his head, but I suggest that he look at those reports. I am extremely keen that there be full transparency and publicising of the performance of Government Departments—both where we do well, as we generally do, and where we do not do so well. I should also point out that the Government's framework for sustainable development on the Government estate requires Departments to report publicly on environmental performance in respect of environmental management systems, travel arrangements for staff and their environmental impact, and water usage. We are considering taking those measures further.

Pig Farrowing Systems

5. **Ms Julia Drown** (South Swindon): What steps she plans to take to ensure that safe and effective pig farrowing systems are implemented. [94162]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): We are funding research into the welfare of the sow and her piglets from farrowing to weaning. We are not yet able to recommend alternatives, because of the adverse effect on piglets.

Ms Drown: I thank the Minister for that reply. Animal welfare groups take the view that farrowing crates are unnecessarily cruel, and look to the experience of other countries that look after farrowing pigs in different ways. Has my hon. Friend discussed with the industry ways of creating commercial incentives to look into more animal-friendly ways of looking after farrowing pigs, and to examine not only crates but other issues such as hard flooring and supervision at birth so as to improve both the care of pigs and the survival of piglets?

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend raises a serious point. Of course we want to improve the welfare of farrowing sows, but I am sure that she will understand that farrowing crates are used because of the risk of sows rolling on piglets, and piglet mortality. We have been funding a range of research that has considered the points that she has mentioned. Unfortunately, although some of the prototype farrowing crates performed quite well in research conditions, in commercial conditions the mortality rate was nearly double the normal rate. We are funding research into the management of sow and litter in a free-farrowing environment, which includes early life programming, stress responses in the farrowing sow, and an epidemiological study of risk factors associated with pre-weaning mortality on commercial pig farms. All those studies are examining better ways of improving welfare, while recognising the commercial nature of the operation.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I hope that the Minister will take account of any new animal welfare measures in the pig industry in the context of the rest of the EU, and that we will not take any unilateral action. We are all concerned about animal welfare, but I hope that he will emulate the example set by the Conservative Government when I secured Europe-wide agreement on a timetable for the abolition of veal crates. It can be done—and if the Minister wants any tips I shall be happy to share some with him.

Mr. Morley: The hon. Lady will know that I too had some involvement in some of those campaigns at the time. She will also know that we have reached EU-wide agreement to phase out sow stalls and tethers across the EU, as has been done unilaterally in the UK—although we are disappointed that the phase-out date is 2013; we would have preferred a much earlier date. We have made it a priority to advance animal welfare issues on an EU-wide basis, and also to include them in World Trade Organisation talks.

Mr. G[illegible] Prosser (Dover): I welcome the Govern[illegible] general support for the new EU directive that req[illegible] the provision of straw and other natural products in pigs' enclosures to enhance their well-being. However, groups that campaign for animals are bitterly disappointed to hear that the Government are considering watering down the directive's requirements and substituting plastic footballs on chains for those natural products. Will my hon. Friend reconsider, and implement the whole EU directive without dilution?

Mr. Morley: I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that we have no intention of watering down the directive. Some of the press reports that he may have read have been somewhat inaccurate; it is always a mistake to believe everything that we see in the newspapers. I can assure my hon. Friend that "manipulable materials" are such things as peat, compost substitute or straw, which pigs can manipulate, and which improve their welfare and the quality of their environment; things such as chains and balls are also included, but pigs can soon get bored with those. The directive covers a range of measures that are part of current good practice in the pig industry. We are pleased to see those standards being established across the whole EU. I assure my hon. Friend that we will not see pigs queueing up to join our Sunday league football teams.

Private Sewers

7. **Paddy Tipping** (Sherwood): What research she has commissioned into the condition of private sewers. [94164]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): Mr. Morley—*[Laughter.]* Sorry, I meant to say "Mr. Speaker". I have not quite got there yet.

W.S. Atkins has been appointed by the Department to carry out an 18-month research contract to identify and examine the problems arising from the current arrangements for existing private sewers, especially with regard to their ownership and maintenance. A consultation paper seeking views on possible options for overcoming the problems will be issued in the spring.

Paddy Tipping: Does my hon. Friend accept that, given the scale and long-standing nature of the problem, the research will be welcomed? When he is preparing the forthcoming water Bill, will he look closely at trying to address this issue?

Mr. Morley: I understand that this is an important matter in many hon. Members' constituencies, and my hon. Friend has been active in raising the problems of private sewers with the Government. The W.S. Atkins study is designed to ascertain the scale of the problem, and it will report in the spring. After consultation on the report, costed solutions will be prepared for consultation in the autumn. The water Bill will acknowledge some of the problems, and it will deal with sewer connections outside the curtilage. However, it is not designed to address in detail the problem that my hon. Friend has described.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I acknowledge that many unadopted private sewers are in very poor condition and would almost certainly benefit from substantial upgrading and investment, and that there is an argument for an industry-wide protocol. However, does the Minister accept that there is almost no problem known to human kind that would not be worsened by nationalisation?

Mr. Morley: It is not a matter of nationalisation. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the Government have agreed a protocol with developers and builders to ensure that the standard of sewers is consistent. That helps in relation to adoption, but I accept that there are problems. Many of them are the result of the failure of private companies to install sewers properly. In some cases, they expect the taxpayer to pick up the bill. We must look at that carefully, because it is no consolation to the many people who are suffering as a result.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): It is all too easy for private sewers to be out of sight and out of mind. It is important that the Atkins research is used to best effect. Will my hon. Friend undertake to make sure that the research's recommendations are included in the Ofwat review of water prices, with a view to adopting private sewers?

Mr. Morley: The review that is currently under way is looking at the regulator's role in matters such as sewer flooding. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping), this is a big issue. I know that my hon. Friend has also been active in the matter, and that she has particular problems in her constituency. The W.S. Atkins study is the right way to proceed. We need to understand the scale of the problem, which may be quite large. We also need to understand the costs involved, the implications, and how best to address the problem.

Water Framework Directive

8. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the European water framework directive on UK industry. [94165]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): The Government published an assessment in 2001 and we plan to publish an updated version later this year.

Mr. Swayne: The initial consultation included an estimate that implementing the directive would cost agriculture between £0.6 billion and £2.9 billion. When will the final consultation begin? Will the Minister undertake to ensure that it will include the draft regulations?

Mr. Morley: The consultation is under way, and we have had two versions already. The hon. Gentleman will know that implementation of the water framework directive will last a considerable number of years—up to 2015. There is therefore plenty of time to look at the issues involved. However, we cannot escape the issue of diffuse pollution, to which agriculture is the biggest contributor, especially with nitrates and phosphates. We are addressing that problem by establishing nitrate-vulnerable zones. Much of the work included in the costings that have been made is already in place, and that is why the possible totals vary so widely. We are aware of the implications for agriculture, but we also accept that serious issues remain that must be addressed.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): Will the Minister bear it in mind that European legislation has had an almost universally valuable effect on water in this country? Without that legislation, Britain's water would be in a much worse state. Does he agree that the directive is another measure that should be supported universally?

Mr. Morley: Yes, I do agree, and I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's support. The water quality of our rivers has consistently improved, as have drinking water standards. European directives have played a part in achieving those improvements.

Norman Baker (Lewes): Will the water framework directive not mean a lot more policing for the Environment Agency? How will it achieve that when it has said, for example, that it will take it at least 20 years to visit even those farms with a high risk of nitrate pollution? The agency is also reviewing only 1 per cent. a year of industrial discharges in the north-east, rather than 25 per cent. a year. Clearly, the agency needs more money, yet the chief executive told Members of Parliament yesterday that there will be a 12 per cent. cut in environmental protection money next year. Why is that happening?

Mr. Morley: The Environment Agency will receive more money next year. It wants to address a range of issues under its programmes and plans. It is taking a risk-based approach to enforcement, and I think that that is right. There are enforcement implications in that, but the water framework directive contains many common-sense measures that will address water quality and the ecology of our river systems. There will not necessarily be huge implications for enforcement, but I recognise that there will be some.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): By the end of the year, the Government will have consulted three times on the water framework directive. How valuable are those consultations when up-to-date cost analysis figures have yet to be published? Have the Government's own consultants not said that the cost to farming will be around £287 million a year? Can the Minister guarantee that the directive's implementation will not be adversely affected by budget cuts at DEFRA? Why is there no reference to the water framework directive in the draft water Bill?

Mr. Morley: The water Bill is complementary to the water framework directive, which is designed to achieve different objectives, particularly on catchment plans and catchment management. We are addressing costs in the consultation, but, inevitably, in dealing with a measure that will cover the period to 2015, it will not be possible to have clear costings until we know exactly what the implications are. I remind the hon. Gentleman that a great many of the delivery mechanisms for implementing the water framework directive are currently being put in place. Those costs can, therefore, be taken into account, and they will not fall on farmers, industry or consumers.

Rural Proofing

9. **Mr. Andrew Rosindell** (Romford): If she will make a statement on the rural proofing of legislation. [94166]

The Minister for Rural Affairs and Urban Quality of Life (Alun Michael): Just over two years ago, the rural White Paper made the commitment that all relevant Government policy developments would be rural-proofed. Legislation is included within that definition. I am pleased to say that our colleagues across Government are increasingly working productively with us on the rural agenda.

Mr. Rosindell: The Minister will be aware that the Countryside Agency reported on 11 April 2002 that progress in the vital area of rural proofing had been very slow. He will also know that a further report prepared last October has not been published. Why is that so, and does the policy remain integral to Government thinking on rural policy?

Alun Michael: Last year's report indicated that a lot of progress had been made, but that there was a great deal more to be done. I agreed with that judgment at the time. The report prepared halfway through the year was intended to help accelerate the process in Departments and was not meant to take the place of the annual report, which will come out this year. I hope that that will demonstrate the progress that has been made by Departments across Government. I work closely with the Government's rural-advocate, Ewen Cameron who chairs the Countryside Agency, and we have met colleagues across Government to accelerate the process.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): When my right hon. Friend next does some rural proofing, will he rural-proof the roll-out of broadband? The rural parts of my constituency simply do not have access to broadband, which is crucial to developing the kind of new small businesses that are vital to regenerating the rural economy. For a long time, my constituency suffered poor transport infrastructure with narrow, winding roads. It seems now that the same is happening with the electronic roads—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Minister should not answer that question; it was far too wide.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): Will the Minister give us some assistance as to what is happening at present on rural proofing for broadband?

Alun Michael: May I answer both that question and the one put by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard)? The Government have recognised the importance of broadband and the need to rural-proof the delivery of broadband in this country. I am pleased by the way in which colleagues at the Department of Trade and Industry and in the rural development agencies—

Mr. Speaker: Order. Is broadband the Minister's direct responsibility?

Alun Michael: The rural proofing of it is, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: The Minister will know that it is not legislation.

Radioactive Waste

10. **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet): When she expects to make recommendations about the disposal of radioactive waste. [94167]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): Following consultation, we and the devolved administrations will set up a new independent body to review all long-term options for managing UK solid radioactive waste and to make recommendations to us. We shall establish it as soon as possible and we hope to receive its report and announce our decision on the UK's long-term strategy by 2006.

Dr. Ladyman: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. She is right to want to come to the correct decision and to bring people along with her. However, it seems to me that a consensus has emerged among environmental groups and the industry that we should deposit that material underground in a way that makes it possible to recover it later if necessary, and that the only reasonable place for that is at Sellafield. As we shall reach that conclusion whether we take one year or four years to discuss the matter, should we not make the decision now and concentrate on making the process safe and determining how to compensate the local community for its involvement?

Margaret Beckett: I agree with my hon. Friend that at present there seems to be a growing number of voices making some of the points that he has just made. However, experience of the subject suggests that as soon as anybody starts to think that there is a consensus and to coalesce around it, a lot of other voices are heard saying something wholly different. Select Committees in both Houses recommended that the course of action that we are pursuing is right. As it will probably take billions of pounds and about a hundred years to deal with the issue, it is probably still worth trying to put in the investment up-front to get it right.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): Does my right hon. Friend agree that when Nirex considered Sellafield, it found that the geology of the area was not suitable?

Margaret Beckett: Yes, I am aware of that. That is part of what I meant when I was replying to my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman). He identified a number of elements and said that a lot of people think this or that and that a lot of people think that there should be retrievable underground storage. That is all true, but unfortunately as soon as one starts to get more concrete and to decide where the pattern of agreement might emerge, difficulties emerge with it. We have set in train a process to try to ensure that we build up an understanding of what really is the broad basis of acceptance and that is the right thing to do.

Sustainable Development (Mozambique)

11. **Mr. Harry Barnes** (North-East Derbyshire): What arrangements she has made to discuss matters of sustainable development and climate change with the Government of Mozambique. [94168]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): We do not have any immediate plans to discuss sustainable development or climate change with the Government of Mozambique.

Mr. Barnes: Might it not be fruitful for the Government to engage in such discussions? The Government of Mozambique overcame tremendous problems caused by floods in that country about two years ago so, given our experience of flooding in this country, there might be a useful cross-fertilisation of ideas. For instance, the Speaker of the Mozambique Parliament organised a fund to assist people in Yorkshire, so we should be doing everything that we can to ensure that lessons are learned on both sides.

Mr. Meacher: Of course, I entirely agree with that. Offhand, I do not know how much aid was provided by the Department for International Development at the time of the severe flooding in Mozambique in 1999 and 2000, as a result of the extreme climatic conditions, but I have no doubt that it was considerable. I should certainly welcome further collaboration between our countries. The key point, as to whether climate change is a significant factor in the increased magnitude and frequency of flooding throughout the world, is the importance of ratification of the Kyoto protocol. I am hopeful that that will be achieved in the first half of this year. Russia is the only country that still needs to ratify for the treaty to come into operation. President Putin has already given a commitment that he wishes that to happen and we are hopeful that the formalities will be achieved by the middle of the year. If they are, it will certainly be of considerable importance to Mozambique and many other sub-Saharan African countries.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the people of Mozambique made a most generous contribution to the people of the Vale of York following the severe flooding in parts of the area in November 2000? Would it not be appropriate, therefore, for the Department to seek an early meeting with the Mozambique Government with a view to undertaking joint research into the causes of climate change, which is leading to more flooding on flood plains such as the Vale of York?

Mr. Meacher: Of course, substantial research is already being undertaken—the United Kingdom is a world leader in this—by the combined capabilities of the Hadley research centre, which is part of the Met Office, and the university of East Anglia. I am keen that there should be closer co-operation between our two countries. Mozambique made a remarkable and very welcome offer to the Vale of York and to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes). I am happy to discuss with the Department for International Development how we can deepen that co-operation to the benefit of both countries.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Given that my right hon. Friend's Department has a significant number of environmental and agricultural scientists, would it be appropriate for him to try to ensure that scientific expertise is made available more widely? In particular, will he channel some of that expertise through DFID to ensure that countries such as Mozambique may tap into it, as expertise is often precisely what they lack?

Mr. Meacher: I very much support that proposal. There is no doubt that the way in which we can most help the developing countries is through more quickly and effectively building up capacity there, with more technological transfer and the spreading of scientific and technical expertise. Britain has a real offer to make. We already do such work. As hon. Members have mentioned Mozambique, I will certainly speak to my colleagues in DFID to find out how much further that work can be taken.

CAP

12. **Sir Archy Kirkwood** (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): If she will make a statement on the latest proposals for reform of the common agricultural policy. [94169]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): I welcome publication of the Commission's legislative proposals for reform of the CAP, which were discussed for the first time at the Agriculture Council earlier this week. They will form a good basis for what will be hard negotiations in which we shall be both positive and proactive in pushing for an early, substantial and balanced agreement that delivers a workable and fair deal for farmers.

Sir Archy Kirkwood: While I acknowledge the need for CAP reform, does the Secretary of State share my concern about the present financial viability of cereal holdings throughout the United Kingdom? Does the right hon. Lady accept that the totality of prices available to cereal farmers plus the arable aid do not meet production costs? Later today, Scottish farm income predictions will show that the incomes of cereal producers in Scotland will suffer a further fall. Against that background, cereal producers are worried about the continuing proposals to cut intervention prices and to introduce further compulsory set-aside. Will she be careful to get enough flexibility from the review of the CAP to ensure that the viability of cereal holdings throughout the UK is guaranteed for the future?

Margaret Beckett: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are concerned about getting the right basic package as well as sufficient flexibility to reflect local problems. I confess that I am not immediately familiar with the sort of figures that he expects for the incomes of cereal farmers in Scotland. Certainly, there is a welcome increase in statistics on farm incomes. We expect those to be in the public domain in the near future. While I do not suggest for a second that that will resolve the considerable problems faced by people in the farming community, it is obviously beneficial.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Does my right hon. Friend agree with the Consumers Association's calculation that the average family in Britain pays a £16 farm tax every week and that 80 per cent. of that money goes to the richest 20 per cent. of farmers? If the CAP is to be reformed, is not it essential that the £1 million subsidies paid to huge farming businesses are changed so that those small farmers whose future is seriously threatened get a fair deal?

Margaret Beckett: There is always argument about specific figures that come out in different studies, but I certainly accept, as most people do, that the CAP's present structure places considerable costs on consumers and taxpayers. Certainly, it must be one of the goals of reform to try to change that and produce a system that is fair, but we would like to see structures and proposals emerge from the reform package that are fair to all farmers.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Does the Secretary of State share my concern that French attitudes to CAP reform may undermine Europe's position in the context of the Doha declaration and the World Trade Organisation talks that are to come? Is she in any way building a coalition of support to counter French positions and to ensure that, under the modulation proposals, sufficient money is made available for rural redevelopment?

Margaret Beckett: It must be a prime goal of the negotiations to ensure that enough money is available on the right terms, with the right flexibility and low level of bureaucracy, for rural development. I entirely agree with that point. With regard to the right hon. Gentleman's initial remarks, I am anxious to ensure that all of us in the EU get the balance of our negotiating approach to the WTO meetings right. I am very conscious of the suggestion that, because Europe was not proactive at a sufficiently early stage in the Uruguay round, we ended up getting the sticky end of the negotiations. There is a strong area of discussion in the Council of Ministers about how we get that balance right.

John Cryer (Hornchurch): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in years gone by, the CAP brought ruin and despair to many third-world agricultural economies because of the policy of dumping cheap food on those economies, with obvious consequences? Will she do her best to ensure that those policies are not repeated in future, so that cheap food is not dumped on the third world? Does she also agree that, despite the best efforts that were mentioned earlier, there is an increasing feeling that—perhaps partly because of the French position—the CAP is ultimately doomed, which would provide a sort of solution to the problems that many Labour Members would welcome?

Margaret Beckett: It is many years since I first came to work full time in politics, and one of the first things that I had to do was write a pamphlet explaining the CAP—I have never quite got over it. So I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes about the difficulties that have been caused not only elsewhere in the world, but in Europe, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Paul Flynn) highlighted a few moments ago. Ever since I wrote that pamphlet, I have believed that CAP reform was an urgent necessity.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): Will the Secretary of State say whether the Government share the Country Land and Business Association's analysis that, on the basis of the Commission's current proposals, British farmers, who receive about 13 per cent. of direct payments under the CAP, will be expected to shoulder 26 per cent. of the costs of CAP reform? Will she also say whether the Government consider that that would be a fair outcome for British agriculture and whether she will be campaigning for British farmers to bear a more proportionate share of the costs of reform?

Margaret Beckett: Without entirely endorsing the precise figures—various people come up with different studies—I can certainly say that we have some concerns about the precise impact of the legal proposals that are on the table at present, and we have concerns about whether they are entirely fair to British farmers. I have made that point already, very forcefully, to Commissioner Fischler, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we shall continue to make it in the negotiations.

Rural Post Offices

13. **David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire): What recent discussions she has had with colleagues in the Department of Trade and Industry about the continued viability of rural village post offices. [94170]

The Minister for Rural Affairs and Urban Quality of Life (Alun Michael): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State had very productive discussions with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry about the rural post office network last summer. Since then, I have been closely involved in discussions and decisions leading up to the DTI's announcement in December of a £450 million support package over three years for the rural network. That is a very significant and welcome announcement, and I will continue to work with that Department on this issue.

David Taylor: In the DEFRA public service agreement, which the Minister probably has on his bedside table, target 4 specifies that the Department must improve the accessibility of services to people in rural areas. How will the progress report on public service agreements, which is due to be published this spring, deal with the fact that 1,000 village post offices have closed since 2000?

Alun Michael: The target is to improve accessibility to cash in rural areas. Post offices make an important contribution to achieving that target, and DTI officials have been fully involved in drawing up our plan for how we will achieve it, but that is not the only way of doing it. Increasingly, if we are to provide the service that people need in rural areas, we must recognise that sometimes people make choices that do not involve using local services. They might access services when they visit town or travel to work, reducing the call on local public and commercial services. We will therefore have to find new ways of making sure that we achieve such objectives. I assure my hon. Friend that the support to the post office network is an important part of making sure that we improve the accessibility of services for people in rural areas.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Will the Minister take an early opportunity to look at the forms and leaflets produced by the Post Office on how to apply to receive child benefit and pensions in cash rather than through a bank account? If he does so, he will discover that the Post Office seems to be directing people intentionally towards the bank account option, making it extraordinarily difficult for them to get benefits in cash. A particular point of concern is that the forms will only be produced on 24 March to be ready for 1 April. Does he agree that if people get their benefits through bank accounts rather than in cash, that will spell doom for hundreds of rural and urban sub-post offices?

Alun Michael: I have discussed that issue with colleagues and the Post Office. What the Government are seeking to do is to make sure that choice is available to people, not to push them in one direction or another. People in rural areas should be able to exercise choice, as should people living in urban areas. The hon. Gentleman should not trivialise the very difficult issue of making sure that services are available to people in rural areas. I am sure that his comments about forms will be considered by those who design them. It is a question not just of forms, but of availability of services.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Obviously, we welcome the discussions that are taking place. Can further discussions take place to support rural post offices, and what role can my right hon. Friend's Department play in that? Will he also ensure that there is a continuation of next-day delivery, and that discussions take place with Postcomm as soon as possible to ensure that that happens?

Alun Michael: I understand my hon. Friend's concern. Although I do not intend to stray into areas that are the responsibility of other Departments, we are keen to work with them to make sure that a high quality of service is provided to everyone. On the provision of post office services, several pilot projects up and down the country—I have referred to the Waters Upton initiative, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will open in a few weeks' time—are bringing together a number of commercial and non-commercial services. As a result, more services will be viable in rural areas than would be the case if they stood alone. That is the way that we need to approach the provision of services in rural areas. I share my hon. Friend's concern about ensuring that there is equity of service for people in those areas.

Retirement Policy

15. **Dr. Andrew Murrison** (Westbury): What her Department's retirement age policy is. [94172]

The Minister for Rural Affairs and Urban Quality of Life (Alun Michael): The normal retirement age is 60. All staff below the senior civil service may elect to remain in service until the age of 65 subject to continued efficiency and organisational need.

Dr. Murrison: The Minister will be aware that there is a wide range of retirement ages in the agencies and the Department for which he has responsibility. Will he comment on that? Is it the result of personal choice or departmental expediency? How will the forthcoming EU directive on equal treatment affect his Department's policy?

Alun Michael: We seek to provide choice for people. We also want to ensure that people are in post who are able to provide the standard of service that the public expect. We have changed our recruitment policy to include those over the age of 60. However, everyone remains subject to the current maximum retirement age of 65. Flexibility and ensuring that we have the staff available to serve the public is the balanced approach that we take.

Speaker's Statement

12.30 pm

Mr. Speaker: Before I call the business questions, I have a statement to make.

Hon. Members have raised with me their concerns that the substance of ministerial statements has been reported in the media before being presented to this House. Particular reference was made to the Defence Secretary's statement on "Iraq: Further Contingency Preparations" on 20 January and the Education and Skills Secretary's statement on "The Future of Higher Education" on 22 January.

I have made it clear, both from this Chair and in meetings with Ministers, that it is of fundamental importance for the proper functioning of Parliament that this House is the first to hear of important developments in Government policy. I recognise the pressures and difficulties that often face Ministers as a result of press speculation about forthcoming statements. My impression, nevertheless, is that in general Ministers recognise and comply with the convention that I have enunciated.

As regards the two recent statements referred to, I have taken the matter up with the Ministers concerned. So far as the statement on Iraq is concerned, I have received an assurance that neither Defence Ministers nor officials trailed its content with the media. This assurance is supported by the fact that the advance reports in the media contained significant inaccuracies and seriously underestimated the strength of the forces being deployed.

As to the statement on higher education, the Secretary of State has represented to me that the majority of the proposals in the White Paper and the package as a whole received their first airing in the House. He has, however, acknowledged that, in order to ensure that the very many people who would be affected by his proposals on student funding would not be alarmed or misled by speculative stories in the media, he said more than he would have wanted in response to a direct question on television before making his statement. He has expressed his regret about this in a letter to me and has made clear his acceptance of the need to come first to the House.

I propose to leave the matter there.

Business of the House

12.33 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will the Leader of the House give the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Robin Cook): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 3 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the European Parliament (Representation) Bill.

TUESDAY 4 FEBRUARY—Consideration of the First Report Session 2002–03 (HC 171) from the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform.

WEDNESDAY 5 FEBRUARY—Motion on the Police Grant report (England and Wales) 2003/2004.

Motions on the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2003/2004 and the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2001/2002: Amending Report 2003.

THURSDAY 6 FEBRUARY—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Electricity (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

FRIDAY 7 FEBRUARY—Private Members Bill.

The provisional business for the week after will be:

MONDAY 10 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 11 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the National Minimum Wage (Enforcement Notices) Bill [*Lords*]. Followed by motion to take note of various European documents relating to Agenda 2000 and operation of milk quotas.

WEDNESDAY 12 FEBRUARY—Opposition Day (4th, 2nd Part). There will be a half-day debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced. Followed by proceedings on the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Bill. Followed by motion to approve the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 (Amnesty Period) Order 2003.

THURSDAY 13 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Industrial Development (Financial Assistance) Bill.

FRIDAY 14 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

In the subsequent week, we will take the constituency week.

Mr. Forth: I am, as ever, grateful to the Leader of the House for giving us the business.

Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the Treasury Select Committee said in its report of 16 January:

> "It would be helpful for the Chancellor to announce the date of the Budget as far in advance as possible (at least two months)"?

That has not happened yet. I rather hope that the Leader of the House may tell us something today about the date of the Budget. What is going wrong? Why have we not been told about the Budget? Is it because the Chancellor is worried that the economy is running into rather choppy waters and is not happy about what he might say? Can the Leader of the House please help us in this matter? If the Treasury Select Committee says that it believes that we should receive proper notice of the Budget, I hope that the Government will pay some attention. Time is already effectively running out.

[Mr. Forth]

In the context of the Budget, can the Leader of the House give the Deputy Prime Minister an opportunity to come to the House again to clarify what he said the other day:

> "On the cost of the dispute, I told the Select Committee that I thought that it was about £5 million, although there are other estimates. However, it is probably something like £1 million a day, but we have to pay more if we are using troops during the dispute, so it may well be £2 million a day. There are negotiations between different Departments, and various costs are involved, so I hope that the right hon. Gentleman accepts that I cannot be precise. However, I have said that the net cost to the Department is £70 million; if other Departments are included, it is about £100 million, which is a considerable sum"? [*Official Report*, 28 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 723.]

I am sure that the Deputy Prime Minister was trying to be helpful to the House, but it would be even more helpful if he were properly briefed and then returned to the House to tell us what the devil that all meant.

You have just stated yet again, Mr. Speaker, your firmly held views on Ministers allowing information to get out into the public domain before Ministers come to the House. Yet again it has happened today. I heard on my radio this morning in some detail what was going to happen about the aircraft carrier statement this afternoon. I heard talk of 2,000 jobs. I heard talk of 10,000 jobs being saved. I heard specific references to shipyards. I heard that this very important contract would be divided between BAE and Thales.

I suppose that the Leader of the House will tell me that that is all idle speculation, and that somehow it was nothing to do with Ministers. But the sad truth is, Mr. Speaker, that in spite of what you have said repeatedly, this is happening over and over again, and it is the Ministry of Defence that is doing it on nearly every occasion. I hope that the Leader of the House will tell us what on earth he or the Prime Minister, or both of them, will do to the Secretary of State for Defence about his disrespect for the House. He is now a recidivist and a serial offender, and it is time something pretty drastic was done about it.

There is a business motion on the Order Paper today which seeks to limit the debate on 4 February in order to allow the House to start voting at 5 pm. I am not sure that I see the point of that. I do not see why we cannot vote at the end of business at 7 pm. We used to do it after 10 pm, after all, so I am not sure why we cannot have our Divisions after 7 pm. We need additional time even more now to clarify just what is going on on the vital issue of the reform of the House of Lords at the highest level of Government.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Common sense has prevailed.

Mr. Forth: On 23 January, at column 441, the Leader of the House said that

> "finding common ground with others on where the best compromise can be found with the largest support for the form of the Chamber"

is a priority. He went on to say:

> "I would be surprised if that compromise did not require some form of mixed membership."

He went on to say:

> "It is not my impression that that White Paper was unpopular because it proposed 20 per cent. elected members; the difficulty with public opinion was in relation to the 80 per cent. appointed. I am doubtful about whether we will remove these anxieties on the part of public opinion by going for 100 per cent. appointed."—[*Official Report*, 23 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 441.]

You can imagine my surprise when just yesterday, at column 877, the Prime Minister said:

> "Do we want an elected House, or do we want an appointed House? I personally think that a hybrid between the two is wrong and will not work."—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 877.]

Hold on a minute—I thought that the Leader of the House said that some form of mixed membership was the most desirable outcome. I am worried about the way in which that matter is progressing—or not. At the highest level of government the Prime Minister is saying one thing—*[Interruption.]* Before Government Members get too excited about the free vote—I am grateful that we are to have such a vote—I remind them that the Labour manifesto in 2001 said:

> "We are committed to completing House of Lords reform . . . to make it more representative and democratic".

I believe that we need more time for next week's debate and that a business motion should not truncate the debate at 5 o'clock because I want to hear the Prime Minister explain how his manifesto commitment to a democratic upper House can be fulfilled by his obvious desire for an appointed upper House—that seems rather difficult to explain. Perhaps the Leader of the House will tell us who is more true to the manifesto—the Prime Minister or him. Finally, to whom should Labour Members now look for guidance on the issue—to the Prime Minister, the Leader of the House or their conscience?

Mr. Cook: I anticipate that the House will be interested in the last passage quoted by the right hon. Gentleman so, if he will forgive me, I will canter quickly through his other points, which were merely the preamble to that point.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Eat it slower.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman's advice is always welcome but, on this occasion, I shall disregard it.

On the date of the Budget, nothing has gone wrong. It would be unusual if it had been announced in January. Indeed, may I tell the right hon. Gentleman that so well has the Chancellor of the Exchequer done in managing a sound economy in Britain that we look forward with anticipation to him having a further opportunity to remind the Opposition that we have the lowest unemployment in Europe, the lowest inflation for 40 years and the highest growth rate of the G7 countries.

On the comments about the cost of the fire dispute, I would not have thought that there would be a dispute between the two Front Benches about the fact that the fire dispute necessarily costs a considerable sum of money. I myself have repeatedly heard the Deputy Prime Minister refer to a sum of about £100 million so far. All Members should bear in mind the fact that that £100 million is coming out of other parts of the Deputy Prime Minister's budget, at the expense of regeneration budgets, expenditure in deprived communities and people who are not well-placed to pay in return for the continuation of the dispute. I therefore hope that the Opposition agree with us that it is best to resolve the matter as quickly as possible and get a solution to the dispute.

On the issue of ministerial statements, I remind the right hon. Gentleman that we live in a free country and that this is the real world. In a procurement decision, there will be lots of people, including those in industry, not just in the Department, who know what is going on. There is sometimes humbug from members of the press who complain that they are being leaked to, as they themselves tour Britain, breaking legs if necessary, to get advance notice of an announcement. I fully understand the importance of Ministers making the announcement of policy first in the House. I welcome the fact that in his statement Mr. Speaker has just said that he believes that Ministers should seek to comply with that, and I assure the House that I shall do all that I can to reinforce that message.

On the last matter that the right hon. Gentleman raised—which, I must confess, I had anticipated would come higher in his order of priorities in the questions that he put to me—my understanding is that the Prime Minister will not be able to join us on Tuesday. That is no doubt a matter of great disappointment to the Opposition as it is to me, but as the Prime Minister said yesterday, it is a free vote. As he correctly identified yesterday, there are a range of views on the matter. The right hon. Gentleman is correct: my own view is that what went wrong with the last White Paper was that the figure of 20 per cent. elected did not command public confidence, nor, as far as I could see, would it have commanded a majority in the House of Commons.

It is my personal and very humble opinion that by removing the 20 per cent. elected element and substituting zero, we will not restore the public confidence that was missing the first time round. I fully agree with the Prime Minister that we do not want a second Chamber that is a rival to this place. We want a second Chamber that is a partner to this place in restoring respect for Parliament and making sure that we command the nation's attention when we speak. To have a partner who can assist us in the task of restoring the standing of Parliament, we need a second Chamber that is legitimate, and as our manifesto correctly identified, to be legitimate in the modern era, it needs to be democratic. To be democratic, some, at least, of its Members need to be elected.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): It's the way he tells 'em. On this serious issue, we look to the Leader of the House to robustly defend the House, parliamentary democracy and the freedom to speak our minds. Will he therefore dissociate himself from the way in which the Lord Chancellor and some of his other noble Friends have been referring with such disdain—even with contempt—to the whole process of election to this place? Since the noble Lord, as far as I am aware, has never been elected to anything, will the Leader of the House indicate that he, at least, respects the democratic process, and believes that a democratic mandate and a mandate at a general election are important?

No doubt some will take notice of the fact that the Prime Minister and the Lord Chancellor are attempting to muzzle Labour MPs and peers, but does the Leader of the House accept that it is wrong, as is suggested in a report today, that they also wish to direct what will happen after the vote next week, as regards the work of the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform? Whatever the vote on an indicative Division next week in both Houses, is it his intention to ensure that the Joint Committee will continue its work and will be given an opportunity to fulfil the instructions that it has previously had from the House and from the other place? Surely he must be prepared to defend us against those, be they every so mighty, who wish to undermine the work of Joint Committees?

Finally, has the right hon. Gentleman noticed that this morning, the former leader of his party, Mr. Neil Kinnock, has come out in favour of compulsory voting, in a desperate attempt to increase turnout? Will he take time, please, today to read the report of the debate in Westminster Hall on Tuesday, when the matter was discussed. A number of Members, including some notable and distinguished members of his own party, stated that the only way to increase turnout is to ensure that people's votes count and have an impact on the result. Will the right hon. Gentleman therefore take note of the fact that fairer voting means a better turnout in elections?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for trailing his coat in the last question, but right now, if he will forgive me, I have enough battles to fight.

May I clarify the position in relation to the Joint Committee, as there seems to be some confusion about that? We have passed a resolution setting up the Joint Committee. That resolution sets out a remit and a mandate for the Joint Committee to prepare detailed proposals for the House on a second Chamber. As a staging post in that process, we invited the Joint Committee to give us options for the possible composition, and it is on those options that we will vote next week. But the Joint Committee has not fulfilled its remit or its mandate. It needs no fresh remit or mandate to meet again to consider the votes in the House and how those might guide its future work. Indeed, to prevent it from doing so would require a fresh motion of this place, so I see no interruption to the work of the Joint Committee from the votes next Tuesday, and I hope that it will meet rapidly afterwards and assess the way forward.

The hon. Gentleman makes the point that the Lord Chancellor is not elected. That may be so, but I have never been in any doubt of his confidence that, if he submitted himself to an election, he would be returned. I would disagree with the hon. Gentleman on his observation that the debate in the House of Lords showed contempt for those who are elected. From reading the speeches, I felt that the emotion was rather more one of fear than contempt. I was very struck by the number of Members of the other place who said that they must not let in any elected representatives because even a few would swell in number until they took over the whole place. That seems to be recognition of the greater legitimacy and authority that comes from elections, and is not a case for resisting the principle.

Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): In relation to freedom of speech, will the Leader of the House arrange a statement on arrangements for the national anti-war

[Alan Simpson]

rally in London on 15 February? At the moment, it appears that there are to be no speakers allowed and no rally in Hyde park. That would be as outrageous and unacceptable as it would be incomprehensible to those who believe in freedom of speech, and would provoke acts of civil disobedience which all of us would deeply regret. In order to prevent any further Talibanisation of our democracy, will my right hon. Friend assure us that that rally will go ahead and that members of the public who oppose war in Iraq have the right to say so?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point; I fully understand his concern. I know of his deep concern for the environment, and therefore put to him that the concern that has been expressed by Royal Parks police and others relates entirely to the fact that they do not allow rallies in the royal parks during the winter months when the ground is soft. We have had record rainfall over the past few months. If 400,000 people were admitted to Hyde park, that would have a significant impact.

Indeed, several other bodies, including the Countryside Alliance—this shows the impartiality of the Royal Parks constabulary on this matter—have been refused permission for rallies in the park during the winter months. There is no problem whatever with such an organisation having a rally in the park when the ground is firmer following the spring. In the meantime, I encourage those who wish to make their point to do so by finding a place where there is firmer ground under their feet than that in Hyde park.

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): The conviction of my former constituent Sally Clark for the murder of her two children must rank as one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in recent times. Will the Leader of the House confirm that there will be an urgent inquiry into how the Crown Prosecution Service handled that case, and into the behaviour of the Home Office pathologist? Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that there needs to be a broader look at the way in which the criminal justice system handles the cases of mothers who are accused of murdering their very young children, particularly given the uncertainty surrounding medical evidence of the death of infants? May we have a parliamentary opportunity to discuss such matters?

Mr. Cook: I fully understand the hon. Gentleman's concern on behalf of his constituent. I should think that the whole House would share his concern over what must have been an appalling ordeal for both her and her family. Plainly, lessons will need to be learned and absorbed by a number of different agencies—obviously the Crown Prosecution Service for one, as well as the police and the forensic service. It would be unhelpful for the Government to seek to respond in the 24 hours immediately after the decision, but I am aware that several bodies have said that they will be following up the case and examining it closely. Plainly, this matter cannot rest with yesterday's decision. It must be followed through so that we can ensure that there can never again be such a peradventure of justice.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): As an accountant, I welcomed yesterday's announcement by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on a tougher regulatory regime of independence, objectivity and integrity. Will the Leader of the House tell us whether the Secretary of State has asked for parliamentary time next week to explain whether that tougher new approach will extend to those accountancy firms that are stitching up the taxpayer by sitting on advisory bodies on private finance initiatives, advising bidders, selecting tenders and writing apparently independent reports on what a good thing PFI is? Should we not have a widespread, independent review of that expensive farce, particularly in the light of reports such as yesterday's on the Lord Chancellor's expensive mistake with Libra?

Mr. Cook: I think that it would be unwise to comment on that last point. To respond to my hon. Friend's general comments, I fully share his welcome for the statement made from the Dispatch Box by my right hon. Friend on the improved standards of accountancy and independence of audit. In the wake of the Enron scandal, all of us would agree that it is important that we should do everything possible in the United Kingdom to ensure that audit is independent and accountancy is of a high standard of integrity. I note what my hon. Friend says about potential conflicts of interest, and I shall certainly draw them to my right hon. Friend's attention. It is important that we ensure not only that there is no conflict of interest but that there can be no suspicion or accusation of it.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement on Stormontgate before the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill is debated in the House? We have been waiting for that statement for some time. We understand that it has been available, and we expected it to be made much earlier.

Mr. Cook: I cannot commit myself to a statement before that debate. I fully understand the interests of the hon. Gentleman and his constituents on this issue, and I am well aware of how important it is in Northern Ireland. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will be conscious of that interest when he addresses the House next week.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, for next Tuesday's vote on the House of Lords to be truly comprehensive and reflect all views, the early-day motion calling for the abolition of the House of Lords that has been signed by well over 100 of us should be put to the House, perhaps at the beginning of the debate, to see whether we can get a majority to ensure that the democratic processes are carried out totally and in full?

Mr. Cook: I hear what my hon. Friend says. I want to ensure that the House has the best possible opportunity to express the range of views in it. I have two difficulties that I invite my hon. Friend to understand and share. The first is that both he and I fought the election on a manifesto that committed us to reforming the second Chamber, not to abolishing it. Indeed, I might be making some animadversion to that in Tuesday's debate. Precisely because I do not wish to take away any part of the force of any phrase in the manifesto, it would not be helpful for me at this stage to commit myself to abolishing the second Chamber.

Secondly, we set up the Joint Committee in order that it might make proposals to the House on the options, and I shall be putting those seven options to the House on Tuesday. It would be improper of me to interfere with the options that it has put to the House. All I would say to those Members who favour abolition is that they should be careful when they consider which option to vote for on Tuesday that they are not misled into voting for one that was sold to them on a basis other than abolition. Anybody who votes on Tuesday for an all-appointed House may wake up on Wednesday and find that that is what they will get.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): May I reinforce the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) when he asked the Leader of the House to extend the time for debate on Tuesday to 7 o'clock? Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that many of us wish to express our support for a wholly elected House of Lords? Does he understand that we want to express our deep disappointment at the Prime Minister's betrayal of his manifesto commitment? Does the Leader of the House also understand that we want to support him in his dispute with the Lord Chancellor on democracy? We wish to make the point that the Lord Chancellor has never been elected to any political office and that he owes his present position in Parliament to his close friendship with the Prime Minister.

Mr. Cook: I am of course always grateful for support, but sometimes one should accept it with a degree of caution and self-preservation. On the question of the length of the debate, I remind the House that we have had a full day's debate on the matter in the recent past and many days of debate on it over the past few years. It is not my impression that anybody's mind will be changed by another two hours of debate on Tuesday.

Mr. Jim Marshall (Leicester, South): May I say to my right hon. Friend as a friend of long standing that I shall start to fear for his future unless he begins to control his sense of irony and does not play to the Opposition gallery too readily, as he appears to be doing?

On a more substantive point, is my right hon. Friend aware that the implementation of section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 is causing a great many problems? Will he look into the problem, particularly in relation to single people arriving in the United Kingdom who fail to claim asylum immediately? Will he arrange for an urgent debate, or failing that, will he urge the Home Secretary to come to the House and make a statement on the issue, so that we can question him about it more closely than we have been able to do hitherto?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his concern. He and I were elected on the same day and are among the few hon. Members left who were elected on that occasion. My observations on the House of Lords are based on views that are well known to the House and are of long standing. In the context of a free vote and having a range of views, I shall continue to stand by that position.

My hon. Friend raises an issue that has been explored in the House in the past, especially in the context of the recent Bill. I understand the difficulty arising from individual cases that are brought to the attention of hon. Members in a constituency capacity. It is difficult for us to write Acts of Parliament that necessarily apply universally, but cater for all the different circumstances and individual cases that will come to us as constituency Members. I shall draw his remarks to the attention of the Home Office. Although I do not wish to hold out the prospect of an immediate statement, I am sure that we will return to the issue on a number of occasions in this Session.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Please can we have an early debate on the role of the Lord Chancellor in the setting of rules of evidence in criminal cases? The release of Sally Clark caused great rejoicing in Salisbury, where she grew up as a child, but it comes as no surprise. Our hearts go out to her wonderful family and her father, who is still a constituent of mine. However, my constituent Angela Cannings is still in prison having been convicted in very similar circumstances, and five similar cases are ongoing. The Leader of the House says that he hopes that the same thing will never happen again, but it will do so as long as we allow juries to convict on the basis not of evidence, but of the controversial opinions and theories of so-called medical experts. That is against natural justice.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman will understand why it would be inappropriate for me to comment on any other individual cases in the present circumstances, but I understand what he says about the evidence given by forensic experts. I am sure that, in the light of the recent decision on Sally Clark, there will necessarily be a review to ensure high standards of integrity, openness and transparency in forensic evidence.

I should like to add one caution: I think that it would be a mistake to encourage the view that there are widespread or general miscarriages of justice in the British courts. Undoubtedly, there are individual circumstances in which things go wrong, and we should vigorously pursue such problems, put them right when we find them and seek to learn any lessons. However, that should not be taken as calling into question the great mass of decisions that are reached in our courts.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): May I bring the Leader of the House back to the rally that is due to be held on 15 February? He will be well aware that it is part of a worldwide protest against George Bush's war for oil in Iraq and that people do not understand why the Government are suggesting at this late stage that preventing the spoiling of grass in Hyde park is a more worthwhile cause than saving the lives of thousands of Iraqi civilians.

Mr. Cook: This is not a Government decision; we have expressed no view on the matter and sought to exert no influence. It is entirely a matter for the Royal Parks. Nor is it a new decision by the Royal Parks, which have a long-standing policy not to permit major rallies in the winter months when the ground will not be firm. I fully understand the importance of members of the public having the opportunity to express their views

[Mr. Cook]

and I would be the last person to stand in the way of their doing so. I urge my hon. Friend and those organising the rally to find other opportunities.

Sir Patrick Cormack: If the Leader of the House is truly concerned about the reputation of this place and having an effective Parliament, will he allow us an early opportunity to vote again on these ridiculous new hours, which are undermining the work of Parliament? Is he aware that there are hon. Members in all parts of the House, including some who voted for the changes, who share that view?

Mr. Cook: The House voted on those matters, as the hon. Gentleman says. It did so on the basis of free will and a free vote, and it came to a considered view. Only three weeks have passed since the arrangements took effect and I think that it is far too soon to reach any mature judgment. However, it is not my impression that the decision would be reversed if we were to put it to a vote again.

Andrew Bennett (Denton and Reddish): Will my right hon. Friend reconsider the answer that he gave my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner)? There seemed in his reply to be a slight tension between reminding Labour Members of our manifesto commitment and emphasising the idea of a free vote. We had no opportunity to vote last week and we will not have an opportunity to vote for abolition in the coming week. If he could find a way of allowing us to have a vote on abolition and to express our views, he might then find that one or two of us are prepared to accept as a second best one of the many proposals that are due to be considered next week, even though they are pretty feeble.

Mr. Cook: I hear what my hon. Friend says. Of course, I often reflect on many of the answers that I have given in respect of the business statement, and I am happy to reflect on the one to which he refers. However, it would be false of me to suggest to the House that, at this late stage of proceedings, I see much prospect of adding any more options to the seven that will be put before the House. We set up the Joint Committee on the basis of a decision taken by this House. Indeed, my impression at the time was that it was warmly welcomed. To be honest, I am not aware of any submission made to the Joint Committee suggesting that it should consider abolition, and nor was such a proposal within the remit that the House approved. The seven options before us necessarily flow from that process. At this stage, I do not see much prospect of my succeeding in the task on which he invites me to embark.

We have a stark choice that we must face up to. If we want a legitimate second Chamber to work as a partner with us, it must have a democratic mandate and the authority that goes with it. If we are not prepared to accept that, I do not resile from the proposal that my hon. Friend puts to me: if we are not prepared to do it, we should perhaps be honest and recognise that the consequence is not to have a second Chamber.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Does the Leader of the House accept that it is totally wrong to deal with a matter as important as assistance to fishing communities by means of a written statement, when the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs knew full well that no fishing question had emerged high in the ballot today? The questions that fishing constituents want answered are clear: why was there no access to European funding, which means that that money is now available to build up other European industries while ours is being run down, and why was there no new Treasury money, which means that the Department's existing budgets are heavily constrained? Why can the Government find so much to prepare for war in the Gulf, but so little to help our fishing communities in a time of crisis?

Mr. Cook: I remind the hon. Gentleman that we have debated fisheries policy on several occasions, including, I think, as recently as last week. I am advised that there are no other available EU grants for fishing, and we are certainly not aware of any potential source to which we are not applying. On the question of fresh money, I point out to him that, on top of the £85 million already allocated for the fishing industry for the next three years, an additional £60 million has been forthcoming. Those are not inconsiderable sums and there are other hon. Members with industries of their own in trouble who would have welcomed that support.

Mr. Iain Luke (Dundee, East): Once my right hon. Friend gets a chance to read the Strategic Rail Authority's updated strategic plan for the next 10 years, I am sure that he will view it with concern, given that, like me, he represents a constituency distant from the House. The scaling down of targets and emphasis on the west coast line mean that the hope for improvements up and down the east coast main line will be pushed back. As I serve the distant community of Dundee, I am very concerned, like many others from the north-east, because improvements are not even a distant prospect. Will he hold an emergency debate on the proposals, so that hon. Members can discuss issues relating to investment in the east coast main line?

Mr. Cook: I fully understand the interest of many hon. Members in the impact of the strategic rail plan on their constituencies and towns. The important point on which we can all agree is that investment in the railway industry is at its highest ever and that we must ensure that that is sustained throughout the entire period covered by the 10-year plan. I understand that my hon. Friend is perfectly reasonably concerned about the east coast main line. Indeed, I share that interest as a Member representing a Lothian constituency. However, it is important to us all that we get the west coast main line right and that the SRA succeeds in the objective that it has set itself of ensuring that the rail industry brings costs under control.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney): As a keen follower of the turf, will the Leader of the House join me in condemning the Government's wholly ludicrous plans for compulsory passports for every horse, donkey and pony in the country? Does he agree that that has nothing to do with animal welfare and everything to do with bureaucracy originally imposed in Brussels? Can he find any purpose in it, or any mischief that it is trying to overcome, apart from the fact that the French like eating horses and do not want drugs to enter the food chain? Can we have an urgent debate in the House about the Government's plans so that those of us who want to maintain the status quo—I hope that he will join me in that—can try to convince the Government of our case?

Mr. Cook: I must declare an interest as a trustee of the British Horse Society, which has an excellent scheme to assist its members in providing appropriate horse passports in response to the directive. I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that the many people in Britain who purchase horses and ponies find it valuable to be able to have confidence in what they are buying and to know the history of the horse.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Knowing that my right hon. Friend is a passionate opponent of ageism—a passion that seems to increase as the years go by—will he soon allow a debate on the so-called National Institute for Clinical Excellence, specifically on early-day motion 316, which deals with age-related macular degeneration and the possibility that some people will be allowed to go blind simply because they are regarded as being too old?

[That this House believes that people suffering with wet age-related macular degeneration are entitled to full access to treatment that could prevent them from losing their sight; is aware that the National Institute for Clinical Excellence has recently issued provisional recommendations that photodynamic therapy be withheld from many people with age-related macular degeneration; notes that, if accepted, these recommendations will lead to approximately 5,000 people each year suffering from predominantly classic wet age-related macular degeneration having treatment withheld; and calls upon the Government not to agree to these views, but instead to support wider access to photodynamic therapy for all age-related macular degeneration sufferers.]

Mr. Cook: I entirely share my hon. Friend's view that the older I get, the more passionate I become about ageism. We have gone well out of our way to ensure that we have a national health service that treats all patients equally and thus treats it elderly patients fairly. I would deprecate the view that because one is older one should get a lesser standard of care, although we have to be realistic in recognising that, as people get older, there is sometimes less that medical science can usefully do to intervene. However, I assure him that the broad principle that nobody should be discriminated against on the ground of age is correct.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): May I refer to the business for next Wednesday, namely the allocation of resources to the police and to local government? Is the Leader of the House aware that that is important to every Member of this House? Although the top figure for the additional resources appears encouraging, most Conservative areas are being very badly dealt with, my borough of Macclesfield in particular. Had not a floor been put in the figures, Macclesfield would be getting below what the Government believe they should be getting. The time allocated next Wednesday is inadequate for all Members to express a view, so will the Leader of the House provide a longer debate? If he cannot, will he ensure that no statement takes place on that day?

Mr. Cook: I welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman accepts that our proposed figures are encouraging. Indeed, police numbers are at a record level. I assure him and his constituents that there is nothing in the formula, and nothing in the Government's approach, that provides for political discrimination against areas because of their political affiliation. We have provided three hours for the debate on that day. I always weigh very carefully an application for a statement against the House's need to proceed with its business. In fact, I am often pressed in business questions to provide for more, not fewer, statements.

Mr. Parmjit Dhanda (Gloucester): Will my right hon. Friend consider finding time for a debate on the conditions in which young offenders are kept in adult prisons? Following the suicide in April 2001 of my constituent Daniel Curnock, who was 17 years old, a decision was made not to allow young offenders to be kept in Gloucester prison. That decision was subsequently reversed owing to capacity problems affecting surrounding prisons. Many issues relating to young offenders in adult prisons need to be tackled, and that could be done in such a debate.

Mr. Cook: I hear with interest what my hon. Friend says. I am sure that the whole House would wish to express its concern and shares his anxieties about young people who are detained and feel driven to suicide for whatever cause. I regret that it has been necessary to put young offenders in a prison that he describes as having been considered inappropriate. As he will be aware, we face substantial demand and pressure in relation to the prison population, which necessarily results in decisions that we would otherwise not wish to have made. I shall draw his observations to the attention of the Home Secretary, and I am sure that they will be taken into account in any future allocations to prisons.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): May I draw the Leader of the House's attention to early-day motion 431, which addresses the serious issue of reducing child deaths from abuse and neglect.

[That this House believes that the numbers of children in this country who die through abuse and neglect is unacceptable and that public policy has failed to reduce the level of child deaths over the last 30 years; is concerned that the Chief Inspector of Social Services records in her eleventh annual report that three per cent. of children on the child protection register and five per cent. of looked-after children are not allocated a social worker, up to 4,000 children without a safety net; is further concerned that there is no systematic follow-up for child deaths or co-ordinated strategy to reduce child deaths in this country; calls on the Government to place area child protection committees on a statutory footing by placing a duty on all the agencies involved in child protection to participate in the work of the committee and support the local authority in discharging its child protection role; and further calls on the Government to establish an independent Children's Commissioner to promote and protect the rights of all children.]

[Mr. Paul Burstow]

Given Tuesday's statement on Lord Laming's report into the terrible torture of Victoria Climbié that led to her death, can the Leader of the House find time for a full debate on the findings and 108 recommendations contained in that report, so that Members on both sides of the House can express their opinions, and especially, for many of us, our support for a children's commissioner for England?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman raises a serious and troubling issue. I am pleased that we have already committed ourselves to implementing 82 of the 108 recommendations in the Laming report, which is not a bad scorecard. We have also committed ourselves to a Green Paper on child protection, which will explore some of the report's more strategic and longer-term recommendations. I fully understand that hon. Members will want other opportunities to discuss the matter and to examine Ministers on it, but I suggest that the best time to do that is when we have the Green Paper.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): When will the House be afforded the opportunity to make true the Prime Minister's reply yesterday that decisions on committing British troops

"are taken by our Government, our House of Commons, and our country"—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 872.]

by having a full day's debate, in Government time, with a substantive motion, on the issue of what seems increasingly to be an illegal and immoral war in Iraq? Will the Leader of the House further ensure that such a debate is not eroded by the introduction of ministerial statements, as in the past three debates on Iraq, which reduces the time that Back Benchers have to raise their constituents' justifiable concerns?

Mr. Cook: I am well aware of the interest in Iraq on both sides of the House. I am also very conscious that it is important for the Government, in responding to that, to provide adequate time for the House to debate the issue. In fairness to the Government, we have provided opportunities to examine the issue, and, indeed, a substantive motion for the House to vote upon. On that occasion, the House voted by a very large majority to support the strategy that the Government are pursuing through the United Nations. I assure my hon. Friend that we shall return to the House at all future stages, and I imagine that there will be other occasions on which the House will have an opportunity to vote on the matter.

Bob Spink (Castle Point): Being remarkably well informed, the Leader of the House will know that tomorrow evening is the 50th anniversary of the 1953 floods that devastated many communities across the south-east and caused 59 residents of Canvey Island to lose their lives. Will he join me in paying respects to those victims of the flood and to those who showed so much courage on that night in rescuing people and animals? Can he find time for a debate on ensuring that flood defences are substantial enough to prevent any further devastation, bearing in mind rising sea levels?

Mr. Cook: Of course, we are fully aware of the importance of flood defences. The hon. Gentleman, who is a fair-minded Member, will acknowledge that we have put substantial additional investment into that. We were pleased that, during the recent floods, the numbers who were inundated were fewer than on the previous occasion. Having said that, I fully understand the importance in his constituency of remembering what happened 50 years ago, and am sure that the whole House will join me in expressing to his constituents, through him, our concern and dismay at what happened and our understanding of the emotions that it must give rise to.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Does the Leader of the House recollect that, in the 25 years when he was not a Minister, he skilfully tabled thousands of named day questions? Is not it paradoxical that, now he is Leader of the House, we are being restricted to five named day questions a day? That removes an item from the Back-Bench Members' toolbox. Can we review that decision?

Secondly, will my right hon. Friend give an undertaking on the Government's behalf that, when Departments ignore questions that do not have a named day, they at least provide a holding reply after 10 days rather than the abuse that we get, especially from the Northern Ireland Office? Some Departments simply ignore questions and hope that the issue will go away. Such questions are neglected not for weeks but for months.

Mr. Cook: I shall take up my hon. Friend's last point with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. My hon. Friend gives me more credit than I deserve. The generation of those who were elected in the 1970s did not ask anything remotely approaching the number of questions that is now normal in any week in the House of Commons.

Andrew Mackinlay: Why not?

Mr. Cook: That is a fair question, which I shall attempt to answer in my memoirs. I shall confine myself today to the present. Since the previous general election, we have faced a sharp increase in the number of questions, even compared with the record number in the previous Parliament. It is striking that half the questions that are tabled are regarded as urgent questions for reply on a named day. The Procedure Committee endorsed that in its interesting recent report on the subject. We have accepted the Committee's proposal, which places no restriction on the number of questions that hon. Members may ask, but suggests that it is difficult to believe that any hon. Member would require five urgent questions in a day.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Reverting to Tuesday's debate on the House of Lords, did not the Prime Minister do something far more serious yesterday than potentially undermine the legitimacy of the second Chamber? By seeking a clear mandate for a more democratic House of Lords and trying to renege on his contract with the electorate, has not he undermined democracy in the primary Chamber of Parliament?

Mr. Cook: I do not believe that there could be a more democratic process than giving the House of Commons, which represents the nation, a free vote on what it considers the right option. As I have often done, and will do again on Tuesday, I urge hon. Members to seize the opportunity to ensure that we find a centre of gravity that can create momentum for reform.

I agree with the Prime Minister that we should seek a constitutional settlement that will last for a long time, not only one Parliament or a short time. I doubt whether any reform that is not a democratic solution will have the legitimacy to stand the test of time.

Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): The Leader of the House knows that I raised QinetiQ in business questions on 9 and 16 January and in early-day motion 531.

[That this House disapproves of the proposals set out in the Ministry of Defence departmental minute, dated 17th December 2002, to retain in the public sector liabilities amounting to almost £100 million as part of the deal done with the Carlyle Group to sell-off the defence evaluation organisation QinetiQ; believes it is wrong to encumber taxpayers with liabilities while selling off public assets to the private sector; further believes that the method of informing hon. Members by a departmental minute deposited in the parliamentary libraries just two days before the Christmas recess is an insufficiently transparent way of keeping parliament appraised of the sell-off strategy and detailed provision; and calls upon the Secretary of State for Defence to postpone any further action in respect of the QinetiQ sell-off until parliament has had a proper chance to debate the implications.]

Does my right hon. Friend know that the Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence recently described the process of the sell-off as "deeply repugnant"? As it is likely to cost the taxpayer more than £100 million, is it too much to expect the House to debate the matter?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing my attention to the Select Committee's report, which I shall consider with interest and care. However, as I understand it, the £100 million is not a cost but the potential liability, to which few imagine that the Government will be exposed. I pursued the question of process, which my hon. Friend raised on previous occasions, and it is well understood that in future we must ensure that memoranda are placed in the Library at a time that permits 14 sitting days to follow, not when the House is about to go into recess.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Future Aircraft Carrier

1.24 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the future aircraft carrier programme.

The 1998 strategic defence review set out the need to improve the capabilities of our armed forces to meet the challenges of a changing strategic environment. The new chapter to the strategic defence review, which builds on our operational experience since 1998 and takes account of events that followed the 11 September attacks, has reinforced those requirements.

Our maritime forces need the ability to project power still further afield. We have therefore set out our most extensive shipbuilding programme for more than a generation. In the next few years, six Type 45 air defence destroyers, six new amphibious warfare vessels and other essential support ships will enter operational service.

Two new, larger, more versatile aircraft carriers will be central to those new maritime capabilities. They will have a vital role in a wide range of military tasks, from peace support operations to high-intensity war fighting. They will offer a coercive presence that could contribute to conflict prevention and provide a flexible and rapidly deployable base when our forces need to operate without host nation support.

As I announced last September, those ships will carry the world's most advanced stealthy and supersonic jump jets—the United States-United Kingdom project for the joint strike fighter. At the same time, I announced that we had chosen an adaptable design for the carriers, which will allow us to make best use of the ships over their projected life of more than 50 years. Both decisions show the Government's determination to equip our armed forces with the capabilities that they need.

The programme is massive and technically challenging, with the two ships alone costing around £3 billion. It will provide employment for up to 10,000 people throughout the United Kingdom. The warships will be the largest and most powerful vessels ever produced for the Royal Navy. At around 60,000 tonnes, they are approximately three times the size of our current carriers. They will rank alongside the most formidable and complex weapons systems deployed by any country anywhere in the world.

The competition for the prime contract has been closely run between the two bidders, BAE Systems and Thales UK. Both are to be congratulated on their proposals to deliver the key new capability to our armed forces. Both are major defence suppliers to the Ministry of Defence. They each make an important contribution to the United Kingdom's economy, providing investment and employment in manufacturing and key science and technology areas. Thales UK employs around 12,000 people throughout the United Kingdom, and BAE Systems, including through its joint ventures, employs approximately 51,000.

A competition of such complexity and scale necessarily involves intensive scrutiny of technical specifications, value for money and wider industrial benefits. We have used a continuous assessment process

[Mr. Geoffrey Hoon]

to evaluate both companies' work and performance. We have assessed their ability to keep to their project schedules and to establish an appropriate relationship with the Ministry of Defence team. That pioneering process has provided us with a wealth of information to help our decision making.

Two key findings emerge. First, both BAE Systems and Thales UK have performed to a very high standard. There is no doubt that competition has led to major benefits and sharpened the performance of both companies. The competition process has produced impressive designs.

Secondly, if the carriers are to enter service on time, both companies would need to augment substantially their available design resources to achieve the necessary maturity before manufacturing can begin.

Our detailed analysis shows that each company has significant strengths. BAE Systems has displayed a sound understanding of the project's complexities in its project management and prime contracting, and has developed a good relationship with all the key shipyards. It also demonstrated the skills that are necessary to integrate the different systems into an effective warship. Thales UK has provided an innovative design that is flexible enough to meet our needs. It has strengths in a number of key areas, including in weapon and defence systems and the interface between the ship, aircraft and flight deck operations.

We have therefore decided that, to deliver value for money and provide the best capability, it is important and, indeed, sensible to exploit all those strengths. We judge that a partnership appears to offer the best means of drawing in the necessary resources and expertise to deliver a programme of such magnitude. We envisage that this alliance will be led by BAE Systems as the preferred prime contractor, with responsibility for project and shipbuilding management. Thales UK will assume a major role as the key supplier of the whole ship design. We foresee that the Ministry of Defence will also take up a formal role in the alliance for those parts of the programme for which we are rightly responsible. That would involve the management of appropriate risk and contingencies and the provision of assets such as suitably trained manpower and the JSF aircraft.

This innovative approach builds on the principles of smart acquisition and the defence industrial policy that was published last October. It will enable us to make the most of the resources and strengths of both companies and the skills and expertise of the Ministry of Defence project team.

Both BAE Systems and Thales UK have indicated their willingness in principle to participate in such an alliance. The approach will be based on proper customer and supplier relationships, working collaboratively to achieve challenging targets. It will be underpinned by a robust contractual arrangement. Risk will be allocated to the party best suited to manage and mitigate that risk and the rewards will be shared so that it is in the interests of all parties for the programme to succeed. Further work will be required with both companies to establish the detailed contractual arrangements.

Subject to reaching a satisfactory outcome to these negotiations, and with subsequent confidence that the alliance is operating effectively during the final part of the assessment phase, we intend to reach the final investment decision in spring 2004. At that stage, we will place the prime contract and permit the alliance to move into the demonstration and manufacture phase, when the ships will actually be built. We remain fully committed to achieving our declared in-service dates for both ships in 2012 and 2015 respectively.

I anticipate that hon. Members will be particularly interested in the shipbuilding element of the carrier programme. We believe at this stage that the best way forward is for the carriers to be built by a combination of four yards: BAE Systems Marine at Govan, Vosper Thornycroft at Portsmouth, Swan Hunter on Tyneside, and Babcock BES at Rosyth. The involvement of other yards has not been ruled out. The precise arrangements will be the subject of discussions between the alliance and the yards, to determine the best value for money and work load capacity. We anticipate that the engines will be provided by Rolls-Royce. It is clear that the benefits for the United Kingdom shipbuilding industry and its related supplier chain across the country are significant. I can assure hon. Members that, despite recent suggestions to the contrary, the vessels will be designed and built in the United Kingdom.

This vast programme of work should create or sustain up to 10,000 jobs right across the country. It offers a significant opportunity not only for the shipbuilding industry, but for many small and medium-sized companies all around the United Kingdom. For example, the Bath-based company British Maritime Technology has played a key role in developing the Thales UK design. Other companies, such as specialist paint suppliers and engineering firms, will also have the opportunity to engage in the programme as it progresses. Ultimately, hundreds of suppliers right across the United Kingdom will be able to participate.

Today's announcement by the Government is good news for our armed forces and good news for the nation's defence. It demonstrates the Government's support for the British manufacturing industry and for British jobs, and I commend it to the House.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for giving me a copy in advance, but I have to say to him that this is not so much a decision as a fudge. The addition of two full-sized aircraft carriers to the Royal Navy's fleet, along with the introduction of the new joint strike fighter, will represent a huge increase in Britain's ability to project, sustain and protect military force anywhere in the world. So we welcome any progress towards the launch of the new ships, but we fear that this programme is now beset by uncertainty.

First and not least, there is the vexed issue of money. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that the money for those ships will be available without the need to cut other programmes? The armed forces and the equipment budget are already overstretched. It is clear from the forward defence equipment plans that there is far more on the Government's shopping list than current defence spending levels will support, alongside all of the UK's other defence commitments.

Secondly, the Secretary of State describes his announcement as "innovative", but he is being a little modest. He has not so much announced a decision as the start of a whole new process: the formation of an as yet ill-defined alliance that is entirely unformed and agreed only "in principle". He remains committed to the in-service dates of 2012 and 2015—dates that are long after he is likely to have departed—but if in a year's time his proposed alliance is judged not to be operating successfully, as he put it, where will that leave the Government's programme? The so-called smart procurement policy was meant to avoid the vexed issue of work sharing. This project started out as a clear competition, but has not the Secretary of State bottled out in the past few weeks by unexpectedly deciding to split the work between the two main competitors? Is he not now effectively saying that Thales won the competition, but that British Aerospace is the prime contractor and has to adopt the Thales design?

What is the basis for deciding the split of work, and is it subject to ministerial direction? Will the contract be arbitrated under English or French law, and who will ultimately be responsible for achieving project milestones and holding to budget? Does not this decision artificially to split the contract have very serious implications for the way in which future defence competitions should be conducted? Is it not the truth that the Secretary of State could never have justified awarding the whole project to a French company, given that there is no possibility of the French Government's ever allowing British companies to compete on the same terms in France? Should he not have realised that at the outset, rather than discovering it only now?

We recognise that Thales UK is a major UK investor and employer, and that work placed with it will create British jobs in British factories, but some work will certainly go to France. I merely ask whether the Secretary of State shares the anxiety of many in our defence industries that UK companies simply do not have the same opportunities to buy companies, and to compete in French markets on the same terms. In return for nominating Thales as a "key supplier"—the company is still effectively owned and controlled by the French Government—what is President Chirac giving Britain, except a regular kick in the teeth for the Prime Minister on issues such as agricultural reform, his outrageous invitation to President Mugabe and his determination to split NATO over the issue of Iraq?

Will the Secretary of State now agree that the company to which he periodically refers as "British" Aerospace is in fact a British company? Will there now be an end to the unseemly public criticism of what is Europe's largest defence contractor and one of our biggest industrial employers and export earners, from which he has carelessly wiped millions in stock market value?

This decision raises many questions about the future of defence procurement policy, which the Government will have to address. The final order for those ships is important for British industry and vital for the future of UK defence, but today's announcement by the Government has introduced more risk and more uncertainty—not just for this project but, by implication, for the entire defence equipment programme.

Mr. Hoon: I am sorry that the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), who speaks on defence matters on the Opposition's behalf, has yet again come to the House with a litany of anti-European—in this case, anti-French—rhetoric. He has a problem, because if he examines the NATO alliance, he will discover that a significant number of European allies are members of NATO, and we work with them regularly. I know that there are many in the Conservative party who would probably like it to revert to its state before the debate on the corn laws, but unfortunately, when the hon. Gentleman talks about projects for the 21st century, his arguments sound distinctly outdated.

The key question that the hon. Gentleman must answer is what would the Conservative party have done differently from the announcement that has just been made. *[Interruption.]* In all the hon. Gentleman's rhetorical, anti-European flourishes from the Opposition Front Bench, I heard not a shred of a suggestion as to what exactly he would have done differently. *[Interruption.]* If he says—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. There is far too much chatter from Front Benchers on both sides of the House. We are trying to hear a reply from the Secretary of State.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

What the hon. Gentleman must say at some stage today—perhaps he will have opportunities other than the one he has just wasted—is whether he would have been prepared to jeopardise this vital programme for our armed forces and the benefits that flow across a range of British industrial expertise, by refusing to take advantage of the strengths of BAE Systems and Thales UK and the various bids that they made. If he is saying that he would choose one bid or the other, he is actually saying that he would rule out of consideration, and exclude from benefit to the UK's armed forces, the considerable expertise that each of those companies would make available. *[Interruption.]* I can hear mumblings on the Opposition Benches, so obviously in the course of his rambling response, the hon. Gentleman did not make all the points that he wanted to make. I invite him to think carefully about the ways in which such project negotiations are conducted, because if he did so he would see that the proposal set out is very clear, tight and well defined, and is clearly of considerable benefit to United Kingdom manufacturing industry.

Let me comment for the House on just one aspect of the hon. Gentleman's obsessions: the reference to French law. Had he listened carefully, and had he thought for a moment about the benefits to the United Kingdom, he would have recognised, as do many of his hon. Friends, that that was a smear, perpetrated deliberately to arouse the anti-European, anti-French rhetoric that has come to characterise the modern Conservative party. If he does not recognise that that is a disgrace, there are plenty of people on the Benches behind him who do.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for giving me an advance copy of his

[Mr. Paul Keetch]

statement. The Liberal Democrats believe that the new carriers that the right hon. Gentleman has announced today are essential to the United Kingdom's future expeditionary strategy. I congratulate him, and the Government, on procuring them.

We firmly believe that it is right for the carriers to be built, but we must be careful about the spin on this. It reminds me of Lewis Carroll, whose Dodo said:

> "*Everybody* has won, and all must have prizes."

We must be sure that the Government can demonstrate that the process has been competitive, not political. In other words, has the alliance turned over the nature of smart procurement?

Will the Secretary of State outline what discussions he has had with his French counterpart about the new French carrier? Does the decision announced today open the possibility of any advantages for the Ministry of Defence in future co-operation and possible future contracts for British companies on that carrier? What discussions has his Department had with the two contractors about the building of a hybrid carrier that could land both conventional carrier aircraft and the STOL—short take-off and landing—aircraft now being suggested? After all, that would ensure that there was proper co-operation with French and American aircraft carriers. Does the decision exclude such a possibility?

Can the Secretary of State confirm—yes or no—that the recommendation from the Defence Procurement Agency was for a single prime contractor? Does not a single contractor represent a single point of control? Who will really run the project? Will it really be BAE Systems? Who will own the rights to the design of the future carrier: BAE or Thales? Can the right hon. Gentleman give a single example of an alliance producing a contract on time and on budget? In short, after a three-year contest, why have the Government decided on such an alliance? If it is such a good idea, why was it not decided on at the start of the contract?

The Liberal Democrats believe that the future carrier programme is essential to our British military future, and we congratulate the Government on fulfilling their obligations under the strategic defence review. I hope that the alliance will work, but it will be for the Secretary of State to demonstrate that that design does not become one of our major overruns.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support—I think. He asked a number of practical questions, and I shall endeavour to deal with them. Overall, I took his response to be supportive; if subsequent textual analysis reveals that I am wrong, I apologise both to him and to the House.

The great advantage of the approach that we are adopting is that we get the best out of a vigorous competitive process. If there is any doubt in anyone's mind about the nature of the competition, they have only to look at the various press reports about it over the past few months. In that competitive process, real advantages have been brought to bear, in terms both of design expertise and, crucially, of allowing the Ministry of Defence to monitor continuously the process that each of the companies has adopted.

That is unlike what happened in previous competitions, when the first that a Department would see of the competition would be the product at the end, and then it would have to take a decision between two or more finished products. We have been able to monitor the way in which each company has approached the competition, which has had benefits for the companies and, I believe, strong benefits for the country. That is why at this stage we are confident that we shall be able to incorporate the best elements of both companies in the alliance approach, while maintaining an interest on behalf of the Government in how they work together. There are other examples of such co-operation. Type 45 will be built in a co-operative way, and that, too, will involve the best expertise that the United Kingdom can bring to bear.

It is not appropriate for me to comment on advice from officials at this stage, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that at every stage there has been absolute agreement within the Ministry of Defence about the best way forward. That has meant that we can be confident in the recommendations that we are making and the decisions that we are announcing to the House today.

As for the hybrid character of the project, I dealt—last September I think—with the proposal that the carrier will be adaptable. It does not make sense at this stage, either militarily or financially, to develop a carrier capable of taking both types of aircraft, but we are ensuring that the carrier could be converted if necessary, given a further generation of strike aircraft, to accommodate a different type of aircraft. That will guarantee the lifetime utility of the platforms that we propose to build.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We do not have an indefinite amount of time available for further exchanges on the statement, so I appeal to the House for short, single-part questions and crisp answers.

Mr. Bruce George (Walsall, South): I hope that the Secretary of State will not construe any mild criticism of his decision as xenophobia. I hope that the Defence Committee will soon inquire in more detail into the nature of the decision, but what I as an individual ask for now is some reassurance. The Secretary of State said that BAE Systems would be a prime contractor. Will it have the opportunity to choose systems made by BAE, and not simply be a prime contractor but have to choose all Thales systems?

Does the Secretary of State accept that, as Sir Robert Walmsley said, a carrier is just a box? That is the easy bit. The difficult bit is the systems that go in it and on it—and those are the bits that I want some assurances about. I want to be assured that genuinely British companies will have the opportunity of bidding for and winning the contracts for them.

Finally, echoing the words of the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), the shadow Defence spokesman, I really hope that this generosity and this alliance will be reciprocated. Otherwise, people will see it in rather more xenophobic terms.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his observations. As he rightly says, it is the weapons systems incorporated in modern fighting ships that are their key characteristic. I assure him that there will be vigorous competition to ensure that not only do we have the best equipment for our armed forces, but the need to promote and protect vital high-tech industries in the United Kingdom is satisfied.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I welcome the procurement decision, but I strongly oppose the decision that the Secretary of State has announced to split the contract. I want to support British industry, and I have done so for all of the 32 years that I have been in this place. The French do not have a very good reputation for building large ships. How many jobs has the Secretary of State sacrificed to the French by splitting the contract, rather than giving the order to BAE Systems, whose proposal I have strongly supported all along?

Mr. Hoon: The answer to the second part of the hon. Gentleman's question is that not a single job has been sacrificed to the French. As I emphasised, unless he and some of his hon. Friends are suggesting that Bath is now somehow part of greater France—

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): No.

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) is protesting that that cannot possibly be the case, so the design work was concluded well within the territory of the United Kingdom. That will remain the position. However, I know that the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton) is a strong and consistent supporter of UK industry. I am delighted to have his support for this proposal.

Mr. Alan Campbell (Tynemouth): Those of us with an interest in shipbuilding in the north-east and memories of the closure of the Swan Hunter yard some eight years ago will greet the announcement as excellent news for the region. Does my right hon. Friend agree, now that a Labour Government have created this opportunity for the revival of shipbuilding on Tyneside, that it is up to companies and the work force to make the most of it?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I visited Swan Hunter some years ago and recognise the revival that has taken place. Opposition Front-Bench Members may bluster, but the previous Conservative Government did not come to the House once in 18 years to announce the construction of two carriers of this size and type.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I regret that the Harland and Wolff yard was not included in the announcement, but may I welcome the inclusion of four British shipyards, along with Thales? They will contribute to the economy of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful for the hon. Member's support. Thales is an important employer in Northern Ireland, where the Ministry of Defence already has a ship under construction. We have played our part in respect of the people there, and want to continue to do so.

Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): In his statement, my right hon. Friend said that the involvement of other yards, besides the four that he named for building, would not be ruled out. Will he give an assurance that the proposals for certain aspects of design, commissioning and through-life support that were part of the Thales bid by Devonport Management Ltd. are not ruled out? Will they still receive full and fair consideration?

Mr. Hoon: As I said, the benefits of this massive programme will spread right across the UK. I do not rule out any contribution that can be made. Obvious benefits will accrue to certain shipyards as a result of my announcement, but there will also be real benefits across the UK, involving many companies situated far from the sea. It is important that we bear that in mind.

Mr. Mark Hoban (Fareham): What reassurances can the Secretary of State give to Vosper Thornycroft, which employs many people across south-east Hampshire, about the share of the shipbuilding work that it will get as a result of today's announcement?

Mr. Hoon: Clearly, as must be the case in any event, that remains to be negotiated. However, I am sure that the company, its employees and the people living in the immediate area will be delighted that the yard will be one of those responsible for the massive amount of work that will come to the UK. Following so closely on the work being done on Type 45, this is a very important opportunity for a significant UK employer.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): Thankfully, more than 1.5 million more people are in work than when the Government were first elected. However, that prosperity has not yet spread to all our shipbuilding constituencies. If the tide of joblessness is to be reversed, it is crucial that my area can win some of the subcontracting work. Will my right hon. Friend give some idea of the number of new subcontracting jobs that will be created by his announcement today?

Mr. Hoon: The overall estimate is that some 10,000 jobs will be created or preserved by the announcement. Clearly, there will be significant opportunities in subcontracting, not least in areas of high expertise such as the one represented by my right hon. Friend. We shall monitor that very carefully as the benefits of these decisions spread throughout the UK economy.

Angus Robertson (Moray): May I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement, and welcome the announcement of domestic procurement? Last year, the Ministry of Defence said that, in procurement terms, there was a shortfall to Scottish taxpayers of £670 million. How will priority be given to sourcing work to the Clyde, Rosyth, Greenock and Nigg, which has an outstanding fabrication tradition?

Mr. Hoon: Given the very considerable benefit that will flow to Scotland as a result of an announcement made by a UK Secretary of State for Defence, perhaps the hon. Gentleman should say whether an independent Scotland under the leadership of the Scottish National party would contribute to the programme—or even whether such a country would want to be defended by these ships. The policy of the hon. Gentleman's party is to take Scotland out of NATO, so I assume that he would abandon any requirement that the ships be used. If so, he should tell the people of Scotland how his party would defend the country in that eventuality.

Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): This is a very welcome announcement for Clydeside. It gives the area's shipbuilding industry the biggest boost that anyone can remember, and we must use the opportunity. However, will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State clarify one point? He said that he sees the role of the Ministry of Defence as providing assets such as suitably trained manpower. I hope that that is so, as I do not think that either of the contractors realise how much education and training is needed to rejuvenate the industry. We must make sure that the education and training sectors can meet the challenge being set them.

Mr. Hoon: The matter that my hon. Friend raises has been discussed across Government, and a number of Cabinet colleagues are concerned to ensure that it is resolved in the way that my hon. Friend describes. Clearly, with a project of this kind following so closely the Type 45 announcement, the benefits to Scottish shipyards are obvious and palpable. Equally, however, as those benefits come onstream, we must ensure that we have the right sort of trained personnel to take advantage of what is a significant opportunity. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his support, and I shall look to it again as we deal with the challenging tasks ahead.

Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): I welcome the Secretary of State's interim statement, although the crunch statement will come in spring 2004, as I think he said. However, Britain is the world's fourth-largest economy, and it is the nation that built the generation of carriers that included the Eagle, Victorious, Bulwark, Hermes, Invincible, Illustrious and Ark Royal. How have we got ourselves into a situation that means that we have to rely on the expertise of a foreign country to produce the best possible contract? Will the right hon. Gentleman conduct an inquiry into what has gone wrong with our defence industry, to ensure that this embarrassing situation does not arise again?

Mr. Hoon: I shall say this once more, for the hon. Gentleman's benefit. The Bath-based company, British Maritime Technology, played the key role in developing the Thales UK design. It is based in Bath and, as far as I am aware, it employs people from the locality. I am not aware that there is a huge number of people in Bath of French origin or nationality. It would not matter even if there were, as the benefits of that excellent design will still flow to the UK. I am tempted to give the hon. Gentleman a detailed account of the failures of 18 years of Conservative government, when no warship orders on this scale were placed. There were massive cuts in the amount of money spent on defence, and a significant rundown in the equipment available to the UK's armed forces. This Government are having to make good that legacy.

Mr. John Lyons (Strathkelvin and Bearsden): Any fair-minded hon. Member will welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. His name will be toasted on the Clyde and elsewhere this evening when the very good news gets out. Rolls-Royce's involvement is important and will be welcomed across the nation. I welcome the proposal to involve a project team. Will my right hon. Friend consider speaking to BAE Systems, which has listed 200 redundancies? It would be great if that threat could be removed and everyone could participate in the work.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's fair-minded support for the project, and for the way in which he has pointed out the wider industrial benefits for Scotland's shipyards, and for companies such as Rolls-Royce that operate in England and Wales as well as Scotland—[HON. MEMBERS: "Northern Ireland."]—and Northern Ireland. The decision will be of real benefit to the United Kingdom and should be welcomed by all Members and by great companies in the UK and their employees.

Mr. Don Foster: I share the Secretary of State's concern that the Conservative tirade against Thales totally ignores the fact that many excellent British businesses were involved in its side of the deal. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his specific reference to the excellent work of British Maritime Technology, which is based in Bath, and assure him that today's announcement will ensure that the company can go forward with bids to do work in other countries as well as in the UK.

Mr. Hoon: That really is a complete answer to the xenophobic nonsense that we have heard from the Conservative Front Bench. We live in an increasingly integrated global economy, and unless Conservative Front Benchers recognise that, rather than sniping constantly at our partners and allies, they will have little future in the 21st century.

David Cairns (Greenock and Inverclyde): When I sat through many briefings from both companies, it was clear to me that each had major strengths. My right hon. Friend has outlined in his statement a creative and imaginative solution.

May I make one specific point? In previous programmes on which there have been overruns, there has been a fault line between those who design the ships and the shipyard management. Is my right hon. Friend completely confident that that major part of the programme will be carefully managed so that those who hold the jobs that will undoubtedly come to the Clyde will create best-quality ships that will in turn attract other orders from overseas?

Mr. Hoon: A key strength of the BAE Systems bid was its relationship with the shipyards and understanding of the problems posed once a project moves from design to manufacture. That is a strength of the company, and one that we identified as part of its contribution to the bid.

Mr. Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater): The House has a habit of saying, "It's good to buy British." Can the Secretary of State confirm that the propellant for the 800 tonnes of ammunition that the ships will carry is made by [illegible] Systems in my constituency, which proposes to move production to America? If buying British is best, will the Secretary of State ensure that the propellant continues to be made in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Hoon: The range of competitive pressures on UK companies clearly leads them to source material from different places. What is important to the UK economy is that they should do so cost-effectively while guaranteeing the supply of equipment—in this case, propellant. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Ministry of Defence pays close regard to that.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): As secretary of the all-party shipbuilding and ship repair group, may I say how much that group welcomes today's announcement? The carrier order is probably the biggest boost to British shipbuilding for many decades, and it is particularly welcome coming, as it does, against a background of siren voices of Conservative Members who said that it would never come to pass.

Can the Secretary of State give us an idea how many carriers he thinks would be ordered by the navy of an independent Scotland? People on Clydeside will want to be clear about that when they realise that the jobs announced today have come while we are part of the Union. As we move towards Scottish elections—I make the point not for partisan reasons, but for the sake of public information—it is essential that people realise that.

Given that the Secretary of State has announced a challenging organisational way of moving forward, can he guarantee that there will be no delay in the work, particularly in steel, because men on Clydeside are ready and waiting to start building the ships?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I shall of course not answer him in a partisan way. I must point out that in the role that he ably holds on behalf of the British shipbuilding industry, he last said that I had given British shipbuilding its biggest boost the last time I announced an order, which was the Type 45 order. I am grateful for his consistent observations, and I know that the Government are consistently grateful for his support.

Mr. Davidson: Only when you deserve it.

Mr. Keetch: Not always!

Mr. Hoon: We are always grateful for my hon. Friend's support.

I have already dealt with the points that my hon. Friend made about Scottish nationalist policy. I recognise the SNP's difficulties in sustaining its argument when it comes to defence-related jobs. It is a great privilege to be Secretary of State for Defence for the United Kingdom, and I think that my hon. Friend made his point well enough.

As for delays, I emphasise the need to ensure a mature design before any steel is cut. One reason for past cost overruns has been that steel has sometimes been cut before the design has been properly matured. That is why it is important to hold effective contract negotiations over the next 12 months in order to secure a proper outcome for employees in and around our great British shipyards and for the Ministry of Defence.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): Returning to the Secretary of State's comments on the partnership role of the MOD in regard to trained manpower, I am sure that he will be aware that Vosper Thornycroft has headquarters in Eastleigh. In the package that it put forward in the bidding process in partnership with BAE Systems, Vosper Thornycroft offered to provide high-skilled training for 1,000 people over the course of the project. That is vital to the future economy of my constituency and the wider area. Can the Secretary of State assure the House that that part of the BAE Systems proposal remains part of the project?

Mr. Hoon: It would not be right at this stage for me to give specific assurances of that kind. What I can say is that there will be enormous demand for high-skilled employees as a result of our decisions, and Vosper Thornycroft's investment and commitment to the skills of its work force has been enormously impressive as it has taken on a number of challenging contracts that ultimately come from the Ministry of Defence. I have every confidence in the company's ability to deliver on shipbuilding and on the training required for a skilled work force.

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham): I warmly welcome today's announcement, which is good news for the north-east economy and particularly for Swan Hunter on the Tyne, a company that was closed by the Conservative Government but given a bright future by Labour. Can my right hon. Friend assure us that the MOD and contractors work with organisations such as Northern Defence Industries to ensure that the maximum number of small and medium-sized enterprises can obtain work from the massive contract, which will be a great boost to the north-east in general.

Mr. Hoon: I have been in regular correspondence with Northern Defence Industries, which performs a valuable role on behalf of the defence industry and defence companies in the north-east. As one who represents an entirely land-locked constituency, I can say that one of the significant consequences of the announcement is that the benefits clearly available to the north-east and other shipbuilding areas flow right across the United Kingdom.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): The Secretary of State did not point out that a commitment to build two strike carriers appeared in the 1997 Tory manifesto. I am glad that he has caught up with our plans and ambitions.

Why is the Secretary of State withdrawing Sea Harriers before the two strike carriers come into commission? Will that not leave the Royal Navy vulnerable? Would it not be possible to bring forward the in-service dates, given that 2012 is a long way off? After all, it took the Germans just two years to build Bismarck and the Americans two and a half years to build USS Missouri. I appreciate that those were less sophisticated vessels, but is there any chance of bringing forward the in-service date?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman unfortunately overlooked the fact that the two huge new carriers will

[Mr. Hoon]

be equipped with the latest and most technologically advanced stealthy aircraft—the joint strike fighter. I would be more enthusiastic about his questions if, rather than just talking about investment, he had been more enthusiastic about the massive investment that the Government have made.

John Robertson (Glasgow, Anniesland): As the Member of Parliament who represents the Scotstoun yard, I hope that its name was missing from my right hon. Friend's statement only because Govan includes Scotstoun. I welcome the statement with open arms as it is good news for the Clyde and the country as a whole, but I am slightly disappointed that BAE Systems did not win the design part of the contract. In Scotstoun, a magnificent design office has been set up, especially for the Type 45 destroyers. It is an unmitigated success, but with the announcement of 265 job losses last week, I am concerned that there might be problems for that drawing office in years to come.

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend has been a constant champion of the Clyde and has argued long and successfully for precisely the kind of investment that we are now able to make in relation to the Clyde and BAE Systems' role there. I know that my hon. Friend will continue to ensure that his constituents are properly represented in guaranteeing that the kind of work available to them will continue long into the future.

John Thurso (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): Although I generally welcome the jobs that will be coming to Scotland, may I draw the Secretary of State's attention to the potential of the Nigg yard in Easter Ross? Given that the people of Easter Ross have borne with fortitude the inconvenience of the bombing range at Tain, would it not be a just reward for some of the jobs from the contract to come to Easter Ross, too?

Mr. Hoon: In my statement, I made it clear that the involvement of other yards was not ruled out. I have already pointed out, in response to a question from one of my hon. Friends, that I anticipated a significant amount of subcontract would benefit parts of the UK other than those that I have identified specifically so far. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be able to make representations in due course.

Andy King (Rugby and Kenilworth): I, too, welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. I am extremely concerned on behalf of the 3,000 workers at Alsthom in Rugby, 200 of whom are to be made redundant in March owing to the failure of international contract and who will be greatly relieved that there will be work for the manufacturing industry. As my right hon. Friend said, the contracts relate not only to shipyards but to manufacturing as a whole. How many jobs are there likely to be in the manufacturing industry, especially at Alsthom, which is a major part—supposedly—of the foreign business partnership?

Mr. Hoon: As I have already indicated, we anticipate that about 10,000 jobs will be either created or preserved as a result of the announcement. There will be significant opportunities for landlocked constituencies such as that of my hon. Friend and indeed mine to benefit from the subcontract work that will flow from these decisions. I look forward to hearing from my hon. Friend that that is indeed the case for his constituency.

Mr. Mark Francois (Rayleigh): Does the Secretary of State agree that the welcome for his statement from the Liberal Democrat Front Bench was a combination of four classic naval commands—full ahead, full astern, abandon ship, and make smoke—all at the same time?

May I ask the right hon. Gentleman about the implications of his announcement for procurement policy? The history of defence procurement under Governments of all colours is littered with examples of projects that went horribly wrong because it was never clear who was actually in charge. How can the Ministry of Defence credibly run future competitions if bidders see that despite all their efforts—and irrespective of the merits of the two bids in this case—Ministers can intervene at the last minute to create what is in effect a shotgun marriage between two different bids?

Mr. Hoon: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for saying so, there might be a fifth naval command that applies to the Conservative party: take to the lifeboats.

As far as—

Mr. Francois: Answer the question.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): It was supposed to be a joke—very funny.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful for all the applause I can get.

I dealt with the specific question put by the hon. Member for Rayleigh (Mr. Francois) in my answer to the Opposition spokesman. By incorporating the best elements of both bids we obtain the best British manufacturing contribution to this excellent British project.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I foresee that the robust contractual arrangements that the Secretary of State described will provide a rich harvest for the legal profession in due course.

The Secretary of State listed four shipyards where the main sections of the carriers will be built. Will he confirm that all UK shipyards, including Appledore in my constituency, will have a fair opportunity to tender for all subcontract work for the vessels?

Mr. Hoon: Having just answered a similar question from one of the hon. Gentleman's hon. Friends in relation to a different yard, I can assure him that the same opportunities will be available. I am sure that his former colleagues in the legal profession will welcome the contractual work that the decision offers.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): Now that BAE Systems has won this major and lucrative contract, will the company be required to honour outstanding cost overruns on existing contracts, such as the submarines and Nimrod, thereby sending a clear signal to all partners in the aircraft carrier contract that contractual failure will be penalised and not automatically paid for by the taxpayer?

Mr. Hoon: It has never been suggested that, under existing contracts, the taxpayer will automatically have to fund any cost overrun. Indeed, that is central to the discussions that are being held between the Ministry of Defence and the company concerned. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that this contract has been dealt with by both companies in an extremely professional and sophisticated way, and that the United Kingdom should be grateful that there are two companies operating in the country that are capable of producing such outstanding work.

Opposition Day

[4TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Iraq (Humanitarian Contingency Plan)

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I have to inform the House that Mr. Speaker has not selected the amendment in the name of the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

2.16 pm

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): I beg to move,

That this House observes the dire humanitarian situation in Iraq resulting from Saddam Hussein's misrule and Iraqi obstruction of humanitarian agencies; notes that more than ten per cent. of all Iraqi children die before their fifth birthday, and that a quarter of children under five are chronically malnourished; further notes the high dependency of Iraqis on Oil for Food programmes; deplores the continued Iraqi disruption of the Oil for Food programme; recognises the serious threat posed by Iraq's weapons of mass destruction; understands that military action may follow Iraq's continued violation of its international obligation to disarm and destroy those weapons of mass destruction, contrary to UN Resolution 1441; urges the Secretary of State for International Development to work with the international community urgently to draw up a comprehensive humanitarian strategy for assisting the people of Iraq in the event of war; further urges Her Majesty's Government to ensure that there is close co-operation between the military campaign and the aid effort; and calls on the Secretary of State for International Development to keep Parliament fully informed of the humanitarian situation in Iraq.

May I begin by drawing the attention of the House to a point that has been made to me by several colleagues? It is extremely difficult at this time of day to attend both the Chamber and Standing Committees whose meetings start at 2.30 pm. Members may not be in the Chamber not because of lack of interest in the subject of our debate, but because they have to be at a Standing Committee meeting in a quarter of an hour's time.

One of the most serious decisions a Prime Minister will ever have to make is whether to send our troops to war. The announcement last week that we are sending a quarter of our Army to the Gulf, while not making war inevitable, brings it a step closer. Furthermore, Hans Blix's statement to the Security Council this week provides clear evidence of Iraqi non-compliance, which, if it persists, will be met with military force.

It is understandable that many people are cautious in their support for action against Iraq. Humanitarian aid organisations are warning of the catastrophic impact that war is likely to have on the Iraqi people. The Conservative party is responding to those warnings by initiating this debate: it is the responsible thing to do.

So far, there has been a worrying silence from the Government on the humanitarian aspects of war against Iraq. It is worth pointing out that we have had no statement from the Secretary of State for International Development on the humanitarian preparations that her Department is making, despite having heard several statements from the Secretary of State for Defence on the military build-up that is taking place, and numerous statements from the Foreign Secretary on the diplomatic steps that he is taking.

The written answers that hon. Members have received have been oblique and, I must say, generally uninformative. Hon. Members may contrast that silence

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on the humanitarian effort with the debates held in Parliament after 11 September. Then, Parliament was provided with regular updates on the situation in Afghanistan. The Secretary of State seemed happy to make statements and respond in debates about the actions that she was taking to deliver aid to the Afghan people.

When Parliament was recalled, the Prime Minister said:

"the humanitarian coalition to help the people of Afghanistan is as vital as the military action itself."—[*Official Report*, 4 October 2001; Vol. 372, c. 673.]

During his speech to the Labour party conference, the Prime Minister promised that

"more than ever now, with every bit as much thought and planning, we will assemble a humanitarian coalition alongside the military coalition."

During the Afghan campaign, the House debated not debate only the military but the humanitarian strategy. We debated the effectiveness of the international aid effort and how it might be made more effective. We were able to reassure our constituents that we were taking the humanitarian effort seriously and we were able to reassure ordinary Afghans that our conflict was not with them.

I hope that today's debate will help to bring some balance to our understanding of the situation in Iraq.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): My hon. Friend is right to mention Afghanistan. Looking a little further back in time, does she recall that during the Kosovo conflict there was substantial emphasis on the Government putting in place a clear humanitarian strategy?

Mrs. Spelman: My hon. Friend is right. So far, our preparations for war in Iraq have been in marked contrast to the preparations for both those wars.

If the wider war on terrorism is to succeed, it is crucial that we do not forfeit vital international support by pursuing a war against Saddam Hussein without a comprehensive humanitarian strategy for helping the innocent Iraqi people.

Our main concern today is the sustainability of the aid programmes on which the Iraqis depend in the event of a war against Saddam Hussein's regime. When war could be just six weeks away, it is vital that the international community builds a comprehensive strategy for delivering humanitarian aid to the people of Iraq. We seek reassurance from the Secretary of State that there are comprehensive humanitarian contingency plans. Some of the statements that we have heard in recent weeks do not give us confidence that that is the case.

Let us consider refugees. After the Gulf war, 1.8 million Iraqi refugees went on the move. That is 18 times the number of refugees who fled Afghanistan. On Tuesday, however, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees admitted to BBC News Online that its preparations were in the initial stages and,

"in terms of scope they are not really on a large scale".

Is that really acceptable when war might be a matter of weeks away?

On 16 December, I asked the Secretary of State what discussions had taken place with Iran, Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia—all the countries on Iraq's borders—about their policy of accepting refugees from Iraq. The answer came back, "None." I repeated that question on 27 January and got the same answer. Will the Secretary of State explain why little preparation appears to have been made for coping with an exodus of refugees? There are still 2 million Afghan refugees in Iran.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing an important debate on a subject that needs a public airing—a debate that I hope will encourage Ministers to take more action. She is not ungenerous by nature, but could she help the House by telling us why she thinks the Government have been so laggardly in promoting this other aspect of the fight against terrorism?

Mrs. Spelman: I am afraid I cannot see into the minds of those on the Government Front Bench. My hon. Friend enables me to observe that although their hearts may well be in the right place in the sense that they want to help the Iraqi people, their seeming obduracy and unwillingness to debate humanitarian strategy could have an adverse morality—working against the very people whom we are all trying to spare unnecessary pain.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Spelman: No, I wish to continue on the subject of refugees.

After 20 years of civil war in Afghanistan, there are still 2 million Afghan refugees in Iran, which already finds that a difficult burden to bear. Given that almost 1 million Iraqis crossed to Iran during the Gulf war, what support is Iran being provided to prepare for an exodus of refugees? Will Iran be in a position to cope when 900,000 refugees start to head for its border in two months' time? Surely now is the time to prepare for such a large-scale movement of people, not when they are on the move and it is already too late.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): Perhaps the hon. Lady will explain Conservative policy on Iraqi refugees. Would the Conservatives merely dub them potential terrorists and lock them up the minute they arrived in this country, which certainly seems to be their policy in general?

Mrs. Spelman: This is not a debate for political point scoring; it is on a very serious subject. If the hon. Lady listens to the rest of my speech she will hear our policy. As she knows, we operate under the Geneva convention, by which we have a legal duty to provide a safe haven for genuine refugees. She knows that to be our position.

As the Secretary of State made clear in her statements to the media—

Mr. Salmond: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Spelman: I wish to proceed on the subject of refugees.

Iraq is already a desperately poor country and life under Saddam Hussein is appallingly bleak. The country's infrastructure remains damaged after the Iran-Iraq war and the Gulf war. According to the United Nations there are already about 1 million internally displaced people. More than 10 per cent. of all children die before their fifth birthday and a quarter of children are chronically malnourished. Children aged under 14 now comprise almost half of the Iraqi population. The sanitation system has all but collapsed and 60 per cent. of Iraqis—16 million people—depend on monthly food rations. Most Iraqis are now dependent on international aid programmes, a large part of which are funded under the auspices of the United Nations oil-for-food programme. Under Saddam Hussein, the effectiveness of that programme has already been severely disrupted. There is a real possibility, however, that that vital channel for the delivery of aid will be cut off altogether if there is a war. I hope that the Secretary of State will be able to tell the House what alternative measures are being prepared to replace the programme if it is suspended for several months.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): Does my hon. Friend agree that the oil-for-food programme does enormously more than just provide food? The consequences of losing that programme will be devastating in terms not only of food but of medicines, transport, telecommunications, infrastructure and water supply. It will affect the lot.

Mrs. Spelman: My hon. Friend is right. The programme extends to the infrastructure requirements of the country and I shall deal with that matter.

Will the Secretary of State shed light on why more than $4 billion in oil revenues remain unspent in United Nations accounts when that has been allocated to humanitarian programmes in Iraq? Will the right hon. Lady investigate whether it would be possible to secure that money to fund vital humanitarian programmes in Iraq in the event of war? It seems absurd that Iraqis are living in appalling poverty and misery while $4 billion lies unspent in UN accounts. Those are the profits from the sale of Iraqi oil and they must now be used to help the Iraqi people.

Mr. Salmond: Will the hon. Lady give way now?

Mrs. Spelman: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is going to ask me about refugees.

Mr. Salmond: I am. Is the hon. Lady aware that a nine-year-old Kurdish girl who fled persecution in Iraq a year ago has been successful in winning the prestigious Bridgeton Burns club award from Sighthill primary school in that area of Glasgow, which is an inspirational example of what can be achieved if asylum seekers' children are educated in local schools? The question is a serious one. What purpose would it serve for a similar child escaping persecution in Iraq or elsewhere to be locked up in a detention centre?

Mrs. Spelman: I am sure that I may extend my congratulations to that Iraqi girl through the hon. Gentleman, who I sincerely hope will pass on that message from all of us. He is aware, I am sure, that there is probably not one Member of Parliament who has not had to deal in his or her surgery with the case of an Iraqi asylum seeker. They are the largest group of asylum seekers in this country. I reiterate that we firmly believe that we need to be in a position to offer a safe haven to genuine refugees.

My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) recently asked the Secretary of State how much her Department would provide towards the UN appeal for basic readiness funding in the light of a possible war in Iraq. Her answer was that she was

"not making funding available at this stage."—[*Official Report*, 20 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 26W.]

She may not be doing so at this stage, but surely officials from her Department are making some calculations as to how much it is going to cost. Can the right hon. Lady tell us today how much her Department expects to contribute to this crisis and what impact she expects the war in Iraq to have on other programmes that the Department funds in other parts of the world?

I am sure that the right hon. Lady shares my concern that a war in Iraq will disrupt the valuable work of her Department in Africa, Asia and other parts of the middle east. I hope, therefore, that she will actively encourage her counterparts in other countries, in particular European Union countries, to pay their fair share.

Resolution 1441 won unanimous support from the UN. I see nothing wrong in saying that those countries that choose not to make a military contribution to this important stage of the war against terrorism should be willing to make a more significant contribution to the aid effort. After the events of 11 September, we were promised a global alliance against terrorism. We need to keep working to make that coalition as wide and strong as ever. If our fellow European countries are unwilling or unable to send troops to Iraq, surely they should play their part by bearing a considerable portion of the burden of aiding the Iraqi people. France and Germany cannot be mere spectators on the war on terrorism.

In November last year, I held a forum in Westminster, attended by 17 aid agencies that operate in Iraq or on its borders. The forum was addressed by Larry Hollingworth, a UN emergency co-ordinator with considerable experience of working in conflict situations. Together, we identified the key elements of a comprehensive humanitarian response to a war in Iraq. I sent the Secretary of State a list of our conclusions, and a few weeks later received a meagre four and a half line reply, thanking me for my thoughts. That was hardly the reassurance that I sought from the Secretary of State.

One of the primary conclusions that we reached in the forum concerned the absolute necessity of good co-ordination within the UN and between the UN and the non-governmental organisations. We also recognised the overwhelming importance of good co-ordination between the military campaign and the aid effort. Strong civil-military liaison is vital to an effective aid effort. However, on Friday, the *Financial Times* reported that a humanitarian operations centre, which was supposed to have opened in Kuwait on 15 January, had been delayed and was not now due to open until February—the eve of a possible war.

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The Secretary of State was quite willing to attack poor levels of co-ordination during the Afghan campaign. In November 2001, she told the Select Committee on International Development, with her typical candour, that the US military was not taking the aid effort seriously. She said:

> "The civil-military liaison is not working particularly well. The communications are there, but they are not being taken seriously enough at a high level".

When my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), asked the Secretary of State for Defence on Monday what discussions about humanitarian work in Iraq he was having with the Secretary of State for International Development, he refused to answer the question and said:

> "I do not want to go into the details of . . . planning of the kind he mentions, because that implies the inevitability of military action."—[*Official Report*, 27 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 558.]

That is not a satisfactory response. Military action should be our last resort, but that should not stop us from planning ahead for all eventualities. Is the Secretary of State for International Development now able to say what practical measures have been introduced to bring about greater co-ordination of the military and humanitarian forces than was the case during the war in Afghanistan?

Last October, Ali Hasmati, a UN information officer in Baghdad told the French Press Agency that the UN was making no preparation for how it would continue to deliver aid in the event of conflict. He said:

> "We don't have anything materialised so far because we have no indications that any of what you said"

—about war—

> "is going to happen and we still hope that things will be solved diplomatically and politically".

In a similar vein, in a written answer on 15 October last year, the Secretary of State told me that she was not actively discussing a humanitarian strategy for Iraq with the UN, the US or the European Union.

It is surely not acceptable for the Department for International Development to adopt an ostrich stance, sticking its head in the sand and hoping that war will never happen. There are leaked UN reports of UN contingency planning, but at the end of last month still no funds had been made available for even the basic preparations to begin. The Foreign Secretary admitted this week that war is now likely—something confirmed by President Bush's "state of the union" address.

The Gulf war caught the international community unprepared: we should learn from our mistakes. The Government need to be actively preparing a comprehensive military strategy to assist the people of Iraq in the event of conflict. We could be at war within two months, so there should be some well-advanced plans firmly in place by now. Food and vaccines should be stockpiled on the borders. Alternatives to the oil-for-food programme should have been found, and strong co-ordination between the military campaign and the humanitarian effort should have been firmly established. The Secretary of State should at least have an estimate of the commitment that her Department may make to a possible emergency and the impact that it will have on the rest of her Department's work.

Above all, there is the moral imperative to help the Iraqi people. We are a rich nation and so is the US. We have chosen to stand shoulder to shoulder with the US in our own national interest, but we should not eschew the responsibility of reaching out to the innocents who may be caught up in the consequences of our actions. My cherished hope is that war can be avoided, but my conscience will not be clear until I am satisfied that the Government have proper plans for humanitarian relief.

2.36 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): I am grateful to the Opposition for providing the opportunity to hold a debated focused on the humanitarian situation in Iraq and the risks to the Iraqi people of any possible military conflict. I hope that, with the permission of the House, I can also respond to the debate, as my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is attending her mother-in-law's funeral. I hope that my request will be acceptable to the House.

I have to tell the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) that this debate is enormously important and it is overdue, but the sort of petty point-scoring way in which she spoke is regrettable. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh, come on."] No, I am being very serious. I would have liked an opportunity to discuss these matters on the Floor of the House before. The usual channels did not provide that opportunity. I wonder whether she is aware of what the usual channels on her side are saying about her declining opportunities to say anything on the Floor of the House. She might want to look into those matters.

David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): Nonsense.

Clare Short: You know what I mean.

David Maclean: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is not often that an Opposition Chief Whip rises on a point of order, but I do not understand the right hon. Lady's allusion. I should be grateful to her if she would explain exactly what she meant by referring to the usual channels and the allegation that she has made; or if she would care to put the matter in writing, I would love to consider it carefully.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: If the right hon. Gentleman does not understand it, he would not expect the occupant of the Chair to have any clearer view of the matter, and it should be pursued outside the scope of this debate.

May I remind the right hon. Lady that she has used the second person, and I certainly have had nothing to do with those matters?

Clare Short: I will be more than happy to remind the right hon. Gentleman of some of the proposals that have emanated from somewhere or other about reducing the time that might be spent—

Gregory Barker (Bexhill and Battle): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Clare Short: No, I will not; I need to proceed, if I may.

It was proposed in the normal way that we should seek to amend the Opposition motion, but, having looked at the motion, there was no case for amending it.

I decided that those matters are too important for petty party-political point scoring and that we should proceed without tabling an amendment.

The Liberal Democrat amendment has not been selected, but, equally, I completely accept its spirit—that we should consider in any military preparations that are made the need to look after the interests of the people of Iraq and minimise any harm to them—if not the more political point about landmines and cluster bombs. I do not say that I am in favour of those things, but perhaps that point was put in a slightly different spirit. My view and the Government's view is that Saddam Hussein is a terrible tyrant dedicated to developing and possessing chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. I know that many members of the public doubt that, and say that the weapons inspectors must provide evidence. Any scrutiny of the record from the Gulf war onwards in relation to requests by the Security Council for Iraq to disarm, with the prospect of the lifting of sanctions against Iraq, must lead to the conclusion that the regime is dedicated to owning those weapons. Otherwise, sanctions would have been removed a long time ago, there would be much less suffering for the people of Iraq, and that country's natural wealth and oil would have been used to restore the prosperity of Iraq, which is naturally wealthy and oil-rich.

Mr. Salmond: I accept much of what the Secretary of State has just said. Is it not important that, for example, the nuclear inspections that have taken place—I know that she has read the relevant documents—have provided some clarification? Have not some of the fears expressed only a few weeks ago by the White House about the imminence of Iraq's nuclear programme been confounded by the inspectors' examination thus far?

Clare Short: I shall refer in a few minutes to Dr. Blix's report to the Security Council. His report is a worry, however, and he has said that he has had co-operation on process not substance. He reported to the Security Council some worrying lack of co-operation and worrying evidence. On the other hand, the previous inspection regime dismantled many armaments, including nuclear armaments. If we could only return to that position, we might have an outcome from this crisis without a war that would cause great suffering to the people of Iraq. I am not sure whether I have fully answered the hon. Gentleman's point.

Mr. Salmond: On the specifics, the right hon. Lady will remember that only a few weeks ago we were told that piping that had been identified in Iraq was certainly part of a process of building up a nuclear capability. It is clear from the nuclear aspect of the inspectors' report thus far, however, that that is unlikely to be the case. That indicates why it is important that people are given the time and space to examine things properly and that we do not rush into conflict.

Clare Short: I agree very much with the hon. Gentleman that the inspectors must be given the proper time. I recommend that everyone read Dr. Blix's statement to the Security Council, which is short and very factual, in which he says that there are very serious problems on his side of the search for chemical and biological weapons. None of us can therefore be sanguine about the intentions of the regime to co-operate with the inspectors, although we should all wish to bring about that objective. I am clear, and all sane people should be clear, that there should be no rush to war. We must be invincibly committed to backing up the authority of the United Nations this time, not backing off. Saddam Hussein's regime must know that the world will remain united behind the authority of the United Nations, that he will be forced by one means or another to dismantle his weapons of mass destruction and that, if necessary, the world will be willing to use military force to back up the authority of the United Nations. That is the right place for the world to be, and that is where public opinion is in this country.

Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): The Secretary of State will be aware that approximately half of the Iraqi population is under 14 years of age. Does she accept that if we go to war, the damage and devastation that will be inflicted on those children will be far greater than any damage that may be inflicted on the grass at Hyde park if those who wish to protest against the war and avert a humanitarian disaster are allowed to do so on 15 February? Is it not a warped sense of priorities that is leading to a ban on that demonstration on 15 February?

Clare Short: I agree with my hon. Friend that we must do everything that we can to make sure that children and people in Iraq do not suffer from any possible military action if such action is necessary to enforce the authority of the UN. We must be willing to contemplate military action to enforce the authority of the UN.

On the question of the demonstration, I know nothing apart from what I have read in the press about access to Hyde park. I welcome the fact that so many people in Britain are troubled by the prospects of war. I am glad that I live in a country that is troubled by the prospects of war and does not relish the prospects of war, and that people are willing to make their views felt. I hope that some accommodation can be found in relation to the problems of Hyde park. I cannot give my hon. Friend any assurances, however, as I know only what has been in the press.

Llew Smith: If I am right, and there is a ban on that demonstration in Hyde park on 15 February, does that display a warped sense of priorities?

Clare Short: As I said, I have read what is in the press, and I have heard someone responsible for the royal parks say that there is a danger of having a demonstration in that park. I certainly believe that the demonstration must be allowed to go ahead and that people must be allowed to rally and make speeches. That is important in a democracy. I cannot with any expertise tell my hon. Friend about the ruling on the park. I hope that he will not press me on that, as I have no knowledge with which to inform him. As is clear, both sides of the House feel strongly that people in our country must have a right to express their views on these matters. My view—which, again, is the view of the Government—is that if we can keep the world united around the invincible authority of the United Nations, and if we can move forward on progress towards the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside a secure and safe Israel, the

[Clare Short]

world will be in a much better shape to deal with this crisis. The threat of bitter division that is ripping across the world and is a great danger would thereby be minimised. The ideal way to proceed is to back up the authority of the UN and make progress on Israel and Palestine. I note that President Bush in his state of the union address said:

> "We will continue to seek peace between a secure Israel and a democratic Palestine".

I do not know about "continue", but I hope that we can take those ideas forward. Now that the elections have taken place in Israel, I hope that the quartet can publish their own map and move forward rapidly to making plans for final status for a Palestinian state. If we can do that, we can handle this crisis in a much safer world with much greater unity across the world.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): The right hon. Lady will be aware that we have rightly provided refuge in this country during the difficult times in Iraq in recent years for many younger people in particular who have left that country. Naturally, if Iraq moves into a better future, they will be an extremely important part of putting the country back together again and giving it a prosperous and successful future. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) alluded to one example of that. Will she provide support within the humanitarian process for those people who are currently taking refuge in this country to return to a post-Saddam Iraq and play an active role in rebuilding that country?

Clare Short: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman's point. I, like many other Members, have large numbers of Iraqi refugees—largely Kurdish but not exclusively so—in Ladywood who come to see me at my advice bureau. Most of them are highly educated and would be a great asset to a rebuilt Iraq. Our arrangements for asylum seekers need to be flexible to take in people who are facing persecution, and to assist those people to return to their countries, if their countries are liberated, to help rebuild them, as we have been doing in relation to Afghanistan. It is not a lead issue for my Department, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and we have tried to do that with regard to Kosovo and Afghanistan. Let us hope that, before long, we will have a free and democratic Afghanistan and that some of those refugees seeking asylum in our country will be able to return home to a free country.

As I was saying, the fallout from the sense of double standards about the world's urgency in dealing with the problem with Iraq, and lack of urgency in dealing with the problem of Israel and Palestine, is a great danger to the future of the world. It is causing enormous tension, hostility and anger throughout this country, but, even more so, throughout the Muslim and Arab world. I believe that the view of the old and the new Europe is that we should do all in our power to move forward on that issue, and that the world would be in much better shape if we were able to do so.

While I welcome the concern among the people of our country that there should not be a war that inflicts great suffering on the already long-suffering people of Iraq, it is our duty to send the firm message to Saddam Hussein that this time the UN is in business, is invincible and will not go away, and that there must be disarmament. I agree very much with my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary that the threat of military force needs to be exercised to avoid, if possible, the use of military force.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I know how deeply the Secretary of State cares about such issues. Suffering will occur if there is war, and there will be mayhem and death. Of course no one would welcome a war, but does she accept that death is already being inflicted on young people in Iraq—those under 14 who make up half the population—and older people by the tyrant Saddam Hussein? In the past 12 years since the end of the Gulf war probably hundreds of thousands of people have been killed by the Government in Iraq.

Clare Short: I agree that Saddam Hussein is a terrible tyrant. There is evidence of gross torture and I have heard deeply chilling stories from asylum seekers in my constituency. The humanitarian situation across the country is terrible, and we should think of the humanitarian consequences of any possible military action, which is the value of the debate. We should also consider taking military action if it is necessary to minimise suffering and to maximise the speed with which Iraq is reconstituted so that it gets up and going and its economy is improved.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): There is little disagreement between hon. Members on both sides of the House about the current situation, but as the right hon. Lady just said, the key consideration is the preparation of contingency plans for any humanitarian problems that might emerge. May I take it that in the remaining moments of her comments she will inform the House exactly what her Department is doing, because at the moment we have almost nothing to go on? The purpose of the debate is to seek details from her. We would love those to be forthcoming in the minutes left.

Clare Short: I regret taking that intervention because it was silly. I am setting the scene for the difficulties we face. Of course I will come on to the humanitarian considerations. The hon. Gentleman is simply involved in the same cheap point scoring as the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman). It is necessary to prepare to minimise harm if military action is taken and to make arrangements for the reconstruction of the country as rapidly as possible. To achieve that, we need to ensure that the UN takes the lead in the reconstruction, as it did in Kosovo, East Timor and Afghanistan. That needs to be agreed across the international community.

Neighbouring countries do not want to talk to other countries about what they might do for humanitarian purposes in the event of war. The public opinion in their countries is raging about the prospect of war. That is one of the dangers. The UN is making preparations, but it was cautious of doing so early on. It was also careful about whom it talked to because it did not want to say to the world, "The UN is preparing for war."

Mrs. Spelman *rose*—

Clare Short: The hon. Lady can stay seated for a moment while I finish. She started by trying to score cheap points. *[Interruption.]* She did. That is my opinion and I will make my view clear. All parties have recently been more willing to prepare for all contingencies, including the military in the United States of America, but it has not been easy to get discussions and analysis going across the international system to prepare for all those. Anyone who pauses to reflect intelligently on the strains and tensions across the international system because of the crisis would realise why that has been difficult. Greater movement to that effect has taken place recently. The hon. Lady got the true answers to her questions, but my Department has been working for a considerable time on all contingencies. That work is developing and we are getting more co-operation from some of our international partners which was difficult to get before.

Mrs. Spelman: I specifically asked about discussions with neighbouring countries. I am sure the right hon. Lady is aware that the leaked UN report has an assessment of how many refugees might go in which directions and which countries are willing to open their borders. I asked about that because refugees might have to move through lines of British troops. The Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development need to co-ordinate on that. I hope to get a more ample answer in the light of that UN report.

Clare Short: If the hon. Lady followed the details of other crises, she would know that that is the responsibility of the United Nations. It takes the lead on that. I note that she had a meeting with Larry Hollingsworth. He performed badly in that role in the Kosovo crisis and we had great difficulties with UNHCR's performance, as the Select Committee on International Development made clear at the time. But the UN will take the lead, for which it is preparing. It is also trying to predict possible risks, in so far as anyone can do that, and sharing that information with partners in the UN system.

As has been said, the humanitarian situation is already a tragedy. The population of Iraq is largely dependent on food handouts. Its agricultural sector is operating way below capacity. Almost a third of all children in the centre and south suffer from chronic malnutrition. The prevalence of low birth weight babies has increased more than five times in the past 10 years. Iraq's under-five mortality rate is 131 per thousand live births, which is worse than the Democratic Republic of Congo or Mozambique. Death from diarrhoea and acute respiratory infections, both easily preventable, account for 70 per cent. of child mortality. More than half of Iraqis living in rural areas have no access to safe water. The average Iraqi child under five suffers from 14 bouts of diarrhoea a year.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): The right hon. Lady knows that child malnutrition in Iraq has improved slightly over the past year or so. That is probably down to the success of the oil-for-food programme and the UN food programmes in Iraq. I hope she will tell us a little more about how the oil-for-food programme will continue, especially post-conflict, and assure hon. Members and the people of Iraq that there will be no exploitation of Iraq's oil resources for the benefit of multinational corporations. Those resources should purely be for the benefit of the people of Iraq.

Clare Short: I will deal with the oil-for-food programme. It is important. I give the hon. Gentleman the absolute assurance, on behalf of Her Majesty's Government, that the oil resources of Iraq belong to the people of Iraq and should be used for their benefit and to reconstruct the country if there is military action. First, however, let me put some of the realities of the humanitarian situation on the record.

The country's infrastructure is in chronic disrepair. Hospitals, clinics, sanitation facilities and water treatment plants suffer from a terrible lack of maintenance. The result is that the Iraqi people's lives are perilously fragile. Their coping strategies have been worn away by years of misrule. The public facilities to help them cope are run down, often to the point of uselessness.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Will my right hon. Friend draw a distinction between northern Iraq, which is under Kurdish rule, and the rest of the country, which is under Saddam's rule, and highlight the differences between the two? Both parts of Iraq are subject to sanctions. The people in northern Iraq are subject to Saddam's sanctions in addition to UN sanctions, but the circumstances of the people there are very different to those in Saddam's Iraq.

Clare Short: My hon. Friend's point is well made. Under the same oil-for-food programme, children in the north are healthy and doing well, but children in the rest of the country are doing badly. Some of the money is unspent because the regime is not using the oil-for-food programme to the benefit of its people. It is not possible for the UN or the Government to make Saddam Hussein use the resources to benefit his people. If he did, they would not be in the same situation.

There was a slow start because the international system was unwilling to be seen to be preparing for war. I am sure that, on reflection, all hon. Members will accept that. But there has recently been a move towards considering all possible contingencies and scenarios. Work is proceeding and the UN is engaging in it. We are in touch with it on all possible humanitarian scenarios.

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire): I should like to take the right hon. Lady back to her remarks about the preparations in the United Nations. I am sure that we are all extremely pleased to hear that they are going on. But, given that she has made valid criticisms of the UN's performance during Kosovo, will she tell us her assessment of those preparations and whether Britain is remonstrating seriously with the UN if in her opinion there are deficiencies, so that they can be made up before it is too late?

Clare Short: I have had talks with the various UN humanitarian organisations and the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which leads co-ordination of the UN effort. I think that the preparations are as good as they can be. There are so many risks and uncertainties that it is very difficult to prepare. I shall come on to some of those risks and

[Clare Short]

uncertainties. With regard to the UN appeal for, I think, $37 million to make preparations, the United States has said that it will pay that money and that the pay-over is in hand. I had discussions with Andrew Natsios, head of the United States Agency for International Development, USAID, in Addis Ababa a week or so ago, when he gave that undertaking.

Since some of the deficiencies of the UNHCR operation in Kosovo—which we should contrast with the World Food Programme, which did extremely well in Kosovo—the UN's operations in Kosovo, Afghanistan and East Timor have been impressive in very difficult situations. The system is improving. We have been working very hard to get it to improve and to be more effectively co-ordinated. Obviously, all such efforts need to continue if there is a military conflict and the UN is put into a leading position in coping with it.

I hope that the whole House will agree that the best scenario is that war should be avoided if possible. It is very clear from Dr. Blix's report that

> "Iraq does not appear to have come to genuine acceptance of disarmament and is co-operating on process and not substance."

As I told the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), the previous inspectors achieved a great deal of disarmament, and we should not forget that. With the pressure and willingness to take action behind the UN, if we could persuade Iraq to be willing to allow the inspectors to disarm, we could achieve a better outcome for the people of Iraq. We must continue to work on that. If that could be done, sanctions could be lifted and the country could be restored very quickly. In such a situation, it is very likely that the people of Iraq would change their leader, and my hon. Friend and those with whom she has been working would have the satisfaction of making sure that Saddam Hussein was brought to book in the courts for the terrible suffering and breach of international law that he has imposed on the people of his country and the region. Obviously, that is the most desirable scenario. Keeping up the pressure for possible military conflict behind the UN is one way of trying to achieve that scenario, if it is at all possible.

I should like to set out the humanitarian risks. There is a very serious risk, if there was military action and there was not good organisation, that large-scale ethnic fighting could break out in the country. There has been deep repression. With the different ethnic groups, that fighting could result in a humanitarian nightmare. Any preparations for military action have to take account of that. There needs to be order and stability in the country to avoid what would otherwise be a humanitarian disaster. That is risk number one.

There is a second risk that the non-governmental organisations have drawn attention to. It is that any bombing to take out electronic capacity and thus disarm anti-aircraft capacity could present a danger to electrics and damage water and sanitation facilities as a consequence. There would be the resultant danger that people would not have access to water and that sanitation facilities would be even worse than they are now. Clearly, preparations need to be made against that eventuality so that the health of the people of Iraq does not suffer.

The third risk is what happened after the Gulf war: the booby-trapping of oil installations, with resultant environmental damage. It would also damage and slow down the reconstruction of Iraq and the capacity of its people to use their oil for the benefit of their own country. Every effort must be made to try to ensure that that does not happen.

The next risk, mentioned by the hon. Member for Meriden and the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas), is that oil for food would be disrupted. Of course, disorder would disrupt it. It is a massive system, and most of the people of Iraq depend on it, not simply for adequate supplies, but, in the case of Baghdad-controlled Iraq, for the very basics of human survival. Accordingly, any action needs to be very organised and calm, ensuring that the capacity of the system is maintained or that a replacement system is put into place very quickly. Otherwise, many people across the country would not have the very basic necessities of life.

The final risk, and the most difficult for the international humanitarian system to prepare for, is that chemical and biological weapons might be used in fighting, including fighting around Baghdad or other urban areas. Everybody will know that that horrendous possibility is being prepared for with the ordering of special suits to protect troops that might be engaged, and that there are preparations in terms of immunisation against the obvious risks posed by the use of chemical and biological weapons. But what about the people of Iraq? No one can provide them with suits or immunisation. That is the most horrifying humanitarian possibility. The UN system is preparing for it and plans that its staff should be withdrawn, because there is no way of protecting them. Obviously, everything should be done to prevent it, if it is humanly possible, but should it happen the military would have to look after the people of Baghdad or wherever in Iraq it occurred. Those preparations are beginning to be thought through.

That shows the complexity of the possible humanitarian disasters that could occur if there is military action.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I welcome what the Secretary of State has just said about the people of Iraq. I wonder whether she has ever read any medical descriptions of malnourished children dying as a result of attack by chemical weapons. They are absolutely horrendous. She should implore the people who are contemplating action on Iraq to do everything possible not just to protect our own soldiers and UN personnel, but to find some way of protecting the children of Iraq.

Clare Short: I defer to the hon. Lady's expertise as a doctor. I have read quite detailed accounts of the suffering of people and children at Halabja and some of the consequences of the use of chemicals there. I could read more and I am sure that I would be even more horrified. But one can feel the mood of the House. Everyone wants to avoid that eventuality if we can.

Glenda Jackson: Surely the situation that my right hon. Friend has just painted with regard to the possible use of chemical and biological weapons, if they are there, is even worse, because during the Kuwait conflict the American Government made it clear to Saddam Hussein that if such weapons were used in the field the Americans would use nuclear weapons. Surely, the best possible protection that can be afforded to the children of Iraq is for everyone inside this House and outside it to argue very fiercely for the inspectors to be given more time and for the possibility and indeed the reality of war to be pushed further and further away.

Clare Short: I agree with my hon. Friend that we should do everything we can to avoid this risk. But I do not agree with those who say that we can do nothing. I think that the case for the inspectors to have more time—Dr. Blix has asked for this—is overwhelming. But last time Saddam Hussein made it impossible for the inspectors to do their job and to disarm the weapons that were there. We cannot allow that to happen again. He has impoverished his country, terrorised his people, destroyed a wealthy economy, all because he is so dedicated to having these weapons. We cannot ignore it, because one day they will be used against somebody. We must find the best possible way of working through the United Nations and minimising the risk of military action, or if it has to take place to back up the authority of the UN, to minimise the risk of harm to the people of Iraq. That is the case that I am trying to put, the case around which I think the people of this country are united. That is the way in which the people of this country should try to use their influence to get the world through this crisis.

Gregory Barker: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Clare Short: With respect, I have given way a lot. I must get on and leave time for other hon. Members to make speeches.

I hope that I have reassured the House that contingency planning is under way. We are trying to take full account of the risks, but I am sure that the House is aware that humanitarians cannot make preparations alone—there must be collaboration between military planners and humanitarians if we are to prepare for all eventualities and risks. We are working on that, but we can never say such work is perfect—it needs to be developed more strongly. On top of all of that, the international humanitarian system is under considerable strain, as there are enormously complicated problems with drought and food shortages in southern Africa, the horn of Africa and Angola. Every day, five million people in Afghanistan need food aid, and the humanitarian situation on the west bank and Gaza is very serious and getting worse. My Department's resources and those of the international humanitarian system are therefore strained. We will, of course, play our part in any international humanitarian effort, but no one should be complacent about the international system's resources or, indeed, those of my Department.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): On the narrow point of resources, so that the House can gain an understanding of the resources that may be required to deal with the humanitarian situation in Iraq, will the right hon. Lady tell the House about the resources being devoted to preparation? What resources will the Department be able to provide for relief if we go to war and end up in the situation that she described?

Clare Short: In terms of gross national income, the UK's contribution to any humanitarian crisis throughout the world, as determined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, is just over 5 per cent.—that is all. As hon. Members know, my Department's budget has virtually doubled since 1997, but is under strain, as I have just said. We have a contingency reserve and Iraq would be prioritised. However, I have just been in Africa, where there is a real fear about resources being taken away from southern Africa, the horn of Africa, the Afghan people, the west bank and Gaza—that would be wrong and we would not contemplate it. We will play our part in the international system, but the Department is not flush with resources—I must frankly warn the House that they are short.

Gregory Barker *rose—*

Clare Short: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman for persistence, if nothing else.

Gregory Barker: A little earlier, the right hon. Lady referred to the possible use by Saddam Hussein of chemical or biological weapons. Given what has been discussed in Washington and what was said during the last Gulf war, is there any scenario in which the British Government would either use nuclear weapons against Iraq or countenance supporting their use?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman will know that I am not a military planner, but I cannot envisage any scenario whatsoever, given the scenarios that I have just put to the House, in which contemplating the use of nuclear weapons would be of any use whatsoever. I speak as someone who is not a military expert but as someone who has thought through the humanitarian contingencies of the present crisis and the prospect of military action.

I am sure that the House agrees—the country feels this very strongly—that the world in an extremely fragile state. I believe that there is a way through the crisis—it is to back the invincible authority of the UN and make progress in the middle east peace process. That is the position that the people of the UK and most people in the world support, and it is the position of the UK Government. As the House knows, the Prime Minister is about to go and have talks with the President of the United States of America, and I am sure that we all wish him Godspeed so that the points made in today's debate can be fully taken into account by the US Government and the world can get through the crisis in the best possible shape, with the people of Iraq being liberated and going on to build up and reconstruct their country, as they are entitled to do.

3.14 pm

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I welcome this Opposition day debate. If the Liberal Democrats had been offered such an opportunity—if, indeed, we are ever offered an Opposition day debate again—we would certainly have had a debate on this issue, but I suspect

[Dr. Jenny Tonge]

that it would have had sharper teeth, which may be why we are not getting any Opposition day debates at the moment. I shall leave the Secretary of State to draw her own conclusions.

The Conservatives have been enthusiastic in their support for the USA's policy on Iraq, exceeding even the enthusiasm of the Prime Minister. I am therefore nauseated by the rows of grey suits on the Tory Benches, all looking concerned and shedding crocodile tears—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. This is a very serious matter, and the House should approach it in that way.

Dr. Tonge: I am glad that they are upset, Mr. Deputy Speaker—perhaps the words hit home. I am sorry to laugh, but those Members are quite funny too.

The debate introduced by the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) is doubly welcome. None of my remarks would ever apply to her, because she has been extremely concerned about the issue for a long time. She has discussed it with both the Secretary of State and me, and I am sorry that she has not been able to bring it to the House—or that her colleagues have not let her do so—before. My concern about the humanitarian situation in Iraq increased two years ago when a party of bishops returned from a fact-finding tour of the country. One of them was the Rev. Peter Price, then Bishop of Kingston who, sadly for my constituents, has now gone to Wells.

The bishops reported on the terrible conditions experienced by many Iraqi people, particularly the children. The Iraqis depend on a modern but decayed infrastructure and for years they have been short of food and medicine. The hon. Member for Meriden gave us a lot of statistics, and I have some, too. One in 10 children die before the age of five; a quarter of Iraqi children suffer from malnutrition; many will be dead in one to five days if they are not fed in the event of war; 15 million people are already dependent on food aid, and another 5.4 million will need feeding if the oil-for-food programme stops suddenly. All those figures are from the UN needs assessment, which also states that, in the event of war, 2 million people will need therapeutic feeding, which is even more expensive and difficult.

The usual Government response is that the oil-for-food programme allowed for sufficient food and medicine for the Iraqi people, but Saddam Hussein was not using the revenues for the right purpose. As the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) pointed out, there is evidence that in north Iraq, where the UN administers the oil-for-food programme, conditions are better and people are in better health. Nevertheless, Saddam Hussein has starved his people and could blame the west for their suffering because of the oil-for-food programme. Economic sanctions are the culprit to some extent, and he has used us as a propaganda tool. That is why, two years ago, at our annual conference, the Liberal Democrats called for the lifting of economic sanctions on Iraq. At the very least, that would have stopped Saddam Hussein blaming the USA and this country for his people's suffering. Military sanctions, arms embargoes and freezing bank accounts, where possible, would have been a far better way of damaging Iraq's leaders.

Mr. Robathan: I served with the hon. Lady for many years on the Select Committee on International Development. Does she accept that while the people of Iraq may hear Saddam Hussein blaming sanctions, they know that Mesopotamia and the Euphrates valley have always been an enormously wealthy area? They know that there is oil in the ground. They are not as stupid as some people may think, and know where to put the blame for their suffering—on the dictator Saddam Hussein.

Dr. Tonge: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is right, but that does not negate my point that economic sanctions have stopped the people of Iraq getting the food that they need, and we have taken the blame for it. *[Interruption.]*

Gregory Barker: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr. Tonge: No, I will not give way again. The situation remains as I have described, and I pay tribute to the Iraqi people in my constituency who have lobbied me over the past five years not to forget the children of Iraq, who are dying because they have no food and no medicine.

Mr. Alan Duncan: On that point—

Dr. Tonge: May I make some progress?

The Secretary of State told us that thought has been given to the likelihood of Saddam Hussein using on his own people again whatever chemical and biological weapons he may have left, even if he cannot attack surrounding countries. That is a dread of mine. The Afghanistan bombing killed 5,000 civilians directly, and many others—20,000 or more—died from the indirect effects of that action. The World Health Organisation estimates 500,000 casualties from bombing Iraq, and the use of chemical and biological weapons on a malnourished and sick population would kill hundreds of thousands more. We are looking at a vision of hell in that country when war breaks out. Are we prepared for that?

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): The hon. Lady may have heard my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) say from the Front Bench that there are $4 billion in oil revenue reserves unspent in UN accounts, and that those funds were earmarked for aid but have not been spent. Will the hon. Lady speculate about why that money has not been spent on aiding Iraq?

Dr. Tonge: It is my understanding that there are two reasons. One is that the contracts are so incredibly bureaucratic that the money has been left—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We have had enough interventions from a sedentary position from various parts of the house. Perhaps we can get on with the debate in a sensible way.

Dr. Tonge: The first reason is that the process is very slow moving. The contracts that need to be set up so that the money can be used to buy products, food and so on are extremely slow, so the money stays where it is. Secondly, Saddam Hussein does not want to feed his people, and we get the blame for it.

Iraqis are also dying because they have no clean water: 70 per cent. of infant deaths are caused by diarrhoea and respiratory infection linked to water pollution. The River Tigris receives 500,000 tonnes of raw sewage every day. Hon. Members should remember that when they are next on the Terrace with their visitors, admiring the view of the Thames.

Mr. Kerry Pollard (St. Albans): Does the hon. Lady understand that raw sewage is going into that river because the Iraqis do not have sewage treatment plants? They do not have them because the United Nations will not allow the pumps to be bought because they can be put to dual use. That has nothing to do with the Iraqi regime. The UN will not allow the pumps through, and that is because of the Americans. I have visited Iraq twice and I know—I have seen it.

Dr. Tonge: The hon. Gentleman has made my point well for me. One of the saddest things about economic sanctions on Iraq has been the decay of the infrastructure, which has led to the terrible plight of the people there, with no clean water or proper sewage systems because they cannot be repaired.

During the war on Iraq, water treatment equipment will be needed for 5.4 million people directly, to give them some clean water. Have we planned for that? Electrical supply is needed to power water and sewage plants, and that, too, has been affected by economic sanctions. A third of the power supply is still down after the 1991 war, and those essential plants have never been repaired. Does the Secretary of State have assurances that her Government and that of the USA will not do further damage to what is left of Iraq's infrastructure, as was the case in Serbia and Afghanistan? For heaven's sake, let the people of Iraq have the water and power that they have left.

Has the Secretary of State assessed the likely flow of refugees? The hon. Member for Meriden spoke about that at length. Already, there are 700,000 displaced people within Iraq. That number will increase. Thousands will flee across heavily mined areas, adding to civilian injury and casualties. Iran has estimated that 900,000 will go there, and it already has 3 million refugees, many still there from the Afghanistan wars. Iran has no capacity to take any more. Will that country receive help when it requests that, or will it suffer from being one of George Bush's "axis of evil" countries and be totally ignored? If so, innocent people, including many Iraqis, will suffer.

Is UNHCR prepared? Will the United States and its allies use land mines and cluster bombs? We need to know that as a matter of urgency. Must we add to the destruction and horror that will go on in Iraq by adding even more explosives, which will affect the civilian population, not the military? Have plans been made for safe havens within Iraq? That needs to be done early on in hostilities so that people know there are safe havens, particularly around Basra, so that people from the south can get to them. That is essential if there is to be a war.

Mr. Simon Thomas: The hon. Lady mentioned cluster bombs and land mines. We bear in mind what the Secretary of State said on the matter, but we must remember that depleted uranium was used in the previous Gulf war. The response of the Prime Minister during Prime Minister's questions yesterday to the leader of the hon. Lady's party, when he suggested strongly that there would be US control over British forces in Iraq suggests to me that we may see weapons being used of which the British Government do not approve. That should concern all of us in the House.

Dr. Tonge: The hon. Gentleman makes one of the most serious points made this afternoon. Do we really want to go to war with our forces under the control of a Government who, over the past few years, have withdrawn from almost every international treaty one can think of? Will we subject our troops to such activity?

Past experiences are not good. In Afghanistan, it took a great deal of publicity from NGOs and others—the House will remember that I called for Afghanistan to be bombed with food, to much ridicule from the boys on the Benches, but never mind—to highlight the humanitarian situation there. Food aid eventually got through, but not without immense difficulty. The west promised not to forget Afghanistan.

Clare Short: I have said before that I admire what the World Food Programme achieved in Afghanistan throughout the crisis, from the pulling out of all UN international staff before any military action got going. Right through the military action and ever since, the UN has been feeding people there. The figure went up to 9 million and it is still 5 million people daily. The World Food Programme managed to keep that going. For the record, that was a fantastic achievement and very important.

Dr. Tonge: The right hon. Lady leads me to my next point. We all remember the Prime Minister pledging not to forget Afghanistan once the bombing was over. Of the money that has been pledged and delivered for the reconstruction of that country, 70 per cent. is still being spent on humanitarian aid. That will happen in Iraq in the event of a war, so reconstruction will be very slow.

Ann Clwyd: The Prime Minister has argued all along for an expansion of the international security assistance force in Afghanistan to avoid having to spend so much on humanitarian aid and to allow more to be spent on reconstruction. While there is insecurity in that country, that will be the case.

Dr. Tonge: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady, but I suspect that we are drifting away from the humanitarian situation in Iraq. It is useful to reflect on what happened in Afghanistan. I was about to report similar failures in the Balkans. The aid pledged for that region is dwindling year after year. The middle east is a running sore and getting worse. In Kashmir, where I have just been for a few days, there is terrible suffering among people caught up in an impasse between nuclear powers. I have not even mentioned Africa, to which the hon.

[Dr. Tonge]

Member for Meriden referred. The world is forced to look at Iraq because America says so, but there are far greater problems.

David Winnick (Walsall, North): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr. Tonge: No, I will not give way again. I have nearly finished my remarks and I want others to have a chance to speak.

If war is waged on Iraq, a humanitarian catastrophe could spread all over the middle east and not be confined to Iraq's borders. How much money will be needed to deliver aid and reconstruction to Iraq during and after the war? What proportion of that—the Secretary of State touched on this—will once again have to come out of the DFID budget? I say this every time these things happen. That budget is bled for reconstruction and aid once a war is over. Why does the Ministry of Defence not pay for cleaning up its own messes? DFID's money is supposed to be used to meet the millennium targets on health, education and clean water for the poorest people of the world, and not—I repeat, not—to clean up the mess of yet another war.

The Prime Minister was fond of telling us during the run-up to the bombing of Afghanistan that, following much pressure, he had a two-pronged approach: military and humanitarian. I believe that it was a three-pronged approach at times, with diplomatic efforts being made too. He has been only too ready this time, backed by the official Opposition, to use the military option, paying scant attention so far to other issues. The Opposition motion recognises the humanitarian crisis, and we will of course support it.

Destruction is so easy. The USA and its allies can perhaps annihilate Iraq and Saddam Hussein, but at what cost? We will risk alienating Muslims for ever. We will certainly increase the risk of terrorist attacks here at home. We must not make war on the Iraqi people—only on their Government. Massive humanitarian aid, backed by patient diplomacy to encourage co-operation with the weapons inspectors, must go hand in hand with the threat of military action.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next speaker, I inform the House that Mr. Speaker has placed a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, and that starts now.

3.32 pm

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): It is massively important that we are discussing this subject. I am pleased that the debate has proceeded as if it is on a motion for the Adjournment of the House. There is a substantive motion, but since the Government have not tabled an amendment to it and the Liberal Democrat amendment was not selected by the Speaker, the debate is about the issue only. Although I am one of those who always calls for substantive motions on which to vote in connection with Iraq so that we can hold the Government to account, the approach taken today is right when considering humanitarian concerns. I am against any war in these circumstances and have humanitarian concerns, but I recognise that there are those who would venture down the path of war but who nevertheless need to be concerned about humanitarian matters too.

The spokespersons for each major party have put on record very important information about the condition of the people and children of Iraq. Therefore, I do not need to go into the material that I have picked up from Save the Children, for instance, and other organisations such as Desert Rescue. Such information has been presented much more authoritatively. Some of the most important, open and honest statements on the current condition of the people of Iraq have been made by the Secretary of State. Many of us will be able to use such weighty and important comments; they are invaluable.

I think that the best contingency would be for us not to attack Iraq, so that the dangers that I am talking about do not emerge. Those who claim to use the humanitarian argument by saying, "We should still go in because Saddam Hussein is slaughtering his people and is responsible for the conditions" can be in a difficult position. Effectively, many of them are saying, "We do not really want to go in; we were hoping that revealing and getting rid of the weapons would make us free from danger". So their argument about the condition of people in Iraq and the danger that they face drops away. The horrors that have been described in relation to the people of Iraq should not be added to by the extra consequences that are due to follow, which are our responsibility and not that of Saddam Hussein.

I do not have to speak in detail about the horrors that have been suffered in Iraq as others have spelt them out, but it might be fruitful to consider how the current conditions emerged. Unfortunately, Britain is the last country in the world that should be involved in an attack on Iraq, because we are the old imperial power there. We created and shaped Iraq in 1920, and until 1932 we had a mandate over it that we exploited considerably for our own benefit, especially through the development of oil. It was not until Harold Macmillan, who was Foreign Secretary in 1955, signed the Baghdad pact—a bit of a wind of change in Iraq—that things started to alter in the country.

Before the signing of the Baghdad pact, Iraq was notionally independent, but dominated by British interests. Some 50 per cent. of its national income came from oil, essentially through the British-controlled Iraq Petroleum Company, and we had Crown bases in Habbaniya, Shaiba and Basra. About 4,000 RAF troops were stationed there; I was among those in Basra at about that time. The Iraqi Levies were also established—an Iraqi force entirely controlled by British officers. A puppet monarchy was established and the country had a basically feudal regime that was interested in land control. The development of oil provisions was very much in British hands.

The only opposition in Iraq at that time was underground. Among the army officers were some who dissented from the developments that were occurring, as they were greatly influenced by what was taking place under Colonel Nasser in Egypt. There was also an Iraqi communist party, which from 1937 had been involved in strikes in the oil industry and at the docks in Basra, and was a major focus for intellectuals and trade union activists.

From 1958, some economic and social circumstances improved. When people have a hope that things will get better in future, the possibility of establishing democratic avenues begins to emerge, but we did not see that as a something that it was desirable to nurture and assist. When the Kurds looked to develop their aspirations, they looked towards the establishment of a Kurdistan, but that would have upset Turkey, so we did not want to be involved in it. In a later period, there was perceived to be a danger of the Shi'a Arabs in the south falling into the hands of the ayatollah and other influences in Iran, but that was to misunderstand the nature of the Shi'a and their commitment to Iraq.

Improvements took place in conditions in Iraq. A welfare state was established, educational provision was extended, and there were improvements in housing. I saw a slum area on the edges of Baghdad that looked as if it was from the biblical period, although it had been established fairly recently. The conditions were terrible, with streets of mud, mud huts and open sewers. All that was replaced and proper housing, new streets and electricity were provided by new regimes. A cultured society was developing and extending. There had always been a tradition of learning in Baghdad and in other places, and that was now beginning to extend to more people. The regimes underwent coups and counter-coups, and in the end the Ba'ath party emerged and Saddam Hussein began to take over in 1980. The conditions of life for the Iraqi people started to deteriorate from 1982 to 1983, when the impact of the Gulf war began to kick in and the sanctions regime began. In my view, sanctions should not operate unless the people of a country ask for them—as in South Africa—because they have a considerable impact on people's standard of life.

Saddam Hussein's military measures and internal controls and the consequences of the Gulf war led to an absolute collapse in the standard of living of the Iraqi people. By 1980, their standard of life per capita had grown to 42 per cent. of Britain's, having risen, mainly as a result of oil, from a figure of 18 per cent. only about a decade earlier. That crashed down to 11 per cent. two or three years ago. The trading connection, oil for food, has improved it somewhat, and it has risen to about 13 per cent., but economic circumstances are knocking it down again. Should we really be going in to hammer such people? The humanitarian thing to do is not to take that avenue, but to get in there and give them the assistance that they need—to uncouple the regime by giving people rising horizons and hope.

3.43 pm

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): I start by commending my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) for her introduction to the debate. Given the robust nature of this place, she was thoughtful and placatory.

I can tell the Secretary of State that if I ever found myself having to go into a fire fight, I should be very happy to have her at my side. We would regularly disagree, and I am sure that she must occasionally be quite an uncomfortable colleague to have around the Cabinet Table, but her commitment to her responsibilities shines through. I am happy to pay tribute to her performance, not only in this debate, but throughout her tenure in office.

I have no registrable interest in the debate, but I am a trustee of World Relief, a major Christian charity that works in several of the poorest countries of the world. We work on behalf of churches, primarily through indigenous churches, including redevelopment work, microeconomic development work and working with maternal care and with children.

I therefore disagree with the supercilious comment of the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge), about whose speech and attitude I have nothing complimentary to say. There are hon. Members in all parties who are committed to humanitarian concerns. They act on that in their own time, in their own way and for their own reasons, in my case, largely for Christian motives.

I want to consider children in that context, but I wish to make some other comments first. As the Secretary of State pointed out, the debate has not been partisan. Some hon. Members who are against the war or the United States—both traditions flourish in the country and the House—could use the subject as a stalking horse for another debate on whether we should go to war. I do not belong to that fraternity. As the right hon. Lady knows, I broadly support the Government's action. I believe that Iraq poses a serious threat to the world and to us. Like every other sensible human being, I view war as a last, not a first resort. However, war is sometimes the lesser evil. In that spirit, I want to make one point in the short time allowed.

We have already heard many statistics about the terrible plight of children in Iraq. We have heard about the large number of stillbirths, the high infant mortality rate and the malnutrition—there is no point in repeating those facts. However, bearing the statistics in mind, I remind the Secretary of State of Christian Aid's comments on its website in October last year. It stated that

> "the humanitarian needs of the civilian population during and after any conflict must be met . . . When drawing up plans for any military action, it is the responsibility of the warring parties to guarantee access and provide sufficient resources for the provision of independent humanitarian assistance . . . As Christian Aid can verify, the war in Afghanistan revealed a huge gap between assertions that humanitarian space would be created for the delivery of aid and the reality on the ground".

I should like the Secretary of State to focus on the disparity between the rhetoric and planning and the delivery. It is remarkable that we are holding such a debate today. Perhaps more than any other debate, it shows how civilised we are as a nation. Does anybody believe that a similar debate is being conducted in Iraq? Of course not. We have the determination to confront and deal with evil, but we understand that there are consequences. At a human level, we want to respond to them. Given the disparity between planning and delivery, I ask the Secretary of State to focus for a moment on the children.

We have heard that the children are already hurting. However, when war comes and refugees start to move, many will be children. Children need special help, facilities and food. They need grown-ups who have expertise and a commitment to focus on their needs

[Sir Brian Mawhinney]

above those of others. As we all know, there is always the danger that we plan for mass humanitarian aid and forget specific needs.

The Government delight in appointing tsars. I should like the House to appoint the Secretary of State the children's tsar for Iraq as a result of the debate. I have limited confidence in the United Nations. I have limited confidence in big multinational organisations, because I have been where the right hon. Lady has been. I have more confidence in our ability to set ourselves certain tasks and goals, and in a strong and committed Secretary of State ensuring that they are met.

The right hon. Lady could do the world and the people of Iraq a service if she would let her officials get on with dealing with the big multinational institutions, and she would become passionate about making sure that the consequences of war are ameliorated to the best of her ability, which, as we all understand, will be limited. I ask her to make a commitment about the after-effects, for the children.

3.50 pm

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): In our debates on Iraq, many of us have pointed to history—my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) has done so today—to the west's double standards and hypocrisy, and to our role in arming and supporting the brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. We do not start on the moral high ground, but we are where we are; and we are, of course, on the brink of war.

The question for me is whether that war would be just and proportionate. I have no doubt that it is possible to construct a legal argument within the terms of UN resolution 1441, but there are wider considerations in the course of war. We must weigh in the balance threat, degree of force proposed, and humanitarian consequences. My right hon. Friend has listed some of the possible threats that people in Iraq would face today, but I want to remind the House of what happened in the Gulf war in 1991.

The UN estimates that between 140,000 and 200,000 Iraqis died as a direct consequence of the war, rather than because of anything to do with sanctions. More than two-dozen factories and stores containing chemical, biological and probably nuclear material were hit, and their toxins were dispersed. Carcinogens from blazing oil wells spread across thousands of miles. The systematic bombing of electricity generating facilities, and of water storage and treatment facilities, left survivors without drinking water. The inclusion of chlorine and medicine on the UN embargo list provided the preconditions for the epidemics that followed. Iraqi health services, previously described by the World Health Organisation as a

"first-class range of medical facilities",

were overwhelmed. Primary health care and disease prevention programmes ceased.

By April 1991, an estimated 1.5 million refugees had fled to the Iranian and Turkish borders. By May, between 15,000 and 20,000 of them were dead. The UN reported

"near apocalyptic results on economic infrastructure",

and concluded:

"Iraq has for some time to come, been relegated to a pre-industrial age".

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Joan Ruddock: I will not. Most people in this House, including me, supported that Gulf war. My right hon. Friend said that we must minimise the risks if we go to war, but a few days ago the Pentagon let it be known that this time, the US plans to fire up to 800 cruise missiles in the first two days of the air campaign. That is twice as many as it fired in the whole of the 40-day Gulf war in 1991.

We are all aware that today's Iraq is not the first-world state of 1990; it is in every sense now a poor, third-world country. The effects of a Dresden-like bombardment on these extremely vulnerable people I find too horrific to contemplate. How many will die in that bombardment? How many refugees will die as they try to flee the country? What will be the environment for those who survive? My right hon. Friend has acknowledged that humanitarian contingency planning will have to take account of the deliberate or inadvertent release of any remaining stocks of chemical or biological weapons. What will be the effect on survivors, deprived of medicine, food and water, breathing a cocktail of carcinogenic air, and facing searing heat in the coming summer months? What will be the cost to the men and women of the armed forces, who will have to remain for months if not years after the immediate war? What will be the cost to Iraq's neighbours?

Iraq has been described as the most dangerous rogue state in the world, and al-Qaeda as the most dangerous international terrorist organisation. President Bush seeks to persuade us that they are connected. I do not find that credible—but let us assume that they are connected. What then? Is it likely that the west will become a greater or a lesser target for terrorists if we carpet-bomb Baghdad? Is it more or less likely that instability will spread throughout the whole region?

Some hon. Members have argued that whatever the political risk to ourselves, we cannot do nothing. I suggest that we are not doing nothing. Iraq's military might has been reined in, and we have the most robust inspection regime ever mounted anywhere in the world. The inspectors have the authority to destroy weapons of mass destruction and delivery systems.

Even were that to be achieved, there are hon. Members who argue—perhaps the hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir Brian Mawhinney) came closest to saying this—that it might be better to have the war to save the people of Iraq from their existing fate. I cannot accept that. It is, of course, not the purpose of resolution 1441, and it cannot be part of the judgment that the Security Council will take on hearing the inspectors' reports.

I cannot believe that that is the best way forward for the Iraqi people. We know what the immediate humanitarian results are likely to be, but the question is: what will follow the military onslaught? Like the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), I want to refer to Afghanistan, because that is where I believe we can see the answer—I have been to Kabul myself.

Let me give the House the financial context alone. The cost to the United Kingdom of military action in Iraq has been estimated at more than $8 billion. By comparison, the whole of the international community's pledges to Afghanistan for both humanitarian and reconstruction aid for five years have amounted to a mere $5 billion—half what initial estimates said was required.

As others have said, progress is painfully slow. There is still no effective security outside Kabul, because of the United States' consistent refusal to support an extension of ISAF—the international security assistance force—outside the capital city. There is no trained national army or police force, and anti-coalition forces are still active in one third of the country. The World Food Programme estimates that 6 million people remain vulnerable, and the Select Committee on International Development has recently reported:

> "the humanitarian crisis was far from over and there was little evidence that large scale reconstruction had taken place."

Needless to say, there is a strong feeling among Afghans that the west is beginning to walk away. I do not include my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development in that. I know just how hard she has worked and how great her commitment to the people of Afghanistan is.

I share the Prime Minister's aspiration for a new world order, but I do not believe that confidence can be drawn from the Afghan experience. Even less do I believe that a war in Iraq can be in the best interests of the Iraqi people. There can be no contingency humanitarian plans for those who will die. The United Nations has voted the means for solving the Iraq crisis peacefully, and that is the humanitarian response which I believe the House should make.

3.59 pm

Gregory Barker (Bexhill and Battle): Although I am glad to have caught your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am sorry to say that, because of the new sitting hours of the House, I have had to leave a Standing Committee to come and join in the debate here.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of military intervention against Iraq, it now seems sadly almost inconceivable that the march to war can be avoided. With or without the support of the country or the UN, the Prime Minister is clearly determined to topple Saddam Hussein's sadistic regime by military force. The likelihood of a war has been growing steadily since George Bush's famous "axis of evil" speech to the American Congress 12 months ago. That has been apparent to many in Parliament, to the army of pundits and observers in the media, and to the professionals involved in humanitarian relief whose job it will be to try to pick up the pieces and mitigate the potentially disastrous humanitarian situation that could quickly develop following the outbreak of hostilities.

However, for many months it has seemed extraordinary that the one person in the Government specifically tasked with making preparations for just such a humanitarian crisis has singularly failed to set before the House a coherent strategy for dealing with the direct effects of military intervention by the Government. That is despite the fact that the Cabinet has mobilised more than 25,000 service personnel and dispatched to the middle east the largest naval taskforce since the Falklands war. For all this time, the Secretary of State for International Development has sat on her hands and stonewalled any inquiry. Despite the intensive military preparations, it is clear that the Cabinet has chosen to close its eyes to the inevitable consequences of its plans for the conflict that will surely come to pass.

My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), the shadow Secretary of State for International Development, has repeatedly called on the Secretary of State to publish her Department's preparations for a possible war. She has been met with total silence. The right hon. Lady earlier pleaded that she had not been able to secure a debate in Government time to explain her plans, but she has had ample opportunity to set them out in response to the numerous written questions seeking answers to the matter.

Last week, on 22 January, the Secretary of State simply stonewalled in response to a parliamentary question from my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr. Swire), who was seeking a statement on what specific assessment she had made of the humanitarian consequences of a war in Iraq. She said:

> "My Department is considering a wide range of contingencies, which take into account the current humanitarian situation in Iraq."—[*Official Report*, 22 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 307W.]

That was a pathetic answer. With the drums of war beating ever louder and the prospects of a peaceful resolution of the Iraqi problem receding by the day, it would appear profoundly irresponsible and deeply reprehensible so woefully to ignore what the rest of the world can see so plainly. The consequences of our inaction now could be unnecessary suffering and even death on a biblical scale.

The Secretary of State must pull her head out of the sand and engage with the non-governmental organisations and other humanitarian organisations without delay. Moreover, she must make a proper and full statement to the House of Commons on a regular basis, rather than be dragged here by an Opposition motion. In that way, her proposed course of action, or lack of it, can be properly scrutinised by the House. She and the rest of the Government must be held properly accountable to Parliament.

The range of issues screaming out to be addressed is vast, and I shall not attempt to deal with them all today. However, I and many others would like to know, for example, that, in the event of military intervention in Iraq, electricity supplies will not be attacked where that would have a disproportionate impact on civilian needs, including the power for water and sanitation.

Clare Short: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gregory Barker: I will give way to the Secretary of State, although she was very reluctant to give way to me.

Clare Short: Now that we have heard what the hon. Gentleman has to say, I wonder if it was worth it. The

[Clare Short]

hon. Gentleman might not be the most intellectually gifted Member of the House, but he might be able to understand that the military are not willing to share their military scenarios with people like him. We therefore cannot share those scenarios with the House. I have outlined the risks, but what the hon. Gentleman is asking for is foolish. He is not serious in what he is saying.

Gregory Barker: That is absolute nonsense. We are asking the Secretary of State to engage with non-governmental organisations and to talk to the people on the ground who are taking the risks and who would deal with the humanitarian disaster on the front line. When we talk with NGO representatives, they scream out that the right hon. Lady simply is not engaging with them, meeting people, holding talks, or undertaking the consultation that is vital if a humanitarian crisis is to be avoided.

Clare Short: Stupid little boy.

Gregory Barker: The Secretary of State knows very, very well what I am saying. She has hidden her head in the sand because she cannot face the possibility that her Labour Government will go to war on the very issue over which she resigned from the shadow Cabinet back in 1990. Political expediency has prevented her from taking on responsibilities that she knows she should fulfil.

Dr. Murrison: Does my hon. Friend share my disquiet at some deeply worrying comments made recently by people in non-governmental organisations? In particular, individuals at Imperial College London and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine have commented on the lack of liaison between them and military organisations in this country and elsewhere, particularly following the Secretary of State's remarks that our military preparation for humanitarian aid in Iraq is just getting going.

Gregory Barker: I completely share those concerns and shall allude later to a letter that 500 students and academics from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine have written to two medical journals.

Have the Government made representations to our American allies about the protection of water and sanitation supplies in the event of military intervention in Iraq? What discussions have they had about food security? What evaluation has the Secretary of State made of the continuance of the UN's oil-for-food programme in the event of war with Iraq? If that programme is suspended, what will be the impact on the food needs of the civilian population? It is estimated that 49 per cent. of families in Iraq do not earn enough money to meet basic needs and 20 per cent. live in extreme poverty. According to the World Food Programme, malnutrition is widespread among children outside Baghdad.

This morning, Julian Filochowski, director of the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development, told my researcher that for the two thirds of the population who depend on UN food rations, there are few, if any, coping mechanisms once food distribution is disrupted and water and sanitation systems collapse. Christian Aid estimates that following suspension of the oil-for-food programme, 16 million people will immediately be vulnerable to food shortages and malnutrition.

Contingency planning for the prompt delivery of food and the effective restoration of power and sanitation is absolutely vital. If major infrastructure targets, such as power stations, are hit, as they were last time, there will be a sharp increase in the number of water-related diseases, because the Iraqi water treatment system is powered electronically. Two thirds of the rubbish in Baghdad is not collected. Cholera is rife. It will become impossible to store medical supplies, such as blood and vaccines, at appropriate temperatures. As I said, in an open letter to two leading medical journals, staff and alumni of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine warned that conflict could lead to hundreds of thousands of civilians being killed, as well as sparking famine and epidemics.

Larry Hollingworth, the UN emergency co-ordinator who spoke at the excellent forum organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden in November, has said if there is a conflict, hundreds of thousands—even millions—of people could uproot themselves and move to rural areas of the country or try to leave Iraq. During the Gulf war, Iran, Jordan and Turkey took almost 1.8 million refugees. Iran hosts 3 million refugees, the most in the world.

It is ironic that we know more about the contingency plans of the Government of Iran than we do about those of Her Majesty's Government. That is thanks to a recent visit to the Iran-Iraq border by Adam Leach, middle east director of Oxfam, and Paul Sherlock. From them, we know that the Iranian Government, in conjunction with Iranian Red Crescent, believe that as many as 900,000 people may flee towards Iran. What is more, that Government have already set up camps, zones and areas to cater for that contingency.

It is appalling that it is easier to get access to the Iranian Government's contingency planning for a possible humanitarian disaster in which our Government must play a leading role than to extract information from a Minister in the House of Commons. The Iranian Government will need full assistance to cope with a further humanitarian crisis on the country's borders. Successful co-ordination between Governments, international agencies and NGOs such as Oxfam will be key to an effective response.

There is no doubt that the architect of the misfortune of the Iraqi people is Saddam Hussein and that, free from his oppression, Iraq would be an infinitely better place for everyone. However, a heavy responsibility lies on the British Government as they weigh up the possibility of military intervention. A report by the worldwide Catholic network of aid agencies, following a visit to Iraq at the end of last year, concluded:

> "Heavy bombardments and the use of military forces will have incalculable consequences for a civil population that has already suffered so much."

I came to the debate hoping that the Secretary of State would map out a blueprint for a humanitarian relief programme. We have been sorely disappointed; there has been not even a shred of detail, nor an apology for the lack of detail to date, and no encouragement that more will be forthcoming. There has been a great deal of hand wringing, but little else.

4.11 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): I am sorry that the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) is not in the Chamber at present as I entirely agree with one of the points that she made. It is unfortunate, given that we are debating such an important subject, that the reforms of the House mean that many Members leave early on a Thursday afternoon. I hope that supporters of that reform will think again and that we shall have an opportunity to reverse it.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, who is also not in her place at present, has said time after time that the best scenario is that war should be avoided. Everyone in the House would agree with that sentiment; we all want to avoid war if it is at all possible.

Aid agencies point out that

> "military action against Iraq could trigger a major humanitarian disaster".

They call on world leaders

> "to draw back from the brink of war".

Assessments of the humanitarian situation in Iraq are horrific, as many colleagues have pointed out. Up to 16 million people are entirely dependent on food aid, and the country's water and sanitation systems are stretched to the limit. The director of Christian Aid said:

> "We believe that peaceful alternatives to conflict are not yet exhausted. All parties have a legal—and we believe a moral—obligation to seek the peaceful resolution of this dispute through the United Nations."

As my colleagues know, I have argued for a long time that for two decades top Iraqi officials have committed massive crimes and atrocities: genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. All those crimes have been impressively recorded by the United Nations, by the American, Kuwaiti, British and Iranian Governments and by non-governmental organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty, as well as Indict, which I chair.

The former American ambassador for war crimes wrote an interesting article in the *Washington Post* a few months ago. He said that, throughout the Clinton Administration he had waged a

> "lonely campaign to compile the criminal record against the Iraqi regime and to seek indictments of Iraqi officials. By the end of 2000 our investigative team"—

Indict was part of that team—

> "had amassed millions of pages of documents, resurrected an extensive archive of evidence prepared by U.S. Army lawyers and investigators during the Gulf War."

That included our Operation Sandcastle investigations, which have never been published. The article then said that the team

> "interviewed key witnesses, and published a report and released aerial photography demonstrating Iraqi crimes against humanity.
>
> Yet no Iraqi official (at least 10 are of extreme interest) has ever been indicted for some of the worst crimes of the 20th century. Efforts to obtain U.N. Security Council approval for an ad hoc international criminal tribunal encountered one obstacle after another in various foreign capitals . . . and even within the Clinton administration"—

people were pulling both ways in that Administration, as they appear to be in the present United States Administration.

> "The usual excuse was that a tribunal would jeopardize either the United Nations' inspections regime or its sanctions regimes. We needed Hussein's co-operation, which a criminal indictment might discourage."

We know from the ad hoc tribunals for the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and now for Sierra Leone, that indictments of alleged war criminals who lead tyrannical and genocidal regimes can destroy their political careers, isolate them internationally, end their regimes and even achieve justice.

Even at this late stage, an indictment could bring about the necessary regime change in Iraq—I believe it is necessary—and would avoid the necessity for military action. Even now, the Security Council could establish an international criminal tribunal to investigate and prosecute the Iraqi leadership. Its indictees would be subject to arrest and its creation could pave the way for UN-authorised military action later to neutralise any weapons and terrorism threats and to bring about regime change with international support.

Gregory Barker: I am listening to the hon. Lady carefully and have great respect for her work. I am genuinely interested to know this. We have heard of the possibility that the United States would support a safe haven or place of exile for Saddam Hussein. How does the hon. Lady reconcile that possible avenue for averting conflict with the genuine and widespread support for indicting those vicious criminals?

Ann Clwyd: It is not up to any country other than Iraq to decide that Saddam Hussein and his regime should avoid prosecution for war crimes. It is not the responsibility of the United Kingdom or the United States of America to take that decision; it is a decision for the Iraqi people. It would be wrong for us to offer Hussein a safe haven—an escape from indictment for war crimes. In fact, I asked an Iraqi friend—an Iraqi Kurd—how he would feel if that happened. His answer was, "If it happened, we would find our own way of dealing with it." It is obvious what that means. That idea ought to be hit firmly on the head. The time for offering Saddam Hussein incentives is over. He and his colleagues deserve to be indicted and the UN Security Council must disarm Iraq. At the end of the day, both justice and international security must prevail.

My hon. Friends have often heard me talk about the work that our organisation, Indict, has been doing. They will be interested to know that only this week the Attorney-General wrote to me to announce that he has refused to grant his consent to prosecute Saddam Hussein, Tariq Aziz, Ali Hassan Al-Majid and Taha Ramadan for the crime of hostage taking during the Gulf conflict in 1990 under the Taking of Hostages Act 1982. In all those cases, he says that that is because there is "insufficient evidence" to provide a realistic prospect of conviction. I found that absolutely incredible, as do most people.

The idea that there is not enough evidence that Saddam was responsible for taking hostages, including many British victims, is unbelievable. The Attorney-General's ruling appears to place us, and anyone who seeks his consent on controversial matters, in a

[Ann Clwyd]

ludicrous circular argument. The evidence is there, and there is plenty of it. We have evidence from opposition colleagues, and evidence was taken from many of the hostages during the Gulf war.

The Attorney-General's ruling means, in effect, that we have to provide not just a prima facie case, but one based solely on the material that Indict provided. An analogy would be that, instead of reporting to the police that our car had been stolen and expecting them to investigate who was responsible, we had to detect the culprit ourselves, rule out all other possible perpetrators and then prove beyond reasonable doubt that they did it before the Attorney-General would say that it was all right to prosecute. It is absolutely ludicrous.

The public are not stupid. They will ask who gains from this decision and why is it being taken now. Is it a coincidence that there is talk of Saddam being offered safe haven and immunity from prosecution and that it is being found, on advice from Treasury counsel, that there is insufficient evidence to proceed against him? Most hon. Members would find that incredible.

4.21 pm

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire): I am pleased to have the chance to take part in this debate, which was rightly called for and ably opened by my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman). It has been characterised largely by informed and passionate comment. Following opening speeches of just such a tone, I simply ask the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) to reflect, with whatever humility she may possess, on the presumption behind her opening remarks that, simply because an hon. Member disagrees with her, is a man in a grey suit and belongs to a different party, he cannot possibly care about these matters quite as much as she does.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): Our surprise is that, during 18 years in government, the Conservative party did nothing on these issues, which are of very great concern to us.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady in her inexperience makes a remark which on reflection she may regret: she should give due credit to those members of the Conservative party who filled the post of Overseas Development Minister, such as Chris Patten and Lady Chalker. In due course, the hon. Lady may care to think again. We might also watch her actions in the next few weeks, as events unfold, and see how much she cares.

Whatever one's view of the war and the need for it, the brutal fact is that the situation of refugees in Iraq—internally displaced people—and the breakdown of structures there will not be deciding factors in whether we go to war. Although we all hope that war does not happen, it is essential to prepare for it. However, the sheer scale of the disruption anticipated should not only give pause for thought: it should give rise to some prompt and urgent preparation. It is alarming to note that the state of preparation, as so ably described by my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden, seems so much poorer than was the case in the Gulf war or in Afghanistan.

I will not linger on the current state of humanitarian affairs in Iraq, as that has already been outlined. I want to concentrate on internally displaced people and also on the countries to which they may flee. I have been in contact with Save the Children, which states that the number of internally displaced people in Iraq is already very high—somewhere between 700,000 and 1 million. In the event of war, up to an additional 900,000 people may be internally displaced, mainly as a result of the policies of the Government of Iraq, but also because of fighting between Kurdish factions.

Living in shanty towns on the outskirts of towns, internally displaced people do not have access to agricultural land, food or income. They are particularly vulnerable if provisions do not reach them in conflict, and they tend to be overlooked in Government emergency assistance. Unlike refugees, IDPs do not benefit from a special protection mechanism in international law. We should ensure that we account for the vast number of insecure people within Iraq in our humanitarian contingency planning. The number of internally displaced persons will depend on the intensity of urban bombing; the intensity of street fighting; the breakdown of the food distribution system in terms of supplies; whether roads remain open and the transport means are there for safe travel; the duration of the war; and the emergency provision of water and sanitation facilities. It is hard to imagine the consequences of probably 2 million internally displaced people within Iraq. We need to be aware, however, that these displacements will be the immediate consequences of strikes on Iraq. On top of some 5.4 million people in the south of the country, according to the UN's estimate, who will need humanitarian intervention and are expected by the UN to be accessible for support, we must therefore consider catering for a further 2 million internally displaced persons.

I hope that when the Secretary of State returns to the Chamber she will say how the Government intend to ensure that humanitarian agencies and the UNHCR are properly resourced and co-ordinated to address the potentially vast number of displaced people. Where are they likely to go? Some will flee inside the country. Many will flee to the north, which is considered safer, as the Kurds are based there. What preparations have been made in the north to cope with the influx of those from the centre and the south of Iraq? Of course, more people will flee across borders. During the Gulf war, Iran, Jordan and Turkey took most of the 1.8 million refugees. Because the aim of this war is regime change, the refugee numbers may be higher this time. United Nations estimates suggest that some 900,000 may go to Iran; up to 270,000 to Turkey; 50,000 to Jordan; and others to Syria, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. We must now ask whether those countries are prepared to offer humanitarian aid and support to the thousands of refugees who will arrive at their borders. We need to encourage them to do so by supporting them and offering funding for their efforts.

I spoke on the telephone this morning to Deputy Foreign Minister Bak of Jordan, and I am grateful to his excellency for giving me some of his time. He said that the problem is that the situation is so uncertain. Not only does Jordan not know how many people it will receive; it does not know in what condition people will arrive. Preparation is therefore very difficult. Jordan is working very hard with UN agencies and with non-governmental organisations, but is looking for financial support from outside.

Mrs. Gillan: Did my hon. Friend receive any indication today that Jordan was reluctant to discuss humanitarian contingencies, which was certainly the impression given by what the Secretary of State said earlier?

Alistair Burt: I got no impression of that from my conversation. His excellency was very open and straightforward about the situation, and was happy to discuss things with me. He was aware that I was speaking in the House this afternoon.

Jordan has a particular concern about water, in which it is one of the 10 poorest countries in the world. Minister Bak remarked ruefully that he would be very grateful to have in his country some of the clouds that he sees heading in our direction on the CNN weather charts at the moment. He mentioned in particular the situation affecting funding. The European Union in particular has been hesitant to announce its plans because it hopes things will not happen. The UN has also reported that it has been difficult to attract money because people hope things will not happen. He made the point that it is all very well for people far away to wait for things to happen, but that he and his country cannot afford to do so. He said that if aid arrives now and it turns out that it is not needed for the immediate consequences of war in Iraq, there is no need to worry: it can still be used to assist the 200,000 refugees from the Gulf war who are still in Jordan. I make a plea on the Minister's behalf for aid to be sent urgently to assist Jordan and, I suspect, its neighbouring countries.

A further sadness is that it is not just a question of people fleeing safely over borders. Getting over the border in the first place is a problem if the border is mined or electrified. We recently received information that the Kuwaiti border is electrified. Are the Government aware of that?

Refugees at or near borders, as well as internally displaced people, who cross to the three northern Governments will be severely affected by the many land mines in the area. Save the Children told us that the borders with Turkey and Iran are some of the most heavily mined in the world. UNHCR points out that there is no mine action programme or mine awareness education in the centre and south of Iraq, and that that will exacerbate the number of mine injuries. Displaced urban populations and children will be particularly unprepared for living in a mine-infested environment. How will the Government prevent vulnerable families fleeing to dangerous areas that may be mined or electrified?

No one in the Chamber contemplates war lightly—neither the Prime Minister, who bears the greatest responsibility of his life on our behalf nor the most ordinary Back Bencher, who carries a lighter but still significant burden: the expectations and concerns of a trusting electorate. Whichever way the decision goes, the humanitarian consequences for the people of Iraq are likely to engage us for some time. They will certainly affect our excellent armed forces as they prepare for their usual constructive role in such circumstances. The least we can do is to engage with the circumstances of the people of Iraq and, as the Secretary of State said, assist in the recovery of their country after so many years of brutality and destruction.

4.31 pm

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): Like my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and other hon. Members, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the humanitarian consequences of a possible war on Iraq.

In recent months, there has been a feeling that we are moving inevitability towards war, but I do not accept that war is inevitable. I still hope that a diplomatic solution will be found, and many hon. Members have said that we must do our utmost to prevent it from happening. The debate is important because we can set the humanitarian consequences of the war against the aims of the war, which causes me to ask: at what price war? I hope that when the Prime Minister and President Bush consider the problem at the weekend, they also weigh up the humanitarian consequences of going to war. I do not think that war is the lesser evil.

The recent leaked UN report on the humanitarian impact of such a war shows the vulnerability of the Iraqi population, half of whom are under 14, as many hon. Members have said. The children will be most affected by a conflict. They are most affected by the regime and will suffer most. How will the international community protect them and their families? From what the United Nations says, that will be very difficult, as my right hon. Friend acknowledged, although she did assure us that the structures are being put in place. But the country is vulnerable, much more so than in 1991.

As other hon. Members said, most of the Iraqi people depend on the Government for their basic needs. According to the World Food Programme, 80 per cent. of average Iraqi household income depends on food rations, with 60 per cent. of homes solely dependent on them, which is 16 million people. Those people will be directly affected by any disruption in food supplies, which a war will inevitably bring. Obviously, the amount of disruption will depend on which part of the country people live in. The issues are different in the north and in the south and central areas, as hon. Members said.

My right hon. Friend said that the UN is preparing for war and considering the humanitarian consequences, but I am worried about what money is being made available in the UN. The leaked draft UN report of 7 January 2003, only three weeks ago, says that the UN agencies will not be able to reach their minimum level of readiness unless initial requirements are provided. On 7 January, no funds were available to pre-position stocks to constitute the minimal level of preparedness that the UN talks about. Is the document correct? Has there been any change in the situation since 7 January? I hope that my right hon. Friend can say whether any more money has become available since 7 January.

In the crisis that war will bring, the UN tells us that 4.2 million children under the age of five would be highly vulnerable, as would 1 million pregnant women. At present, 30 per cent. of babies in Iraq are born with low birth weights. Only 80 per cent. of children have had the measles vaccination, and the report says that a measles

[Julie Morgan]

epidemic is likely. It estimates that, in a war, 30 per cent. of under-fives would be at risk of death from malnutrition. Those figures have been given several times today, but they cannot be stated too often.

There is still a shortage of drugs and vaccines, according to the UN, and UNICEF expects a shortage of drugs, especially antibiotics, within a month of the outbreak of war, as the population begins to suffer from diarrhoea and the other illnesses associated with the inevitable consequences of drinking water supplies being cut off in the event of war.

Mr. Pollard: Is my hon. Friend aware that, in the southern parts of Iraq in particular, many babies are still being born malformed—some with two heads—as a result of depleted uranium used in the last war? We perhaps have that to look forward to in the next one.

Julie Morgan: I had heard that. The situation is of great concern.

The British Government are one of the largest donors to Iraq, having given about £100 million since the Gulf war. Our aid has focused on health, sanitation and water, but still, under the present regime and with the effect of sanctions, Iraq's mortality rate in the centre and the south is 2.5 times the level recorded in 1990. Despite the slight improvement that has already been mentioned, the present situation is very bad, and it is likely to be much worse after a war is declared.

I come now to the situation of refugees. The UN expects that up to 1.45 million refugees and asylum seekers would try to flee the country. Some countries may deny access to refugees or make them stay in camps on the borders or just inside Iraq. As the borders are mined, it is likely that there will be casualties caused by the mines, especially on the borders with Iran and Turkey. Therefore, I too wish to ask the Government what they will do to try to stop families fleeing into areas where there are mines.

I recently visited Iran, which already has 2 million refugees from Afghanistan. We had discussions with the agencies about the plan in Iran to encourage Afghan refugees to return to Afghanistan over a period of four years. Many of them are very reluctant to go back, for reasons that have been mentioned today. Outside Kabul, they do not know what they would be going back to. That is an important point that we should bear in mind when we think that there may be many Iraqi refugees entering Iran, which has the highest population of refugees in the world.

There will also be internally displaced people, estimated by the UN at up to 900,000, in addition to those already in Iraq. They are the most vulnerable in the world. The Save the Children Fund has briefed us on the fate of internally displaced people, who are without the established system of international protection. It has vividly described the experiences of children who have been displaced throughout the world. Many become separated from their families and are most vulnerable to sexual abuse and attack and at risk of malnutrition. These children will also lose out on education and on most of their childhood, because the problem will take many years to set right. They will not have the opportunity of normal play activity. Already in the centre and south of Iraq, one in three girls do not attend primary school, so there is disruption to their education. If children become internally displaced, there is a much greater chance of disruption. The protection of displaced children is a priority for the United Nations, which has produced guiding principles on such children, and it is essential that they are followed. Will my right hon. Friend do all that she can to ensure that, if war starts, the UN protocols are observed?

I am pleased that we are having this debate. In deciding whether to go to war, we must take into consideration the humanitarian consequences. At present, I do not believe that war is justified, and everything that has been said today confirms me in that view.

4.40 pm

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): It is always a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Julie Morgan), who posed some interesting questions that I hope the Secretary of State will have time to answer in her winding-up speech.

First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) on calling for this debate. I agree with her opening remarks and those of the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). I, too, was supposed to be serving on a Committee considering secondary legislation. It was a difficult choice, but I deemed this debate more important—there is no doubt that within the next few weeks we will more likely than not be fighting a war on Iraqi soil to remove weapons of mass destruction from the hands of a brutal and vicious dictator. As my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden said in her excellent opening speech, virtually all contributions to previous debates in the House have concentrated on military operations and the justification for action. It is surprising that the Government have not placed more emphasis on the humanitarian side of the equation, and I hope that today's debate will genuinely help to strengthen the hand of the Secretary of State and give her a louder voice in Cabinet discussions.

Dr. Murrison: Does my hon. Friend agree that the humanitarian and military effort are one and the same? The military need to prepare for what will subsequently be demanded of them. As the Secretary of State said, she is only just starting to liaise with the military so that they can take over many tasks that non-governmental organisations have said they will not do if biological or chemical agents are used in theatre.

Mrs. Gillan: My hon. Friend is right, and anticipates the military angle that I hope to discuss later.

Except for the privileged few, Iraq and its people are in pretty poor shape, as everybody has attested. Almost three quarters of the population now depend on food handouts, and child mortality has rocketed due to the combined effects of malnourishment, poor sanitation, lack of clean drinking water and grossly inadequate health care.

Children are not the only vulnerable ones. Elderly and handicapped people and those who have been internally displaced are also living in highly precarious conditions.

Military action itself will leave a legacy of destruction and deprivation on top of the existing humanitarian disaster. It will drive sick and starving people in their thousands through hostile conditions across the border into surrounding countries, and will displace people from their homes and separate them from family members. There is no doubt that people will die. It is therefore imperative that the House understand the Government's plans and the readiness of DFID and the relevant agencies for involvement in the difficult task of delivering swift and effective aid in a complex humanitarian emergency.

I want to explore in the brief time available the role of the military and the pitfalls that may face them. In the past 20 years or so, they have increasingly found themselves facilitating humanitarian assistance following conflicts. Indeed, I have seen our troops in operation in Pristina and surrounding areas, where they played a major role both in peacekeeping and in helping to rebuild communities devastated by war. The military do not act in isolation—they have to deal with various agencies and organisations, all of which have different roles and responsibilities, different methods of working and different chains of command. That can lead to problems, as past experience has shown. I should like to know whether the lessons of previous humanitarian operations have been learned and whether they will be put into practice in any potential conflict.

The first concerns assessment. In dealing with a complex humanitarian emergency, the first priority is rapid assessment to identify or even confirm needs, identify public health requirements and determine priorities and resources. Following the Gulf war, it was found that both civilian and military personnel working in Iraq were not trained in rapid public health and needs assessments or survey skills. I believe that the MOD and DFID have undertaken efforts to train both civilian and military personnel in those vital and basic skills. If so, may we have the details? Is the Secretary of State satisfied that the training so far has been sufficient?

A second issue that arose was the poorly defined role of the military, which contributed to co-ordination problems. What has the Department done to ensure that better communication between agencies and the military will be facilitated in the field during the humanitarian phase of the operation? Such was the failure of preparation that the aid efforts were even hampered by workers and military personnel being unable to speak the same language or the local language. What language training has been carried out for our NGOs and our forces?

Thirdly, political barriers to effective aid delivery were encountered in the last Gulf conflict. The western relief programme, Operation Haven, for the displaced Kurdish population was not as successful as it might have been. The refugees were restricted to high, cold and exposed mountain slopes, with poor sanitation and water supplies. The mortality rate was consequently high, and even though the public health needs strongly indicated the need for a rapid move, probably to a position over the Turkish border, that was not possible. Turkey was having its own internal political problems with the Kurdish nationalist movement, and some commentators have speculated that that may have been why the refugees could not be moved to more suitable terrain.There is no doubt that many people died from the harsh conditions, and would not have died, had they been moved to suitable areas.

What has the Secretary of State done to ensure that suitable sites have been identified in Iraq or the surrounding countries, and what discussions have taken place or are planned to take place, particularly with Turkey, to reduce the likelihood of the situation being repeated? We need to be able to guarantee that political expediency does not take precedence over epidemiological evidence.

Fourthly, the western relief programme was hampered by the absence of the UNHCR and its usual co-ordination role because its mandate did not cover internally displaced people. Can the Secretary of State tell us whether that is still the case, or whether it will be able to play a full role in any relief programme, irrespective of the status of the people?

Practical issues have arisen in other humanitarian relief operations and I should be grateful if the right hon. Lady could address these. Initially, in Goma in 1994, the military rather than an NGO such as Oxfam was required to provide a clean water supply for more than 50,000 refugees from neighbouring Rwanda. The military personnel faced huge technical problems for which they were not well equipped, and within eight days, a cholera epidemic raged through the camp, killing more than 30,000 refugees. In the end, at the height of the epidemic, more then 100 NGOs and 50 military contingents were working together. The UNHCR had no control over them, and when the final analysis took place, it was discovered that the military interventions were six times more expensive than the NGO interventions, and of course their presence in this instance exacerbated the co-ordination problems in the field. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that the lessons from Goma have been taken on board, and that only well-equipped personnel with appropriate equipment and training will be used in any humanitarian aid programme in Iraq?

Also in Rwanda, a small military contingent set up a field hospital for the refugees in Gikongoro and after a few weeks passed the operation over to NGOs. Although the military had provided superb medical and surgical care, it was found that the death rate among the refugees was more than eight per 1,000 per day, which is far above the accepted norm of 0.5 per 1,000 per day. Post-event analysis showed that although the medical care was excellent, the military had not recognised that the lack of shelter, water and sanitation was a priority, and the resulting public health problems had caused the high mortality. They had been focused on the priorities that they had rightly identified through their military training—that is, treating the wounded—and had failed to appreciate the public health implications. Inadvertently, they had added a dimension to the problems and many refuges died from common communicable diseases before it was even realised.

There are many other examples where the best intentions have not resulted in the best outcomes. I should like some reassurances, in particular that DFID has addressed the poor training and inadequate preparedness of personnel, the inadequate understanding of public health problems and priorities, the variable quality and poor targeting of aid, the

[Mrs. Gillan]

political override of epidemiological needs, and the lack of co-ordination of military and civilian or NGO operations.

In addition, I would like to know what the MOD has done on those issues and about equipment, training, liaison with NGOs and civilians, cost-effectiveness studies and command structures during the aid phase. Military contingents have a role in humanitarian aid programmes, but those issues need to be addressed. The one thing that the military hate is dual tasking. Therefore, I should also like an assurance that there will be a follow-on military contingent to provide appropriate aid and security following any conflict.

We all hope that war will be avoided, but that depends on the actions of Saddam Hussein. We in this House need to know in the eventuality of war that we are well prepared to help the people of Iraq. The Secretary of State has so far disappointed us with her responses, but she will have another opportunity at the end of the debate to give the reassurances that we require. I hope that she will take that opportunity.

4.50 pm

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby): I wish to make colleagues on both sides of the House aware of a letter that I wrote this week to the Prime Minister. It states:

> "Dear Tony,
>
> I write to you on a matter of real urgency at a time when so much concern is focused on the work of the United Nations weapons inspectors and when public opposition is growing against military action and the perceived reasons for taking such action. We have in my view little need to look for new weapons of mass destruction in Iraq as a trigger for action when there is already so much evidence of their use against the Kurds.
>
> I am a good friend of Professor Christine Gosden, Professor of Medical Genetics at Royal Liverpool University Hospital Department of Pathology. She is also a nationally and internationally renowned individual, her reputation mainly focused in the area of weapons of mass destruction. Professor [illegible]den and her professional colleagues throughout the world meet regularly to discuss"

problems associated with WMD

> "and the medical response to the deployment of chemical and biological weapons in Northern Iraq. She and I are meeting with representatives of the Foreign Office to discuss the funding of several small projects in the area. However, we are both desperately concerned about a number of specific issues about which she has provided me with much reliable, verifiable and disturbing information, some of which I now summarise.
>
> It seems likely that Saddam Hussein may currently be using weapons of chemical mass destruction against the population including Pesh mergas of Northern Iraq, members of the CIA, and MI6 throughout Iraq, as well as aid workers and Government officials who are working on plans to establish an administration after the current regime has been disposed of. However, what we do know is that WMD have been used against the population in Northern Iraq on a wider scale than has been recognised and may currently be a threat to the population in clandestine use including that in food and water supplies. The agents carried by these mediums may include aflatoxin, anthrax, small pox, plague, botulinum toxin, toxic radioactive waste, radiation weapons, and ricin. In addition, Professor Gosden believes that Saddam may even be infecting people in prison and then releasing them to mingle with members of their indigenous community, spreading such diseases as small pox and the plague. Whilst there is as yet no direct evidence of these latter practices, there are several reliable reports about experiments using prisoners to determine the human effects of ricin, and the contamination of water supplies.
>
> My main concern is that we (as a primary aid giver to and possible invader of Iraq) are currently incapable of assessing the risks to the population by measuring the extent to which these agents are now being deployed there. What is certainly known, however, is that deaths are increasing in all age groups and that the diseases and genetic conditions exhibited by the Iraqis derive from interactions with various highly toxic agents. The levels of cancer, range of cancers, genetic and chromosomal defects exhibited by the people exceeds that exhibited by any normal population, but is matched by communities that fall within chemical and nuclear disaster areas, such as Bhopal and Chernobyl.
>
> I am very concerned that we lack sufficient information about the consequences of chemical and biological weapons and that this paucity of knowledge will leave us ill-prepared to deal with the health problems of the people of Northern Iraq and battle troops if and when we invade the country. Professor Gosden and her team have developed a chemical and biological testing and treatment programme that needs to be implemented quickly to protect invading allied troops and Iraqi civilians from chemical and biological attacks. There is obviously an immediate benefit associated with this proposed programme for the indigenous people involved, but far more importantly the data collected from the testing programme would be of inestimable value for British and American intelligence and military planning agencies.
>
> Unless you can assure me to the contrary, Christine is unaware of any agency carrying out such studies in the area of Northern Iraq at this time. Since this is one of the highest risk areas for the deployment of chemical and biological weapons, it is surprising that apparently no attention is being given to analysing the ongoing health effects of the previous extensive use of weapons of mass destruction on the people of the region. You will know that, under sanctions, few aid agencies now have licences allowing them to provide support for the people of the region. Have you carried out any analyses to determine the preparedness of these agencies to deal with the aftermath of the possible war with potentially millions of victims, including military personnel and aid workers, subjected to cocktails of biological and chemical weapons? Furthermore, has consideration been given to extending the list of aid agencies, who are allowed to deliver aid into the area, and how are these agencies being briefed and made ready for the task that may face them?
>
> I am concerned that the existing structures responsible for providing health care and relief in Iraq are inadequate. There is a very real fear that some personnel involved with W.H.O. and the U.N., (because they have to work through Bagdad government departments), have become part of the regime that denies health care to the Iraqi population. The aid agencies operating in that area have virtually no diagnostic provisions or facilities and possess limited resources for treatment of illnesses related to poisonous weapons. Meanwhile the US and military agencies who are responsible for undertaking the task of conflict and post-conflict planning for health provision have no experience of the cultural and social networks that exist on the ground and which would improve the effectiveness of any care and health provision they might offer. They are by definition war professionals, not health professionals, and they therefore lack the skills and resources to deal with the people appropriately, especially in view of the large population of Moslem women to whom on religious and cultural grounds they would be denied access.
>
> I support this argument by referring you to the situation in Afghanistan and the former Yugoslavia, where the military are still providing significant levels of post-conflict support. It is a matter of record that in the aftermath of those particular conflicts there are now dramatically increased disability and mortality rates amongst the indigenous populations, especially mothers and babies. Clearly the environment that our troops and allies may face in Iraq will be unprecedented in comparison to these previous theatres of war, and the problems that they face thus far greater.
>
> In this context, I would like to ask you what action has been taken in relation to the following.
>
> Has the Ministry of Defence developed strategies with medical teams from the UK and across the world with expertise with weapons of mass destruction to enable proper testing to be carried out in the region.

> What is being done to provide medical assistance for those in danger in the region, such as supplies of antibiotics for potential plague and anthrax attacks, and bleach for attacks using biological agents and chemical agents such as VX, ricin and mustard gas.
>
> What are we providing for the current investigations into the effects of weapons of mass destruction on civilian populations, with particular and sensitive reference to both Islamic culture and the fears of the people.
>
> What support should we be giving to initiatives for the research and implementation of conflict recovery strategies for populations ravaged by modern conflicts, embodying modern technological, molecular and therapeutic modalities that are sensitive to the culture of the people in conflict zones.
>
> In conclusion, I would wish clearly to state that, as a pragmatist, I continue to accept the probable necessity of the forthcoming conflict with Saddam Hussein, and that I am relieved that we are finally settling to the task of removing this clearly deranged and murderous man. I regret, however, that the justification to do so appears, at least in the public's perception, to have arisen as a consequence of US policy and its perceived preoccupation with economic and oil-based arguments rather than flowing from what should be our own government's concern for humanitarian and moral issues—and indeed that we did not argue for this type of humanitarian intervention for this population damaged and killed by WMD many many years ago."

4.58 pm

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): I am pleased to have the opportunity to take part in this debate, even though I, too, have had to give up on a Standing Committee in order to be here. We were debating whether Rupert Murdoch should own Channel 5, but this is a far more important debate for the House, which I hope will colour the decision on whether we go to war. The humanitarian aspect of any war in Iraq is surely part of considering whether we go to war, and I hope to make a few comments along those lines. I should like to say at the outset that I am receiving reports of very bad weather in mid-Wales, so if I have to miss the winding-up speeches, I hope that the Secretary of State will understand why. It will mean that I can get the earlier train, so that it will take me six hours instead of seven to get home. We shall see.

I am pleased that the Conservative party tabled the motion, because on the whole we have had a good-tempered, well-ordered and informative debate. However, there is one aspect that I should like to discuss. We have talked tangentially about the effect of economic sanctions on Iraq, but we have not considered whether the humanitarian situation in today's Iraq, or in post-conflict Iraq, would be better or worse if those sanctions were lifted or of a different nature. I want to read out a short newspaper story from *The Guardian* of 14 April 1990, which said:

> "The Government has informally relaxed the arms sanctions it imposed during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war in its efforts to ensure that Britain is not left out of the international drive to re-equip the Iraqi regime."

That was the then Conservative Government taking the opportunity, for trade reasons, to relax the arms embargo on Iraq. I want to turn that on its head to ask, in all seriousness, whether we are doing the right thing for the citizens of Iraq by maintaining economic sanctions, and whether we should have considered that at an earlier stage, when many hon. Members said that we should be doing so. We must face up to the reality that although the dreadful humanitarian situation that pertains in Iraq is mainly the result of Saddam Hussein's actions, it is partly because one of the tools of our policy in Iraq has been to keep the civilian population living a pretty miserable existence in the hope that they would overthrow the regime in their own time and in their own ways. That remains one of the unspoken aspects of the sanctions regime and the current situation in Iraq.

Many hon. Members mentioned the humanitarian situation. I shall not reiterate all those facts and figures, but leave them to speak on the record. We have heard that 1 million children under five have chronic malnutrition, that fewer than half the homes in Iraq have access to piped and clean water, that a third of the power supply is still down, and that between 60 and 75 per cent. of the population are dependent on food aid. That is the situation now, 10 years after a very limited conflict that did not take troops into the major part of Iraq itself, and which certainly did not target the regime or try to overthrow it. I ask hon. Members to imagine, in the context of the conflict that we are facing, the situation after an all-out war in Iraq, especially if we were forced to go into Baghdad or to use air power to take it. It is important to remember that Iraq was once, and still could be, a thoroughly modern country with a proper infrastructure in terms of water supply, electricity supply, education, a health service—

Clare Short: I know that we are short of time, but I want to respond to the hon. Gentleman, because he may not be here later. Sanctions were imposed by the UN at the end of the war on the assumption that Iraq's nuclear, chemical and biological weapons would be dismantled quickly, sanctions would be lifted and the country would return to normal. Instead, Saddam Hussein retained those weapons. That is the dilemma that the world faces. Saying that we should remove the sanctions because the Iraqi people have suffered is the same as saying that Saddam Hussein can do what he likes. I am afraid that it is not as simple as that. The UK has worked for the simplification of the sanctions regime so that nearly everything can be traded, and only things that could be used militarily are banned, but that has proved difficult. The UN expected a brief sanctions regime, the dismantling of weapons and a thriving Iraq—it was Saddam Hussein who was not willing to go for that.

Mr. Thomas: I accept the burden of the Secretary of State's comments. She is right to make those points. However, eight or nine years after the Gulf war, we realised that the sanctions regime was not working and that it did not put the right pressure on Saddam Hussein to make him do what we expected. We should have reconsidered it. I accept that the Labour Government did what they could to reform it, but if I have time, I shall mention one or two aspects that need further consideration.

Iraq is a modern state, and its resources mean that it could become a powerhouse in the middle east. In that context, the position that people face, especially young people and children, is dreadful.

I want to concentrate on water supply. The Department's policy emphasises water, and one of the few successes of the world summit in Johannesburg was an international agreement on water. It is dreadful to contemplate what might happen post conflict in Iraq.

[Mr. Thomas]

The water supply currently fails to reach the majority of homes, and 65 per cent. of the water that does reach homes is untreated. After air strikes, matters will be even worse.

It was pointed out in an earlier intervention that dual-use material such as electric power generators could be utilised for military and civilian purposes. There is continuing discussion about several hundred small rural-based generators for water supply. Under the current sanctions regime, the UN has not given them the go-ahead.

The Secretary of State referred to the oil-for-food programme. Clearly, the regime uses it as a tool to oppress its people. However, the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that approximately 15 million people in Iraq depend on food aid and the oil-for-food programme. I appreciate that if the Secretary of State is winding up as well as opening the debate, she may have kept some of her powder dry. I hope that she will say more about the preservation of such programmes in a conflict and whether more can be delivered to the people of Iraq.

I want to consider our armed forces' actions in Iraq. If we go to war, we hope that they will act in a humanitarian way as far as that is possible within military constraints. I am especially worried that our forces may be under direct United States control and that weapons that we do not countenance, such as landmines, cluster bombs and depleted uranium may be used. The Geneva conventions provide that

> "any objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population"

must not be targeted and that no military actions should be taken that

> "leave the civilian population with such inadequate food or water as to cause its starvation or force its movement."

I hope that that will be taken into account, not only in this debate, but in other defence debates and any decision to go to war.

I strongly believe that we can avert a humanitarian disaster in Iraq by avoiding war. I accept that the prime responsibility for that rests with Saddam Hussein, but the House and the country also have a responsibility. We must grant more time for the UN inspectors to do their work. We must not jump to conclusions simply because somebody finds a nerve gas suit or a biological or chemical suit. That does not mean that Iraq will use such weapons. We must allow enough time.

We must bear down on Saddam Hussein and the current regime and we must ensure that we go through the United Nations. The Secretary of State always emphasises the UN. I hope that she will give her view on actions without UN approval. My party and I would not approve of that.

We must avoid polluting the UN through browbeating it into going along with conflict in Iraq. Whatever the final decision, we must ensure that the UN is seen to be the international arbiter so that all countries, including Arab countries, continue to have faith in it and do not perceive it as a tool of US policy.

I hope that those comments will be considered not only in the context of humanitarian aid, but in our decision about whether to go to war with Iraq.

5.9 pm

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I welcome this debate on humanitarian contingency plans for Iraq, and I am grateful to the Conservatives for their interest in this critically important area, although in my view that is almost as surprising as Dracula securing a debate on blood transfusions for haemophiliacs. I note that the hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) made a somewhat personal attack on me. What he does not seem to grasp is that my attack on the Conservatives is not personal at all; indeed, I had a meeting this morning with Baroness Chalker, one of the most intelligent and sincere people ever to grace the Conservative Benches.

I am not looking at Conservative Members' personal qualities; I am looking at their record. Eighteen years in office and what did they do? They cut aid to the world's poorest people and linked it to trade. That is the record. It is a shameful legacy, which this Labour Government have consigned to the dustbin of history. I would be very happy to leave it there, if only Tory MPs would stop acting as though they ever did anything useful when it mattered: when they were in power.

Alistair Burt: If that is the hon. Lady's view, perhaps she might enlighten us as to the tone of her conversation with Baroness Chalker this morning.

Ms King: I am an executive member of the newly formed all-party group on Africa, which the hon. Gentleman is very welcome to join. However, he might also want to think about a reconciliation and truth commission within the Tory party, in order to come to terms with its shameful past on this subject.

How urgent are our efforts to prevent blood being spilt, and to minimise any civilian casualties? Our first and foremost aim must obviously be to minimise the loss of human life. For the purposes of the current debate on Iraq, there are four possible causes of loss of life, all of which are more or less interlinked: first, military action; secondly, the development and use of chemical and biological weapons; thirdly, the poverty that faces most developing countries in that region; and fourthly—a particularly lethal cause of loss of life—Saddam Hussein himself.

The latter is not a flippant point. I made the same point during a debate on sanctions in Iraq some years ago, and it was eloquently restated today by my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). The worst infant mortality and malnutrition in Iraq is in areas under Saddam Hussein's control. In northern, Kurdish-controlled areas of Iraq, which face greater sanctions and shortages, loss of life is less. Saddam Hussein kills more Iraqi children than anyone else, but that does not mean we can abdicate our responsibilities to those same children. Saddam Hussein has built and used chemical and biological weapons, but that does not mean we can abdicate our responsibilities towards the prospects for their future use.

The dilemma that we face is that if we permit the development of chemical, biological and possibly nuclear weapons, at some point we are inviting a terrible loss of human life. Yet if we take military action to disarm Iraq and enforce UN resolution 1441, we risk a more immediate loss of life. For this reason, it is my fervent, although perhaps futile, wish that we avoid military action. None the less, the decision rests with Saddam Hussein: it is up to him whether he wishes to do what he has been requested to do by the UN.

So I agree with the Government's actions so far. Threatening Saddam Hussein with military force has been the single most effective thing that we have done in the past 11 years to get him to accept UN authority. And it is UN authority that is at stake. I trust that the UN will be given more time to carry out its work. If military action is taken, humanitarian risks are grave. As we have heard, 16 million people rely on food aid through the oil-for-food programme. That is 60 per cent. of the Iraqi population.

Other humanitarian risks that have been set out include regional factionalism and bloodletting—we have seen terrible examples of that in Afghanistan, post conflict—risks to sanitation facilities; the deliberate or inadvertent use of chemical and biological weapons; and the terrible legacy of land mines and cluster bombs. Will the Secretary of State make representations—perhaps she has already done so—to the Defence Secretary and the Prime Minister to ensure that those types of weapons are not used? Will she also let us know what further humanitarian aid the British Government are making available to Iraqi civilians? It might come as a surprise to people to hear that the British Government are one of the largest donors to Iraq, and that since the Gulf war we have committed nearly £100 million for water, sanitation and basic health provision. We also run a programme to help Iraqi refugees in Iran.

However, the worst-case scenarios facing Iraqi civilians as a result of military action could dwarf the terrible problems that they have faced so far. That is why any military action must take account of humanitarian risks, perhaps in a way that challenges current military thinking. In the past, the vulnerability of the civilian population has not usually been at the top of the military's agenda—but if it is not at the top of the agenda this time, I have no doubt that the military will win the battle but lose the war.

Half of Iraq's population are children under 14. If we do not protect those children, all the military hardware in the world will not protect us from the justifiable anger of the Muslim world—indeed, from the anger of all those who hold sacred the value of human life. This Government are renowned for having developed one of the world's most effective humanitarian programmes. For that reason, we have a responsibility to make every possible effort to ensure that humanitarianism is at the top of the international community's agenda.

5.16 pm

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I shall echo some of the points that have already been made, but I also hope to raise a few issues that have not been raised so far.

This is not the time to debate whether Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction, United Nations approval, or even the importance of a substantive vote in the House—although many people, like me, are mystified by the Prime Minister's reaction to questions about a substantive vote in this place. If George Bush phones the Prime Minister and says, "We need to go to war now"—as he might—surely it is in everyone's interests, including those of the troops, to ensure that the Government and the Prime Minister have heard the views of the House first. The public are asking questions about the military action that will be taken in their name, and the House is not giving them the answers. I hope that that will be a debate for another day.

What is at hand today is something that I believe the people of this country are deeply concerned about, as has been shown by the speeches that hon. Members have already made—something that, in the heat of the military debate, is in danger of being lost. The humanitarian consequences of military strikes in Iraq are nothing short of frightening. A high-impact scenario was suggested in the recent UN report, which said that military action could

> "result in a complete breakdown of state capacities and possibly civil war . . . This will trigger large scale internal and external population movements as well as massive humanitarian needs. Agencies' ability to respond would be severely limited for an extended period."

Before we even think about the potential problems in Iraq after a conflict, it is important to stress the humanitarian situation now, before the first official bomb has been dropped—I understand that bombing in some areas has already started, and is being carried out with increasing regularity. The situation on the ground in Iraq is horrifying.

Last week, I was fortunate enough to meet representatives of Save the Children, and they backed up much of the information that I had already received on this subject. The figures, which many Members have already mentioned, speak for themselves. Malnourishment and diarrhoea mean that Iraq is suffering the fastest increasing child mortality in the world: 10 per cent. of Iraqi children now die before their first birthday. As other Members have said, according to the World Food Programme, 16 million Iraqi people—60 per cent. of the population—are now wholly dependent on food aid. To put that figure in some perspective, the number of people who are now hungry in Iraq is roughly equivalent to the number who are in a similar situation in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Swaziland, Malawi, Mozambique and Lesotho all added together.

Put simply, Iraq is unable to feed its own people, because of drought and the bureaucratic system of food distribution used by the Iraqi state authorities. The food going into Iraq is insufficient, and careful consideration will have to be given to how we shall help the innocent and the starving if military action commences. It is surely without question that any military action would further disrupt that food distribution, and probably stop it altogether. If conflict were to begin, Iraq's neighbours would likely close their borders and the UN oil-for-food programme would effectively end.

However, food is not the only problem. As my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) said, Iraq's basic infrastructure is crumbling, with 50 per cent. of the sewage treatment plants not working. The water and sanitation systems that are left depend on the supply of electricity but, 12 years after the Gulf war, it is estimated that one third of the national power supply is still down.

Iraq is a country in serious poverty. That is one reason why I find it incredible that we might create yet another humanitarian disaster, when the UK and the

[John Barrett]

international community already have to deal with countless other disasters across the globe. A number of speakers have already outlined the situation in Zambia, Malawi, Ethiopia and Eritrea, but we are seriously talking about adding to the list. If military action does take place, that is what will happen. Are not the development budgets of the United States, Europe and Britain stretched enough already? Will they be able to cope with anything more?

The contingency plan of the UN office for the co-ordination of humanitarian affairs admits the financial restraints that already exist. It states:

> "UN agencies have been facing severe funding constraints that are preventing them from reaching even minimum levels of preparedness. As a consequence, the current response capacity of the UN system remains well below the critical requirements established through the inter-agency planning process."

The Secretary of State—for whom I have the utmost respect—does not want there to be civilian casualties. Of course she wants to avoid unnecessary deaths and inflicting yet more suffering on a population already suffering from misery, hunger and disease. I believe the right hon. Lady when she says that the British Government would be there to help people rebuild their lives. However, the Government's good intentions are not enough. We can all remember vividly how the Government said, in 2001, that they would help rebuild Afghanistan when the conflict there was over. They are making efforts to do just that, but the situation in Afghanistan is far from being a good-news story. Much of the country has reverted to the status that it occupied before the campaign against terrorism. Most of the country outside Kabul is under the control of warlords, and poppies that will become heroin on our streets are still being grown in the fields. Afghanistan is far from being a rebuilt nation.

Last week, the Select Committee on International Development, of which I am a member, published a report on the reconstruction of Afghanistan. In paragraph 86, it stated:

> "Afghanistan is a completely wrecked land, with no institutions that work, no legitimate economy, no legitimate economy, no order of security and serious capacity shortfalls within Government."

The report showed that there are still immense problems in Afghanistan. Before the Prime Minister and the Government consider their next military campaign, they must not forget that there is unfinished business from the previous campaign.

I have seen no evidence to convince me that this country should go to war with Iraq. I can understand that, under certain circumstances, such action may have to be taken, but my view today is that war is not desirable, necessary nor inevitable. In my relatively short time as a Member of Parliament, more of my constituents have contacted me about Iraq than about any other issue. I do not take it to be a wholly representative sample, but I have not yet received a single letter, or spoken to one person in Edinburgh, West who believes that this country should be involved in military action at this time. Other hon. Members have told the House on a number of occasions of similar experiences, and I believe that that is very significant.

I hope that the Government accept that a great deal more work will have to be done to convince a large number of hon. Members, and I believe the resounding majority of people in this country, that force should be used in their name, especially given the major impact that such force would undoubtedly have on ordinary innocent Iraqi civilians—on men and women, on young and old, but mostly on children.

I hope that we do not go to war. Unfortunately, I fear that the decision may have been taken already. The humanitarian consequences of war in Iraq would last a generation. Today in Vietnam, children are still being born deformed or stillborn, without palates or chins, as a result of the effects of the agent orange dioxin—a weapon of mass destruction if ever there was one. If military action is taken, I hope that the UK Government will live up to their promise to make every effort to minimise civilian casualties and to help the people who definitely do not hold chemical weapons, pose any threat to this country or deserve further misery, but who will undoubtedly suffer most should military action be taken.

5.24 pm

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): I, too, welcome the opportunity to debate Iraq and the possibility of war. I share with my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) a sense of stupefaction at the Conservative amendment on the Order Paper—

Mr. Alan Duncan: It's the motion.

Glenda Jackson: The motion on the Order Paper.

I find it difficult to believe that the Conservative party, which spent 20 years behaving as though there were no such thing as a humanitarian act either at home or abroad, should choose to use the possibility of a war—a war in which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) pointed out, thousands on thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians will probably lose their lives—to make party political points.

Attempting to condemn my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is nothing less than shameful—albeit hardly surprising. The Conservative party when in government reduced aid year on year. We have heard much from Conservative Members of their concern about possible humanitarian damage, the special needs of children and the appalling situation for refugees if they flee across borders. They have asked my right hon. Friend what plans she has to ensure that the worst humanitarian catastrophe does not take place. Yet one of their number referred to refugees who are still in camps in Jordan following the Kuwait war. If memory serves me correctly, the Conservatives were in office for six years after that; why did they not have a humanitarian plan?

We also heard much concern about the possibility of refugees escaping from the war and having to cross minefields. I am prepared to bet a sizeable amount of money that the mines were sold by the Conservative Government who year after year spent public money to advertise and encourage the sale of British weapons to developing nations at fairs that British citizens were not allowed to attend even as they paid for them.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady referred to my remarks about Jordan and refugees. I asked a junior Foreign

Office Minister about that this morning, and the refugees still in Jordan have in fact been assimilated into Jordanian society rather than remaining in refugee camps. I thought it would be helpful to make the hon. Lady aware of that.

Glenda Jackson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for setting his own record straight. I understand that the refugees in Iran have not been assimilated.

I have made my position abundantly clear on the possibility of war with Iraq, and I will continue to do so. One argument advanced by the Conservative party today for war on Saddam Hussein was the obvious one about weapons of mass destruction. Another was his appalling human rights record. I was interested to hear that argument from a party that did nothing about—indeed, encouraged British businesses to invest in—Burma, whose regime was one of the most appalling in the world. I was touched by the Conservatives' concern that Iraqi oil must be the preserve of Iraqi people. They did not have the same attitude towards Nigeria or Burma. It is nice to know that they may be beginning to change, but I will always have my doubts about that, and I regret to say that my suspicions have been confirmed this afternoon.

It was left to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford and other Members on the Labour Benches to set out clearly, using well-informed and well-researched evidence, the absolute disaster that a war on Iraq would be for the innocent civilians of Iraq. There is no guarantee that any military action would kill or even capture Saddam Hussein.

It is absurd to persist in the blithe belief that, at the end of a war that would undoubtedly be won by the most powerful nation in the world, a marvellous democratic Iraqi Government would be waiting in the wings, ready to slot into place. Reference has already been made to the international community keeping faith on its promises to Afghanistan. It is doubtful—or at least extremely debatable—that the international community will stay in Iraq for the length of time necessary to bring about democratic government that will have the support and loyalty of the Iraqi people.

We do not have the right to engage in what will clearly be murder, and which will leave the most terrible legacy for generations of Iraqi civilians, without hard, verifiable evidence not only that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction but that he is able to deliver them against the United Kingdom, which is an absurd idea. Even more absurd is the idea that he could actually deliver them against the mainland of the United States.

Both our Government and the American Administration are floating the idea that a further reason for the removal of Saddam Hussein is that he may have—they are beginning to move away from "he has"—clear links with Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. However, before we move to an actual shooting war, evidence for that should be presented not only to the House, the American Senate and the peoples of the world but also to the United Nations.

I would dispute whether it was exclusively the threat of violence and attack that got the UN weapons inspectors back into Iraq, but even if one accepts that, they are there. What do the inspectors ask for? They ask for more time. This morning, I heard an interview on the radio with the UN inspector with responsibility for examining the possibility that there are nuclear weapons in Iraq or the capacity to create a nuclear programme. He was categorical: the inspectors need at least five more months. Hans Blix has also asked for more time. That time should be given to the UN inspectors, and our Government and the American Administration should stop hiding behind the excuse that it is all up to Saddam Hussein. It is up to the United Nations; it should be the will of the United Nations.

Resolution 1441 was passed unanimously. That should inform what happens over the next few months. However, the inspectors will not be afforded the time they need and I freely admit to cynicism when I say that that will not be because there are weapons of mass destruction nor because everyone is so outraged at that evil dictator, but because there is a window of opportunity for troops. If troops are not on the ground by the end of February, the weather will become infinitely too hot for them to fight effectively in protective clothing. That seems to be the trigger.

A few moments ago I was standing in the Corridor—there was no one there but me. How dare we sit in this calm, quiet, panelled Chamber and have the audacity to make decisions that will be death for people thousands of miles away? We do not know them; they do not know us. We cannot take such actions without taking every opportunity and every diplomatic avenue to prevent a war.

5.33 pm

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): I apologise to the House if I appear slightly bleary-eyed this evening. I stepped off a plane from the United States only this morning, having sat in the Security Council in New York on Monday and having spent Tuesday and Wednesday in Washington seeing members of the Administration. They do not have a gung-ho attitude; there is serious consideration of what might unfold, especially in relation to the humanitarian matters to which our motion is devoted. I am sorry that some speakers in the debate have not, in everything that they said, devoted themselves to those matters.

I think that we can see the most likely course of events. I hope that there will be a second resolution—I think that there will. We shall see Secretary of State Colin Powell appear before the Security Council on 5 February. We will have a further statement from inspector Hans Blix on 14 February.

War looks more likely than not and no one in all conscience can ever relish the prospect of war, but we are duty bound to assess what it would entail and plan for its consequences. That is exactly what the motion before the House attempts to do.

Some of the accusations levelled against us have been out of place, distasteful and unworthy of many of those who have made them—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Glenda Jackson) is at it again.

Glenda Jackson: My only rider to the hon. Gentleman's statement was, "Invariably factual."

Mr. Duncan: My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) has been asking questions

[Mr. Duncan]

about the humanitarian consequences of any war for a long time. She has done so in a spirit of constructiveness and in a responsible manner, not in a mood of point-scoring or petty politics, as some people have said. There is no better evidence of her attitude to the subject than her letter to the Secretary of State of 4 December. It was a well-reasoned and thoughtful letter, asking some serious and sensible questions of the right hon. Lady. I shall instance a few:

> "what will happen to the Oil for Food Programme . . . How effective are Iraqi aid agencies?"—

and what happens if UN personnel have to leave the country?

> "Has consideration been given to protective clothing . . . What discussions have you had with your counterparts in the surrounding states",

and what about the "pre-positioning" of supplies and people? What medicines and vaccines are there, what might be needed, and are there sufficient stocks? What liaison is there between civil and military agencies—a very important point, in particular in the early stages of anything that might happen, and,

> "What role does the Government envisage for the BBC Arabic Service?"

No one can say that that is petty point scoring. No one can say that it is irresponsible. Those were grown-up, sensible and dutiful questions put by the Opposition to the Secretary of State.

What did we get back? Five lines, which read:

> "Thank you for your letter of 4 December about Iraq. I am glad you share my concern for the Iraqi people."—

that looked like a little pat on the head to me.

> "My Department is looking at all eventualities, and talking to relevant actors across the UK government and internationally. We are also in regular contact with the NGOs we already fund in Iraq. We are planning for a wide range of humanitarian contingencies."

That was that.

I simply do not understand the Secretary of State's petulance. There is no need for it. We have set aside all party consideration in being largely supportive of the Prime Minister and of the Government of which the right hon. Lady is a part—*[Laughter].* I do not understand how the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) can laugh. Her attitude today has been lamentable.

A similarly constructive attitude from the Secretary of State to our legitimate inquiries about humanitarian concerns would have been appreciated and will yet be appreciated in the remaining minutes of this debate. The right hon. Lady is to speak for a second time and will have the opportunity to answer the questions that she did not answer before, which I will deal with in a minute. First, I will deal with some of the interventions.

The hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate seems to have done a runner, but she intervened early in my hon. Friend's speech, as did the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond)—I am afraid with another party political point, about asylum. The whole point about all that might happen in Iraq is not that it might become easier to escape persecution by coming to Britain, but that those who are born and live in Iraq might yet escape persecution by staying where they are. That is what all this is about.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park, who spoke for the Liberal Democrats, essentially has this policy on Iraq: let them stew. She is in favour of doing nothing. She adopts a totally illogical position. She does not want sanctions, but she expects containment. She says that containment is working, but she wants to drop sanctions. It is an utterly illogical position behind which there is no cogent thesis.

Dr. Tonge: I do not remember at any stage of my speech saying that containment was working. I do not think I even mentioned it.

Mr. Duncan: The hon. Lady wants sanctions to be dropped. How does she think she would contain Saddam Hussein if that happened?

In the minutes left, we in the House have a crucial opportunity to give the Secretary of State a second chance to inform us, which she failed to do earlier. In many respects, we have had a good debate. We have heard 12 contributions. My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir Brian Mawhinney) drew attention in particular to the plight of children. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Gregory Barker) expressed his exasperation—I share his view—at the Secretary of State's sins of omission, and I hope that she can rectify them in a moment. My hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) made an excellent and thoughtful contribution; she added to our deliberations.

The Secretary of State spoke only of the risks. Let me return to what she said. Quite reasonably, she listed some of the risks that Iraq will face: ethnic fighting; the removal of electrical power, which will affect water and sanitation; the burning of oil wells; the disruption of the oil-for-food programme; and biological and chemical contamination. All of that is valid stuff. It says something about her analysis, but absolutely nothing about her proposed course of action. That is what the debate is about, and it is what we call for in our motion.

When I intervened on the Secretary of State, she said that she would give us some details—but she did not. She gave us none at all. We have heard nothing whatever about her contingency plans, so let me try to set the parameters in which, I hope, she will be able to give us at least some information. There are some aspects of Iraq that give it good prospects for long-term recovery. There is a highly educated and intelligent population—the legacy, to an extent, of what was there before Saddam Hussein.

There is secular government, albeit horrendous. Again, to an extent that is an advantage. There is a chance that, if the integrity of the state can be maintained, there will not be the ethnic fighting that the right hon. Lady suggested might be a risk. Crucially, unlike Afghanistan, Iraq will be able to benefit—sooner, rather than later—from the revenues that it can earn from oil, which can play a significant part in its reconstruction.

Let us consider the shorter-term humanitarian needs: food and clothing suitable for the climate and the people and, crucially, water. If electricity has gone and people are moving, they will have no water. So stockpiles of water, particularly in the growing heat, will be absolutely crucial to the basic survival of the people who are bound to be displaced by any conflict. As soon as water goes and sanitation goes, there is the risk of cholera and other diseases, so there is an immediate need for vaccines of all sorts, for which adequate preparation can readily be made and admitted to the House without in any way compromising the military secrets that the right hon. Lady thinks compel her to some kind of Trappist vow.

There will be the movement of people. We hope that there will not be massive movements of people across borders. We hope that, at worst, there will be internally displaced people, who perhaps can be helped more readily, given the existing aid structures in Iraq. In the short-term, the logistical needs of any kind of aid will probably rely on military co-operation to start with, rather than on civil personnel delivering all the aid. It is probably true—in some ways, I hope it is—that many people in Iraq, fearing what is coming, may have stockpiled up to a month's supply of food for their own use. That will provide them with a necessary and crucial breather for their survival if there is conflict.

What I really object to is the fact that, despite the terms of our motion and the requests that we made in intervening on the Secretary of State, we have heard nothing from her about her plans. She could not even give us a basic list of those to whom she is talking. She could not, even in basic conceptual terms, address the sort of action that might be needed. Such an approach does not give away any secrets. If those things are not happening, it is a scandal. If they are happening, there is no reason not to tell the House today.

The United States is devoting extensive resources to planning for humanitarian aid, with a professionalism and purpose that the right hon. Lady seems unwilling to replicate or even to discuss. I find the right hon. Lady's attitude today absolutely bewildering. My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden has been consistent, constructive and even rather dogged in asking her to make a statement and to explain her plans. We are grown up enough to know that she would rather not give certain details in public. She could even have offered some kind of private briefing for my hon. Friend, but she has not even had the basic courtesy to do that, even within the restricted criteria that we may accept need to govern what she says. All that we have done is ask for some basic information about the Government's plans for humanitarian aid to what may be a war-riven country.

Glenda Jackson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Duncan: No.

Instead, all that has happened is that the Secretary of State has got ratty. We could be exchanging all sorts of ideas and suggestions, each of which might save lives. All that we have had from her, however, is a bizarre and peculiar reaction. I was looking forward, in the spirit in which the Opposition have approached this difficult moral issue, to congratulating her on her vision, commitment and sincerity, as I have done previously, and as I have regularly congratulated the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) on everything that she has done in the middle east and elsewhere. Given that all we have witnessed today is apparent confusion, dereliction and seeming lack of grip, we must demand better.

Let me try again, in the minute remaining, to ask the Secretary of State, in a spirit of genuine co-operation, what she plans to do to help with the humanitarian needs of Iraq should there be some kind of military conflict. Will she tell us a little about her budget; her priorities; who her partners will be, internationally and in Iraq; how her co-operation will work with the armed forces, and how responsibilities will be shared with other agencies? Will she give us a clue? If she does so, we will give credit where credit is due. If all we get is continuing silence and obfuscation, she will have to answer charges of negligence and disarray.

5.47 pm

Clare Short: I asked at the beginning of the debate for permission to wind up, as my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is at her mother-in-law's funeral. I ask you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for that permission again.

After that pompous, smug and self-satisfied speech, let me say that I now understand what the Tory party is trying to say—*[Interruption.]* I am trying to speak, and already the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) is heckling from a sedentary position. The Tory party is saying, "We welcome war, let us go to it. What are your plans to tidy up afterwards?" They do not appear to understand a number of things that I have tried to explain to them.

First, it has been difficult to get all the parts of the international system that must prepare—*[Interruption.]* The Tories are heckling again, and they pretend that they are concerned about these matters. It has been difficult to get all those parts to prepare for all the different contingencies, of which there are many—it is not just a question of war or no war, and action to plan for war that will have certain inevitable consequences.

It is a question of how the inspectors perform, whether there will be military action and what kind of military action it will be—all of this will relate to the situation in the middle east—and what kind of humanitarian consequences might flow. Much of what needs to be prepared must be lined up against the military contingencies, which it has been difficult to get the international system to talk about. Even when it will do so, I am not in a position to report to the House the details of all those discussions. Similarly, the UN system, which is responsible to its members, most of whom do not want to foresee military action in Iraq, has had difficulty getting started on its preparations. Then it started, but it did not want to make public statements about those preparations, because of the amount of seething anxiety across the international system, of which perhaps those Members who are so happy to go to war are unaware—*[Interruption.]*

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. It is clear that the Secretary of State is not giving way.

Clare Short: I have taken a lot of false, rude, ignorant and silly abuse. I should like to make some progress and

[Clare Short]

educate Conservative Members because they are not thinking through all the agonising possibilities. We have to think through the ways in which we can minimise the suffering of the people of Iraq in terms of the reality of the international system in which we have to work. In addition, the neighbouring countries have not been willing to talk openly about the prospects of war or military or humanitarian preparations. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members may heckle, but that is the reality.

Conservative Members seem to think that it is possible to plan to have a war in which the US would be overwhelmingly the largest player and the UK a relatively small player, and for my Department to sit on the sidelines putting in place plans for the humanitarian contingencies so that everyone in Iraq is cared for properly. The world does not work like that. The UK is 5 per cent. of the international humanitarian system. The right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir Brian Mawhinney) asked me to consider becoming a tsar for children. I would be delighted to rage into Iraq to look after its children and to leave the multilateral system to one side, but the scale and complexity of the crisis, and the possibility of a post-war situation, mean that it is not possible to act like that. The value of the debate is to stress that it is impossible to make military plans without thinking of the humanitarian consequences.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Tell us about it.

Clare Short: I told the hon. Gentleman about it in my introductory remarks, but because the Conservative party is so intent on war and the humanitarianism of tidying up afterwards—

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is the third time that the right hon. Lady has perpetrated that slander against the party of which I am proud to be a member. Many hon. Members, such as myself, are gravely doubtful of the leadership provided by the Prime Minister on the matter and we want to know what the right hon. Lady is doing to mop up the mess that may be created.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I remind the hon. Gentleman that that is not a point of order for the Chair, but a point for debate.

Clare Short: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman has just come into the Chamber and has not been listening to the debate. Funnily enough, he just confirmed my point. He wanted to know what I am doing to mop up the mess. That is my very point. We cannot approach the crisis in that way. It does not work like that. We need to think of all the possible contingencies and plan to minimise any harm to the people of Iraq. For example, if chemical and biological weapons are used, the military will have to take action to protect the people, but Conservative Members do not seem to be interested in those realities. I am sure, however, that other hon. Members and those who read the debate will be capable of thinking through the consequences.

Mrs. Gillan: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Clare Short: No, I am sorry.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge), for whom I have much affection and respect, demonstrated the luxury of being a Liberal Democrat. She wanted to withdraw sanctions and to have no military action in the middle east because any war would be a human catastrophe. The UN imposed sanctions after Iraq invaded Kuwait. They were meant to be for a brief period. Iraq had chemical, biological and nuclear capacity. The UN put in its inspectors and the sanctions were to be lifted after they disarmed the weaponry. We have worked to refine and limit the sanctions. Surely no one in a responsible world would propose walking away and allowing Saddam Hussein to go on with developing his weapons of mass destruction and terrorising his people. Life is just not as easy as that.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) that, despite some of the noises off, it is valuable to have a debate that considers military possibilities alongside humanitarian consequences. Such a debate, which is overdue, might lead to refinement of the planning of some of the military options. He asked, "Should we go in and hammer these people?" The answer is no. If military action is necessary to maintain the authority of the UN to deal with the problem, we should think about how it can be refined so that the people of Iraq are properly cared for and any harm to them is minimised. Some of that work is going on and needs to be taken further.

I have responded to the points of the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire. I assure him that we shall do all in our power to minimise the suffering of the people. It is not possible to minimise the suffering of children without minimising the suffering of civilians, of their mothers and their families. If we can have a more sophisticated debate about military options and how to minimise harm to the people of Iraq, we can probably minimise some of that harm and bring about the recovery much more quickly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) used the words, "If we carpet bomb". There must be no carpet bombing. She will remember the Gulf war. I did not resign from our Front Bench when the Gulf war took place. It was my desire to talk about the kind of military action, the unnecessary bombardment and suffering for the people of Iraq, which was not permitted, that led me to resign. There is a speech on the record that spells that out and demonstrates to some Opposition Members that the suggestions that they have been making are false.

As for the poor hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Gregory Barker), he revealed some of the motivations of his party and his ignorance and silliness. His speech was beneath contempt and was not worth commenting on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) has campaigned long and hard for the bringing to justice of Saddam Hussein. That is a very useful campaign. I think that the most optimistic scenario is enough time, a united international community, progress in the Middle East, a crumbling of the regime, minimal military action and Saddam Hussein brought to justice. That is not ruled out. If we examine some of the options, we shall see that we could get there and then minimise the suffering of the people.

The hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) asked a question about the Kuwaiti border—*[Interruption]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Lady is responding to questions from hon. Members. Quiet would be appreciated.

Clare Short: I do not know the answer to the hon. Gentleman's question, but I shall make sure that it is provided if it is available and if the Ministry of Defence is willing to give it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, North (Julie Morgan) asked about refugees going into mined areas. Again I make the point that we must look at all the contingencies, but we must try to avoid massive movements of refugees, because that would mean terrible bombardment, and possible use of chemical and biological weapons. Those contingencies are being thought through by UNHCR. Another hon. Member asked whether it dealt with internally displaced people, and the answer is that it does. The contingency plans are being made, but let us try to ensure that mass movements of population are not caused, because that would mean a terrible situation inside Iraq.

I would tell the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) that we certainly will not repeat the disaster that was Rwanda and the handling of the humanitarian situation there. There have been major improvements in the capacity of the international system since then.

My reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) is "absolutely". The weapons inspectors are back in because there was a willingness to use military action to back up the authority of the UN. We might not like it, but that is the truth. My view is that we should continue with that determination, but through the UN, to minimise humanitarian harm and as speedily as possible reconstruct Iraq. The Arab world is working on the prospect of getting Saddam Hussein removed rather than having a war. All these options should be explored.

David Maclean *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House observes the dire humanitarian situation in Iraq resulting from Saddam Hussein's misrule and Iraqi obstruction of humanitarian agencies; notes that more than ten per cent. of all Iraqi children die before their fifth birthday, and that a quarter of children under five are chronically malnourished; further notes the high dependency of Iraqis on Oil for Food programmes; deplores the continued Iraqi disruption of the Oil for Food programme; recognises the serious threat posed by Iraq's weapons of mass destruction; understands that military action may follow Iraq's continued violation of its international obligation to disarm and destroy those weapons of mass destruction, contrary to UN Resolution 1441; urges the Secretary of State for International Development to work with the international community urgently to draw up a comprehensive humanitarian strategy for assisting the people of Iraq in the event of war; further urges Her Majesty's Government to ensure that there is close co-operation between the military campaign and the aid effort; and calls on the Secretary of State for International Development to keep Parliament fully informed of the humanitarian situation in Iraq.

DEREGULATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 18(1)(a)(Consideration of draft deregulation orders),

CREDIT UNIONS

That the draft Regulatory Reform (Credit Unions) Order 2002, which was laid before this House on 16th January, be approved.—*[Mr. Ainger.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 18(1)(a)(Consideration of draft deregulation orders),

ASSURED PERIODIC TENANCIES

That the draft Regulatory Reform (Assured Periodic Tenancies) (Rent Increases) Order 2003, which was laid before this House on 13th January, be approved.—*[Mr. Ainger.]*

Question agreed to.

NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Orders Nos. 115 (Northern Ireland Grand Committee (delegated legislation) and 116 (Northern Ireland Grand Committee (sittings)),

That—

(1) the draft Budget (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 be referred to the Northern Ireland Grand Committee; and

(2) the Committee shall consider the instrument referred to it under paragraph (1) above at its meeting on Thursday 6th February.—*[Mr. Ainger.]*

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Tuesday 4th February, the Speaker shall put the questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motions in the name of Mr Robin Cook relating to the options on the composition of the House of Lords not later than Five o'clock; pursuant to the recommendation of the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform in its First Report (House of Commons Paper No. 171), Questions on later Motions may be put notwithstanding any decision of the House on earlier Motions; the Questions may be decided after the moment of interruption, and the Orders of the House of 28th June 2001 and 29th October 2002 relating to deferred Divisions shall not apply.—*[Mr. Ainger.]*

(66) PETITIONS

Coniston Hotel

6.1 pm

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): I wish to present a petition from Robert Wrigley and over 5,000 residents of Sittingbourne in Kent.

The petition states:

> The Coniston Hotel is a valuable and important resource for the residents of Sittingbourne and provides facilities that are unable to be matched by any other venue within the town.
>
> The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons call on the Home Office to urgently reverse the decision to use the Coniston Hotel as a Centre for Asylum Seekers.
>
> And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Chechnya

6.2 pm

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I wish to present a petition on behalf of Anthea West of Norreys Avenue, Wokingham and nearly 5,000 signatories, principally from the Berkshire area, which was collected by Amnesty International Reading group.

The petition states:

> The UK has been silent in the face of wide scale serious human rights violations in the Republic of Chechnya; that forces of the Russian Federation are reportedly continuing to commit these crimes.
>
> The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Prime Minister to publicly condemn, and call for an end to, all human rights violations in the Republic of Chechnya; to make it clear that human rights violations may not be perpetrated and justified under the pretext of an international "war against terrorism"; to urge the Russian authorities both to set up impartial, comprehensive investigations into those violations and to ensure that those guilty of committing them be brought to trial and sentenced appropriately.
>
> And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Council Tax (Dorset)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Ainger.]*

6.3 pm

Mrs. Annette L. Brooke (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): My constituency of Mid-Dorset and North Poole is covered by four principal councils—Poole unitary authority, Dorset county council, Purbeck district council and East Dorset district council. I hope that the Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) will bear with me when I mention those different councils.

I should make it clear at the outset that I am a Poole councillor. All of my constituency is served by Dorset police authority. I called for this debate because I have received a large number of representations from my constituents, who do not know how they will cope with predicted rises in their council tax. Those representations are largely from pensioners, but the points that I am going to make apply equally to people on fixed or low incomes, particularly pensioners and others who just miss qualifying for benefits.

I shall quote from some typical letters, one of which says:

> "It is truly outrageous, the proposed increase in council tax, it is indeed bad enough for people earning a living wage but to aged pensioners on a low and fixed pension, it is crippling and a cause of great concern. A great many of us served this country well in 6 long years of war and today we are treated as 2nd and 3rd class citizens, central government and local government impose these extreme hardships on the most vulnerable, without any concern or remorse."

Another correspondent writes:

> "You will have noticed that a lot of us are lone pensioners, some with just one single state pension. I live in a modest flat. I have to pay insurance, telephone, half bus fare travel, food, clothes, council tax at £70 per month, flat maintenance of £70 per quarter, and so on—all of this out of £75.50 per week."

I am sure that the Minister will tell me by how much the Government have increased pensions, as well as introducing the minimum income guarantee and the winter fuel allowance, but pensions are the same across the whole country, in contrast to levels of council tax and percentage increases in council tax, as I shall demonstrate.

More than 26 per cent. of Dorset's residents are pensioners, and even in Poole, where there is new development, 23 per cent. of the population are pensioners. Yes, there are some pensioners who might be regarded as affluent, but the vast majority are not, and even those who have private pension schemes are likely to have lost income with the fall in the stock market and its knock-on effects on pensions. Dorset and Poole have relatively low-wage economies, which means that local people are not likely to receive large additional pensions.

I recently asked some parliamentary questions and established that the real increase in the state pension since 1996 equates to 7 per cent. I also established that percentage increases in council tax in real terms over the same period varied from a reduction of 20 per cent. in Wandsworth to a rise of 66 per cent. in Brent. The percentage increases in real terms over the same period for the billing authorities in my constituency are 37 per cent. in Poole, 49 per cent. in East Dorset and 54 per cent. in Purbeck. It is easy for Ministers to suggest that the increases are all the fault of local councils, but the truth is that it is due to a combination of factors, and the largest influences by far are the level of Government grants and Government requirements on local councils. That is taxation by postcode, determined primarily in Whitehall.

Wandsworth's band D council tax this year is £403 and Brent's is £878, and I suspect that pensioners get free bus travel in both those places. In Poole, it is £936. I am proud that in Lib-Dem Poole, people get more for less, taking account of the local influences. In East Dorset the figure is £1,045 and in Purbeck £1,023. I could choose billing authorities' increases and actual council tax in different parts of the country to prove almost anything that I set out to prove. As a further example, in Trafford there has been a 19 per cent. increase since 1996, and band D tax is £817. In Westminster, where there has been a 30 per cent. increase, the band D tax is £445.

A good tax ought to be easy to understand. It is impossible for people to understand the variations that exist. A good tax should also be related to ability to pay, and that is clearly not the case. A real increase in pensions of 7 per cent. from 1996 to date against the best case in Dorset—that is, Poole—where there has been a 37 per cent. real increase in council tax over the same period, is clearly placing a huge burden on pensioners and others on fixed incomes.

The Government, as the Minister well knows, are currently consulting on a new financial formula, and so far, right across Dorset, the application of the formula has brought forth from the various councils predictions of even larger increases. I am aware that the county council is considering a 16 per cent. increase and that Poole is considering 13 to 14 per cent. Dorset police authority is proposing a 20 per cent. increase in its part of the council tax just to stand still.

How does that compare with the increase in the state pension? That, I believe, will be increased by a massive 2.58 per cent. in April—that is, £1.95 per week for a single pensioner. The quality of life for pensioners in Dorset is being further attacked in the coming year. People are frightened and do not feel that they can or will take more of this medicine. Some of my constituents have told me that they want to march on Parliament to express their views.

I know that my local council has agonised over expenditure and endeavoured to make £3 million-worth of cuts, which is a great deal for a small unitary authority, but as education and social services make up the largest part of the budget, cuts are difficult to make without hitting the vulnerable any more, depriving our already poorly funded schools and possibly even incurring the wrath of the Secretary of State for Education and Skills by not passporting all the funds as required. Representatives of both Dorset and Poole councils have met Ministers to put their case, but I fear that their pleas have fallen on deaf ears. That is why I am pleased to have this opportunity to explain to the Minister how actions in Westminster are affecting my constituents.

The past was bad enough for pensioners in my constituency, but the Minister could take action for the future. I should like to make three points about that. Will the anomaly in the new formula, which is adversely affecting all the councils in Dorset, be looked at prior to the final announcement on the financial settlement? Our councils have lost out on the resource equalisation aspect of the new formula, but have received no help from the area cost adjustment.

The anomaly appears to occur because Dorset and Poole authorities have high house prices but relatively low wages. A recent survey put Poole at No. 14 in the list of places that are most expensive to buy a home in comparison with average wages. The gap is growing and putting more and more pressure on the recruitment of staff for essential services such as teaching and social services. Council wage costs are the same as elsewhere, if not higher. The situation is similar for Dorset: average house prices are slightly lower, but average wages are also lower. Therefore, among the shire counties, Dorset is the second highest ranked in terms of the number of hours worked to buy an average house.

It would help if the Government were prepared to moderate the effect of the resource equalisation and allow councils in Dorset to benefit from the area cost adjustment. That would mean taking on board house prices. I know that we have made that plea before, but it is so important to many people. I fear that the Minister is likely to say, "You are protected by the floors", but that fills me with even greater dread, as it would appear that things will just get worse in future years. There is also uncertainty because we do not know how long the Minister anticipates that ceilings and floors will exist.

Secondly, given the burden on pensioners throughout the country under this absurd system—I do not think that anybody could describe all the different council taxes that are quite unrelated to the level of services provided in any other way—will the Minister consult his colleagues and, if there is no more money in the local government financial settlement, consider some additional support for pensioners?

Thirdly, in the longer term, surely a new local taxation system should be considered, so that taxation is related to ability to pay. I suggest a local income tax as the answer. There would always need to be some equalisation by central Government and a centralised financial settlement, but a local income tax, as recommended by the Layfield committee way back in 1974, which I am sure the Minister will not recall, would allow local decision making and make councils more accountable to their electorate.

There is a blame culture surrounding the council tax. The ruling party on a council is likely to identify the role of the Government in determining council tax as the prime reason behind the high percentage increase. The opposition parties often try to put the whole blame on the ruling party. That is the basis of many elections; it is ridiculous and not good for local democracy.

I have no objection to taxes varying by postcode as long as there is clear and accountable decision making, which, frankly, there is not at the moment. Finally, taxes need to be related to ability to pay. Otherwise, we need some more protection to be put into the system.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. She is to be

[Mr. Christopher Chope]

congratulated on securing the Adjournment debate in the ballot. Almost every hon. Member representing a Dorset constituency has been trying to secure such an opportunity.

Does the hon. Lady share my concern about what happened yesterday when I raised the issue under discussion with the Minister for Local Government and the Regions? He said that the prospect of a 19 or 20 per cent. council tax increase in Dorset had nothing to do with the Government and that it was all the fault of the county council. Was that not absurd? Does she agree that it is a big problem that the Government seem to think that the value of one's house is a proxy for one's ability to pay council tax, when it manifestly is not?

Mrs. Brooke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I heard part of the answer to which he refers, which emphasises the point that I have been making: there is a blame culture, which does nobody any good. It is clear that council tax forms far less than a third of the amount that pays for local services. When there is a shortage of funds, the leverage or gearing effect puts extra pressure on council tax. I repeat that my colleagues way back in Poole are having sleepless nights while deciding whether to cut social services—the most obvious area in which to make cuts because of the amounts that are spent and as there are fewer restrictions than apply to education—or to increase council tax. In both cases, it is the vulnerable who will be hurt, which fills me with great horror. At the end of the day, the decision will result in high council tax increases for pensioners and others.

I shall conclude by drawing those points together, as I want to give the Minister plenty of time to provide a full explanation to me and to the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope). I ask him to ensure that we can go back to the people who visit our surgeries and who are writing letters and give them the Government's answer. Will he give serious consideration to the three points that I have made: the formula; something to help pensioners; and, finally, the suggestion that the Government must surely make some changes to this absurd system in the long term?

6.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Christopher Leslie): May I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mrs. Brooke) on securing this debate? Her honourable colleague on the Back Benches, the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope), was right to say that many Members have been trying hard to secure a debate on the local government finance settlement. We will have more general opportunities for other Members to discuss the matter, but the hon. Lady has done very well to secure this debate.

In my short time as a Minister with responsibility for local government, I have received representations from almost all hon. Members regarding how much grant goes from the Government to local authorities. Very rarely have I ever heard any hon. Member say that they are delighted and ecstatic about the grants that they get, even though, in some circumstances, the increases go into double figures. Every year, local and national newspapers are full of stories forecasting doom and gloom about high council tax increases. Sadly, this year is no exception. However, I believe that when one considers the settlement that we have managed to put in place and the extra resources that we have found for local government—an issue to which I shall return in a moment—one sees that there can be very few excuses for excessive council tax rises, especially this year.

I shall try to address the hon. Lady's three points in particular, but it may be helpful if first I give a quick background to the council tax system and the local government finance arrangements. Decisions rest with the councils and councillors, and it is for the local authorities in Dorset to decide how much council tax local people should pay. The Government do not say at what level council tax should be set or what money should be spent on. Decisions about council tax levels are for individual local authorities; and accountability is the key. Local authorities are answerable to their local electorate about the council tax rate, and we believe that they should take into consideration the views of local taxpayers. Elected councillors—I understand that the hon. Lady is one herself—have a responsibility and accountability in that regard.

Mrs. Brooke: Contributions from central Government form the greatest portion of the money that goes towards local services. Given that the Government require local authorities to provide a good standard of services, how can local councils have total control over the level at which they set the council tax? Dorset was classed as very good in its comprehensive performance assessment, and Poole, a small unitary authority, was classed as good, so we are talking about efficient councils that have scored highly throughout every test. If the majority of funding comes from central Government, how can the local authority be the sole determinant?

Mr. Leslie: I was about to say that it is true that councils' resources come not only from council tax, but from central Government grant that is allocated to them. All elected councillors face a series of difficult decisions, not only in prioritising where that money should go, but in setting the level of council tax year on year, and we carefully consider the representations that we receive. Ultimately, it is not rocket science. We have a finite pot of money, and we have to apply a formula. It is the best and fairest way of distributing grant to all authorities across the country, and that system should continue. We have reformed the formula system, which has led to improvements, but I understand that it affects different authorities in different ways.

Mr. Chope: The Minister is being a bit disingenuous. The Government make assumptions about the presumed level of council tax that will flow as a result of the settlement. Is it not correct that the assumed council tax is rising from £769 this year to £1,001 next year—an increase of 30 per cent. on the Government's own assumptions?

Mr. Leslie: There are various statistical assumptions about council tax. I shall come to that when we discuss the part of the formula known as resource equalisation.

We believe that we have put in place a formula for distributing grant that will ensure a fair distribution between authorities. It is necessarily detailed, but we have been able to simplify the structure, which is now based on a basic level of funding per head, with top-ups for various factors such as deprivation, high labour costs and scarcity.

The settlement across the country is a good one. We have been able to ensure that every single authority is getting more money—not only that, but an increase above the cost of living and above inflation. It is important to put that on the record. Since this Administration came to power, there has been a 25 per cent. real-terms increase in money to local authorities. That compares very favourably with the cuts that took place under the previous Administration.

We have set up the system known as floors and ceilings to temper some of the excessive data changes in some authorities—lost population, for example. For some local authorities that have responsibility for providing education and social services, such as Dorset and Poole, the floor is 3.5 per cent. and the ceiling is 8 per cent. For all other authorities, the floor guarantee is 3 per cent.

We shall announce the final settlement figures next week. Dorset county council is provisionally due to receive £181.1 million in grant—an increase of £66.7 million, or 3.7 per cent.—and Poole borough unitary authority is due to receive £74.5 million, an increase of £2.7 million, or 3.9 per cent. Of the two district councils in the hon. Lady's constituency, East Dorset district council is pencilled in to receive £3.5 million in grant—an increase of £100,000, or 3.6 per cent.—and Purbeck district council receives £3 million in grant, an increase of £800,000, or 3 per cent.

I can say for the benefit of authorities in Dorset that we intend to keep the system of guaranteeing a certain level of grant for the foreseeable future. We do not, however, believe that it is appropriate to set the level of the floor guarantee for future years, because factors such as data on pupil numbers can vary considerably each year, making it difficult to make a firm decision now on the level of floors and ceilings.

The hon. Lady asked me to consider what she called the Dorset anomaly—the interplay between the area cost adjustment, which is the top-up system that covers higher labour costs, and the complex but important part of the formula known as resource equalisation.

The area cost adjustment is now more sensitive to local circumstances. It recognises high costs on a consistent basis nationally, rather than being arbitrarily confined to London and the south-east. We consulted about a house price approach to the area cost adjustment, but that received little support from local government and the local government community.

We concluded that wages—what is paid to people in each area—are a more robust basis for the area cost adjustment than house prices. That does not imply that house prices do not matter. If they are sustained at a high level in an area, they may lead employers to increase wages to tackle recruitment and retention problems. The area cost adjustment will be updated every year to incorporate the latest wages data.

Authorities that receive the area cost adjustment are determined directly by wages data. After adjusting the average wage figures to make like-for-like comparisons, we set a threshold. Authorities with relative wages above the threshold receive the area cost adjustment.

Average wages in Dorset are currently 1.7 per cent. below the cut-off. However, the new methodology protects lower wage areas by bringing those authorities that are below the threshold up to its value. That benefits Dorset and recognises national pay scales for staff such as teachers that do not vary with local wage pressures.

The hon. Lady asked about resource equalisation. It aims to reflect fairly authorities' relative ability to raise income from their tax base. For grant distribution purposes, we assume that all authorities set a council tax that is the same for every authority in the same class. The hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) made that point. We do not assume that some authorities can set a higher council tax than others. The number of band D equivalent properties varies between authorities.

Resource equalisation is the means whereby we recognise that authorities can raise differing amounts from a given level of council tax. That is because some authorities have higher tax bases than others. Resource equalisation is not new; it was a key part of the old standard spending assessment system. We have brought it up to date so that it reflects more recent information on the national average level of council tax. That clearly improves the fairness of the grant distribution system.

The hon. Lady mentioned fairness and asked me to consider the underlying principles of the council tax and whether it was fair for house prices—rather than, for example, local incomes—to determine council tax. That has more to do with whether a local property tax is fair in principle than with grant distribution. The council tax system uses house valuation to establish the relative value of all dwellings in an area. That means that the system can operate effectively and that the burden of taxation is distributed fairly and reasonably.

The hon. Lady favours a local income tax, but I am curious to ascertain how that would work. Would it be levied according to the person's place of work or residence? Would it disadvantage city areas over suburban areas? Many local authorities, such as Liberal Democrat-controlled Liverpool city council, would not necessarily be happy with such a system.

Mrs. Brooke: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Leslie: I have no time because I have only a minute left, in which I should like to reassure the hon. Lady that we are giving pensioners extra support. We are giving significant discounts: for example, we are making a 25 per cent. reduction for single people. However, I do accept that more needs to be done, and we shall continue to work on that basis. Basic pension increases have been significant, and there is other support for pensioners as well, as the hon. Lady said. There is the minimum income guarantee, the cut in VAT on all domestic fuel bills, winter fuel payments for pensioners, and free TV licences for the over-75s. We have also increased the amount of savings that pensioners may have before they are taken into account when calculating entitlement to income-related benefits, including council tax benefit.

[Mr. Leslie]

The pension credit, which will be introduced from October, will build on the improvements already made to the minimum income guarantee. However, it will go further by simplifying benefits for pensioners, and by directly rewarding savings. It will have two elements: the guarantee credit and the savings credit. The pension credit will ensure that, for the first time, saving will be rewarded instead of being penalised, and that pensioners will gain from having done so.

In the light of the issues raised by the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Christchurch, I believe that the system that is in place provides a more generous level of support for pensioners than that provided under the previous Administration. We want to ensure that we distribute grant to local authorities fairly, so that councils get not just a cash increase, but a real-terms increase in grant. The hon. Lady's local authorities are receiving those sums, and as I said, I do not believe that many excuses exist for excessive council tax rises. I accept that local councillors face difficulties, and it was interesting and useful to meet elected members and officers from the Dorset authorities in undertaking local consultation on the grant distribution process. However, I believe that the council tax system is working reasonably well as a local tax. The hon. Lady should not forget that its predecessor was the poll tax; sometimes, people have short memories in respect of that tax. The current tax is largely accepted and understood by local taxpayers. It is generally regarded as related in some respect to the ability to pay, in that it is linked to the property lived in by the person paying.

We have given local authorities real increases in grant, but what councils choose to do about council tax is their final decision. I understand the hon. Lady's concerns, but I believe that Dorset is getting a reasonable deal. Councillors have to be held to account, and at the end of the day the council tax is a matter for locally elected councillors.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes to Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 31 January 2003

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Orders of the Day

Co-operatives and Community Benefit Societies Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

9.34 am

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Have you been advised whether any Minister, possibly the Deputy Prime Minister, is going to come to the House at 11 o'clock and make a statement about the inability of the Government and local government to respond to the recent extreme weather conditions? Nobody can legislate for the weather conditions, but a creaking, broken-down transportation system, which is not working, has literally been brought to a halt on the roads, rail, underground and at our major airports, and it is a disgrace. Labour is not working, nor is the country. Is the Deputy Prime Minister coming to the House?

Mr. Speaker: No Minister has approached me this morning.

9.35 am

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Attendance in the Chamber may have been inflated by the weather conditions, but I hope that it is because of enthusiasm for the Bill. I begin by declaring the assistance that I have received from the Co-operative party and its advisers. I have chosen to promote this Bill, in part, because I served as a director of the then Cambridge and district co-operative society between 1987 and 1990. There are other Members in the Chamber who have had experience of that society. I have been a member of various societies, including those that served my constituency for many years.

Co-operatives and community benefit societies have their roots in the self-help tradition of the Victoria era. Their origin dates in part from the beginning of company law in this country and the incorporation of legal bodies, which first became possible with the establishment of joint stock companies in 1844. Incorporation allows an organisation its own legal personality. It can sue and be sued, own property, enter into contracts and enjoy the privileges of limited liability. As we all know, the company is the commonest form of incorporated body. The number of registered companies runs to many millions, more than 1 million of which are currently trading. The company continues to be a highly effective means of attracting investment, generating rewards for entrepreneurs and for those who are prepared to take risks with their capital, and will rightly continue to play the dominant role in the development of our economy.

The advantages of the company are reflected in the registration figures for various forms of organisation. Each year, over 200,000 companies limited by shares are established; about 6,000 charities; over 5,000 companies limited by guarantee, a common charity model; but only 200 industrial and provident societies are registered in any one year. When the company was emerging, different legal forms of business ownership were emerging to meet other needs. The co-operative society emerged as a trading vehicle through which people could meet their basic requirements to buy food at a fair price. Their purpose was first established and protected in law in 1852. The preamble to the Industrial and Provident Societies Partnership Act 1852 notes:

> "Associations of Working Men have been formed for the mutual Relief, Maintenance, Education and Endowment of the Members, their Husbands, Wives, Children or Kindred, and for procuring to them Food, Lodging, Clothing and other Necessaries by exercising or carrying on in common their respective Trades or Handicrafts."

Building societies emerged at the same time as a vehicle to help those who lacked the means to purchase their own home. Friendly and provident societies were also established at that time to offer mutual insurance against sickness or unemployment.

All those organisations, together with trade unions, were established on the principles of self-help and democracy—still novel in a world where hierarchy, patronage and either benevolent charity or exploitation were the means of control and service provision for working people. Since then, those principles have remained relevant and been applied by our citizens to found organisations relevant to almost every part of our economic and social life.

Co-operatives and community benefit societies are incorporated under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 1965, which consolidated various changes since 1852. While company, building society and friendly society law has changed substantially in the past 150 years, with the exception of certain consolidating statutes and specific narrow issues, industrial and provident society law had not, until last year, changed fundamentally since 1862.

Fascinating and inspiring as the history of the co-operative and mutual sector is, it is important that we should not just simply admire the sepia images or the marvellous examples of surviving organisations. Mutualism has a robust future, relevant to the lives of all our constituents. If we reflect on the themes that inspired the brave, imaginative founders of those societies, we can see that they are just as central now—a desire for more control of our lives; recognition that membership and involvement can add quality to service; and acceptance that services for a community can be best managed by that community.

[Mr. Mark Todd]

As one author considering the role of mutuals in the future has written:

> "One of the most important issues facing the Government at present"—

he referred to this Government—

> "concerns the appropriate mechanism for delivering public services. In the UK we have moved from transport and utilities services owned by private enterprise, through nationalisation to state-owned and controlled services; and then back again in a number of areas to privately-owned services with a state-appointed regulator. The latter has not been an overwhelming success"—

nor were some of the former experiences—

> "and there are those who believe that further transition is necessary. A move to a community-based form of ownership is one possibility."

I have on another occasion in the House reflected on what seems to me to be a conundrum. As some hon. Members know, my grandfather was a Member of the House in the 1930s. At that time, few would have expected Governments to provide administrative or legislative solutions to all their problems. If my father's recollection is anything to go by, an MP's caseload was tiny, yet respect for the work that Parliament did, for Government institutions and for politics appears to have been immeasurably greater than it is now. Yet now Governments seek, at the request of citizens, to intervene more and more. The more laws we pass and the more institutions we establish to solve perceived problems, the less our efforts are regarded.

When I reflected on the subject of this Bill, I was approached, as one can imagine, by many organisations wishing to pass laws that would restrict other people's freedoms in various respects, often for sound reasons. However, I firmly wished to see a measure in my name that permitted people to do something that they are currently not able safely to do. That was my choice in the matter, and I shall expand a little further on that point.

There are many possible explanations for the conundrum that the more we do, the less we are regarded, and the more the state provides, the more suspicion in which the state is held. It is not appropriate for me to dwell on that now, but one part is touched on in the foregoing quotation, which rightly reflects the disengagement of most citizens from state-owned or controlled services. Transferring ownership and control to the community served by the service can add quality to the service itself, by improving its reflection of user needs, and strengthening the value that the community places on that service.

There are suggestions that the Government may be prepared to entertain such ideas for their reform of public services. It is partly for that reason that I am promoting the Bill, as it will, as I shall outline, remove one weakness in the current model of ownership and control of community benefit societies, a possible vehicle for public sector management reform.

The out-of-date framework for industrial and provident societies is recognised in the Government's excellent strategy unit report, "Private Action, Public Benefit", which was issued last autumn. It remarks:

> "Industrial and Provident Society legislation has not kept pace with changes to company law. A fundamental overhaul of the structure is long overdue."

Last year my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) promoted a Bill with that aim, and I pay him great credit for his efforts. The measures in this Bill were contained in the Bill last year and were the subject of considerable debate at the time. They were deferred, partly because of the need to consider further their possible impact. My hon. Friend's Bill, which became the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 2002, was the first update of industrial and provident societies legislation since 1965. In summary, it gave the same level of protection from carpetbaggers as exists for building societies, and allowed future changes to company law to be applied to industrial and provident societies by means of a statutory instrument. My hon. Friend's Bill was much needed, but there remain a number of outstanding issues which this Bill, in part, seeks to address.

Although they are covered by the same legislation, there are some major differences between co-operatives and community benefit societies. A co-operative conducts its business in the interests of its members, who gain from it on the basis of how much they use the service or its trade, rather than purely on the basis of their investment in it. If people want to register a new co-operative society, they have to satisfy the Financial Services Authority that the proposed organisation is a bona fide co-operative. Many retail and agricultural organisations and many social clubs are designed as co-operatives.

In my constituency there are successful retail outlets owned by two societies, Midlands co-operative society and Tamworth co-operative society. They offer a range of convenience, non-food and funeral businesses from Chellaston on the edge of Derby to Swadlincote in the south. My one regret is that the range has diminished over the years, as has been common in several parts of the country. The most recent example was the closure of the store serving the village of Hilton. The village in which I live, Willington, has an excellent Co-op convenience store, which my family uses regularly.

The retail co-operative movement makes up a significant part of the UK economy. Retail co-ops alone have an annual turnover of £9.7 billion and employ 115,000 staff. They operate for the benefit of their 9.7 million members throughout the UK.

Community benefit societies are the second category of industrial and provident society. They differ from co-operatives in that they trade for the benefit of a wider community, rather than just their own members. Their name is often abbreviated to bencoms, and I shall use that term. They include the many housing associations that exist, but I should explain that housing associations have greater protection than other community benefit societies because the Housing Corporation oversees their activities. Community benefit societies also include some social clubs—I remember some entertaining exchanges last year about some of the social clubs that had been established, including Conservative clubs in some parts of the country—and the new football supporters trusts.

Many South Derbyshire people support Derby County. There is a football trust for supporters of the club, set up as a community benefit society with the aim of strengthening links with the club and adding weight to the voice of supporters. In other parts of the country, such societies have been able to share in the ownership of clubs. If we reflect on the origins of the industrial and provident society movement—a desire on the part of ordinary people to have more control over their lives and to rely less on the decisions of a wealthy few—we can see its attractions in the football world.

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Harrow, West): My hon. Friend mentioned football. Will he also pay tribute to rugby clubs that use the industrial and provident society model—such as the Pinner and Grammarians rugby club based in my constituency—and the many industrial and provident societies that are affiliated as rugby clubs to the Welsh rugby union? Does he share my hope that those rugby clubs will soon produce again the players to help Wales rightly challenge and win the six-nations championship?

Mr. Todd: Until my hon. Friend's final sentence, I would have agreed with him entirely. As hon. Members can imagine, with my build I was a pretty competent rugby player in my day, and I am a keen supporter now. I am delighted to see the industrial and provident society model being used by rugby clubs across the country, including the one in my hon. Friend's constituency. I congratulate him on the assumed association that he has with those clubs.

Industrial and provident societies give legal form, and thus structure and clarity, to a range of community organisations and activities for which charitable structures, public sector structures and the company model are not entirely appropriate. A key attraction of the industrial and provident society is the element of democracy. Where a number of people are involved or are dependent as customers on the service or trade of the organisation, the one member, one vote principle that the industrial and provident society offers, and where it differs most markedly from a shareholding operation, presents a powerful attraction. It is an arrangement by which power and control cannot be bought for money. Where a local community has been involved in creating or protecting an important community facility, the one member, one vote governance route helps to reflect the effort that all those involved have put in, and their mutual dependence on one another. Industrial and provident societies that are members of the excellent Village Retail Services Association, which helps to keep rural post offices and shopping facilities available to communities, are good examples.

A similar form of democracy can be created in a company. Indeed, some co-operatives have even decided to use the company model. I do not criticise that approach, but the problem is that nothing can stop shareholders changing or abandoning the original purpose for which the company was set up.

Another key difference between the industrial and provident society and the company model is the approach of the different registration bodies. Under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 1965, the Financial Services Authority has to approve any changes to the constitution of an industrial and provident society, and it strictly monitors such changes to ensure that they are in line with the registered purposes of the society. That clearly offers added reassurance to members. Companies House, by contrast, has no such function. It has a lighter touch—and rightly so—but with the result that shareholders or members of a company can change that company's constitution more easily. Companies House does not scrutinise constitutional changes to companies. Such scrutiny is not needed as there is no equivalent to section 1 of the 1965 Act in company law.

Those key differences create important distinctions between the company model and the industrial and provident society model, and they provide choice for those looking for the right legal structure to suit their purpose. A variety of structures give legal expression to the activities and services of organisations rooted in our communities, reflecting the many differences in their motivations, modus operandi, financing, governance and so on. I am not seeking to say that either the co-operative or community benefit route represents the best legal structure for every situation. For some scenarios, the approach would be entirely inappropriate, but our legal structures need to be appropriate for the circumstances to which they are applied.

One type of organisation that has been particularly attracted to the co-operative and community benefit society models is local registered clubs. There are 6,500 registered clubs in the UK, many of which have chosen to be co-operatives or community benefit societies. Examples include clubs of the Royal British Legion, the Association of Conservative Clubs, the National Union of Labour and Socialist Clubs, the National Union of Liberal Clubs, the Royal Naval Association and the Royal Air Forces Association.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): Does my hon. Friend recognise that any organisational form that can bring together Conservative societies and working men's and socialist clubs must have something very special about it?

Mr. Todd: Indeed. My hon. Friend highlights the fact that this has never been a partisan issue, as was demonstrated in last year's debate. It is a model that can be applied in a wide range of circumstances when it is convenient for particular bodies to incorporate themselves so as to protect the interests of the original purpose for which they were set up.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): As the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) implied, the hon. Gentleman is offering us a heady cocktail. Will he now tell the House something about the diverse range of purposes for which members will allocate surpluses?

Mr. Todd: If I may, I shall not deal with that point now, as I have some way to go. In dealing with the clauses, I shall come to the issue of how to deal with assets should they be dissolved for some purpose.

David Cairns (Greenock and Inverclyde): One of the first things I was asked to do when I was elected as a councillor some years ago was to intervene with the local Conservative association, whose club was being closed owing to lack of interest. Tragically, it was one of those things that history leaves behind. Would the Bill have

[David Cairns]

allowed me to intervene more strongly to prevent the people who were running the Conservative club from flogging it off altogether, even though nobody was using it and there was absolutely no interest in it?

Mr. Todd: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, which I am sure contained no political message in respect of the Conservative cause in his constituency. If the Bill had been enacted and the society had held a democratic vote and was seeking to protect its value, it would have had more difficulty in disposing of that value, except for the purpose for which it was set up. Of course, in the case to which he refers, the purpose for which the club was set up was presumably either the promotion of the Conservative cause or another associated purpose.

As hon. Members know, a company is a vehicle for generating profits for its shareholders, and the ability to distribute the profits generated from its trade is fundamental to its nature. Co-operative societies and bencoms, however, are set up not as vehicles to generate profits for investors but to trade for the benefit of a community of members or the community at large. Members of a community benefit society are not permitted to receive any payment by way of profit distribution. All such profits must be retained in the society and applied to its objectives in serving the community. That partly addresses the issue raised by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). Similarly, on a solvent dissolution, any surplus remaining after all liabilities have been paid off should pass not to members but to some other community benefit purpose under the current rules.

A co-operative society also has a fundamentally different purpose from that of a company. It is set up by its members as a vehicle to pool their transactions and co-operatively to provide certain goods or services to themselves and/or the wider community. A co-operative is legally permitted to make a distribution to its members or customers from its surplus profits, but that power of distribution originated from the need to reimburse to its customers the amount by which they had, in effect, overpaid for their purchases. The mechanism is intended to ensure that customers are not exploited by their paying too much. That is illustrated by the fact that a distribution of profits is based on purchases and not on the size of the shareholding.

I turn now to the detail of what is proposed in the Bill, but I recognise that this is a Second Reading and I do not intend to labour every clause. Clause 1, the value lock, seeks to give community benefit societies the option of protecting their assets for the purpose for which the society was established. The assets in a community benefit society are held for the benefit of the community for which the society was established. The biggest group of bencoms is housing associations, and I have referred to other examples.

An important feature of a community benefit society is that, unlike the comparable company model, the commitment to community benefit is subject to review by the registering authority—the Financial Services Authority—so any attempt to change the constitution or water down such a commitment would not be approved. The assets may have been built up over many years with generations of people from different families in a community working to contribute to them. Charitable assets are effectively dedicated permanently to a particular charitable purpose. The purpose of the clause is to offer the same principle of protection to community benefit societies.

Clause 1 would free societies from the risk of one group of activists in the organisation attempting at some stage to use its assets for their own benefit, rather than for its original established purpose. Such societies may not make distributions out of profits or surplus to members. On a solvent winding-up, assets should not be distributed to members. However, there is the ability to convert or transfer engagements to a company under section 52 of the 1965 Act. That would allow such restrictions to be avoided.

Once a society is converted into a company, the shareholders can amend the rules to permit the distribution of assets to themselves. That is clearly a loophole in legislation that the Bill tries to tackle. The measure proposes that a society should be able to elect that no such power should be included in the rules, subject to obtaining the support of a 75 per cent. majority of those voting at a meeting when not less than 50 per cent. of those qualified to vote participate.

Clause 1 specifically permits the constitution of a bencom to include provisions to prohibit the distribution of assets except on dissolution. Even when it is dissolved, the clause allows the imposition of significant restrictions on the distribution of the assets. It allows the prohibition by democratic choice. It is important to emphasise that it has to be the will of the society's members when it is set up and its purpose is defined. Existing societies can also call a duly constituted meeting and decide in favour of prohibition.

Clause 1 allows for considerable flexibility. Sometimes a community purpose can cease to exist. My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns) gave an example from his constituency. It could be argued that the purpose of the club had ceased to be relevant to the area. That may be an extreme example, but sometimes a community benefit society's purpose is no longer relevant to the community. There must be a mechanism to deal with that. If the bencom dissolved, its assets could be transferred to another community benefit society with similar provisions in its rules or to a charity.

Clause 1 does not prevent the sale of an asset. For example, one could convert a building into cash, but the value should continue to be applied for a specific purpose. It would not therefore put a lock on a redundant building and mean that it remained an eyesore in a community for ever. The clause provides for converting an asset into another form of asset for disposal for a specific purpose. Crystal Palace Supporters Trust is an example of that. I am not a Crystal Palace supporter, but it is written into the trust rules that, in the event of dissolution, its assets must go to community football in the Croydon area.

Clause 1 also allows a bencom to convert to a company or another body if the latter contains similar provisions in its constitution to protect the assets for the benefit of the community. The bencom is also permitted to convert to a different legal entity. However, the liberation of the assets from their original purpose is not permitted. The provisions will apply only if the society adopts them in its constitution by resolution of its members and if FSA approval is secured in the normal way.

The safeguard could be perceived as a protection against a hypothetical risk. However, the strategy unit report emphasised the problem. It states

> "The thresholds for voting for conversion should be increased. In addition, it would be desirable for I&PSs to choose to protect their assets against any possibility of conversion. In this case, a system would be put in place to ensure that the assets would be transferred to an organisation with similar aims should the society dissolve or be taken over. However, this 'lock' on assets will not be appropriate for many I&PSs, and should be optional."

Hon. Members will acknowledge that my description of clause 1 precisely fits the report's recommendation.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore): I wish the proposal well. Does my hon. Friend agree that a bencom with a regional or local aspiration should consider making that explicit in its terms of reference to ensure that the locked assets go back into the community?

Mr. Todd: I agree. It is critical at a society's inception that members carefully consider its then purpose and any future developments.

Mr. Gareth Thomas: Before my hon. Friend moves on to clauses 2 and 3, will he acknowledge the interest of the Women's Institute Country Markets, another body that sponsors industrial and provident societies, in clause 1? As he acknowledged, we could not get the provision through last year. Will he join me in paying tribute to Ruislip women's institute country market, an excellent organisation to which some of my constituents belong?

Mr. Todd: Clearly, my hon. Friend represents a colourful and thriving community, which contains many examples of industrial and provident societies. I join him in applauding women's institute country markets. A much more distinguished Member than me would counsel me not to give offence to the National Federation of Women's Institutes in any circumstances.

Clauses 2 and 3 would effect some modest changes in the way in which industrial and provident society law reflects company law. Clause 2 would bring industrial and provident society law into line with specific aspects of company law. The proposed change was effected for companies in 1989 and subsequently for building societies and friendly societies. Hon. Members will recognise its relevance in other transactions that relate, for example, to local government.

The proposed assimilation with company law relates to sections 35, 35A and 35B of the Companies Act 1985. Those sections are for the benefit of third parties that deal with companies in good faith and do not need to be concerned about whether, under a company's constitution, it has the capacity to enter into a transaction or whether the power of the board of directors to bind a company is subject to any limits. Such matters are important for third parties that enter into substantial transactions with societies, including trading and financial transactions.

For example, it would be a considerable bar to trading if a society had a track record of trading just outside its constitutional limits, thus placing the third party at risk of not having its contract honoured. The directors of such a society could say, "We made an error in following our constitution and we have therefore moved ultra vires." Clause 2 is intended to deal with that circumstance.

Company law reforms in 1972 and 1989 ensured that no question about the company's power to conduct specific business that was not mentioned in its constitution's "objects clause", or about how and whether power was given to the company's agents, could affect transactions as far as outsiders were concerned. It would be straightforward to apply the same solution to the problem of the capacity of an industrial and provident society or its agents to be questioned. I believe that the change would be consensual and mere common sense.

The only safeguard that an industrial and provident society can currently provide to anyone who trades with it is to offer a copy of its constitution and say, "Please read that if you have any concerns about whether we're trading with you legally." Clearly, that is a long-winded and deterring approach to doing business.

Mr. Love: Is my hon. Friend attracted to the recommendation in the recent strategy unit report that we should do away with the term "industrial and provident societies" because it is redolent of their Victorian origins, and change it to "co-operatives and community benefit societies"? Has he thought about including that in the Bill?

Mr. Todd: My hon. Friend will note that the Bill's title is precisely that. Until it completes all its stages and amendments have been discussed, the words "industrial and provident societies" remain relevant in English law. Although I am an admirer of the Victorian heritage, the terminology is off-putting. The strategy unit report refers to poor brand image. The brand of industrial and provident societies is scarcely enticing in a modern world.

Clause 3 relates essentially to the formalities of conducting a society's business. It proposes that societies execute documents in the same way as companies. At present, the method is old fashioned and cumbersome, requiring the application of the society seal to documents. The proposed assimilation with company law would introduce the ability for societies to execute documents by signature of officers rather than by seal. The relevant provisions of the Companies Act 1985 are—it tells us something about English law that there is such a profusion of them—sections 36, 36A, 36B, 36C, 37, 38, 39 and 41. The clause will assimilate the necessary company law provisions and it represents a gain by levelling the playing field. I am aware of one society that has a board sub-committee devoted entirely to the authorisation of the application of the society seal. Following a society name change, it was necessary laboriously to approve the use of the seal on many hundreds of documents. A similar company would have simply been able to execute the documents by signature of an authorised officer.

If the mutual sector is to develop, further sensible protection and reform of the rules will be needed. Many

[Mr. Todd]

recognise the need to develop social enterprises. In the Prime Minister's foreword to "Private Action, Public Benefit", he drew attention to the

> "insufficient recognition of the particular needs of social enterprises, a rapidly growing group of businesses carrying out a wide range of activities for the benefit of society rather than the individual."

I shall not make wild claims for the Bill. It does not solve all the problems of the industrial and provident society model, but it does, I hope, provide an opportunity to make significant progress. The Bill seeks to strengthen our co-operatives and community benefit societies, and I hope that the House gives it a Second Reading.

10.13 am

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Interests as the parliamentary adviser to the Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators. As a former group company secretary of a FTSE 100 company, many of the issues raised touch on my direct experiences. I am also an honorary member, along with my spouse, of the Winsford Constitutional and Conservative club, which is the type of society covered by the Bill.

I congratulate the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) for doing so well in this Session's ballot and for endeavouring to reform an aspect of the law that will bring real benefit to communities across the country. I know that the hon. Gentleman has stated his desire to present a useful Bill that can be passed into law. This Bill is a good example of an hon. Member using the pole position granted through the ballot process to demonstrate that Parliament has a crucial role in aiding our local communities.

It is a particular pleasure to follow the hon. Gentleman. I noted that as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) raised a point of order, the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) suggested from a sedentary position that he and some other hon. Members should be stranded in Cambridge. The hon. Member for South Derbyshire and I shared years together at Emmanuel college, Cambridge. It is of interest, therefore, that although we are on different sides of the House, we can join forces today, just as we did in those days.

The hon. Gentleman's introductory history lesson, based on information gleaned from his father about his grandfather's experience in the House, was an interesting description of the way in which MPs' roles have changed over the years. I applaud him for thinking carefully about introducing a Bill that is permissive rather than restrictive. That is especially important in our day and age. The temptation in recent years has been to introduce Bills that curtail people's freedoms rather than to make them freer. That is why this Bill is to be welcomed. I was also extremely amused by, and rightly supportive of, the hon. Gentleman's sensitivity not to stray too far into falling on the wrong side of the WI country markets, raised by the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas). The country markets in my constituency do an outstanding and critical community job.

The Bill is closely defined in its scope, which is the right way to use private Member's Bills. It is clear that the hon. Member for South Derbyshire has worked closely with the co-operative societies. I extend my best wishes to them for helping to produce a timely, justifiable and broadly sensible Bill to sit within what is broadly defined as the voluntary sector. Although that term might give rise to some confusion, it is important to recognise that the historical context of the Bill, as set out by the hon. Gentleman, belongs to that fine tradition of people wanting to be part of the voluntary self-help mutually beneficial culture that served our country well for decades and, it could be argued, centuries.

The charitable and wider not-for-profit sector covered by the Bill is both economically important and extremely diverse. It encompasses organisations of widely varying scale, purposes and structure. It is estimated that there are between 500,000 and 750,000 organisations in the charitable and wider not-for-profit sector in the United Kingdom. My right hon. and hon. Friends and I believe in encouraging that immense resource to be used to the benefit of all, especially, although not exclusively, the vulnerable in society.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend describes the position pithily. Does he agree that those excellent organisations form part of what Edmund Burke famously described as the "little platoon", which constitutes civil society and is the middle way between an atomised individual and the state?

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend generously describes my contribution as pithy, but it does not come more pithy than that. I not only endorse what he says, but recognise how critical the little platoons are for this country to move forward. They help to ensure that we balance the dignity of individual families and communities against what is, at times, an over-mighty state and the arrogance that goes with it.

I am sure all hon. Members are aware that co-operatives and community benefit societies provide essential services and amenities to communities. The list of the societies is diverse, ranging from housing associations to football supporters trusts, to social clubs and home care providers. It is helpful to have in mind the football trusts, be they rugby or soccer—as I still, perhaps anachronistically, call that form of football—and the Royal British Legion clubs. It is important to have in mind those examples as we go through the more detailed aspects of the Bill. For instance, perhaps one of the least controversial types of club is the British Legion club. It is hard to imagine that the purpose of such clubs would ever cease to exist. They not only give support to those who have served our country so well in the past; they honour the memory of those who made the ultimate sacrifice. That sacrifice has enabled us to be in this House today under the freedom of the rule of law, which our generation is lucky enough to enjoy in this democratic and civilised society.

However, what if, over time, the membership of a British Legion club were to fall to such a level that it became important to review its operation, and the supporting assets given in perpetuity for that purpose? It is important to ensure that no one generation of membership can remove a benefit that is provided not only for past generations, but for future generations. None of us can ever know how the future will work out, or the extent to which those assets might prove of benefit to future generations.

The voluntary sector has a key role to play in the renewing of our society. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) has said, the Conservative party will work with voluntary groups and other groups of all types, including co-operatives and community benefit societies, in breaking down the constraints that are currently applied to this sector. We have been listening, and will continue to listen, to the problems that such groups face, and we will seek to identify the solutions. The Bill before us today is a solution, and it defines the problem that it seeks to address well.

To the extent that this Bill has not already done the work on co-operatives and community benefit societies, and in the hope that it does become an Act, we will build solutions to the problems faced by the voluntary sector into a voluntary society Bill, which we will lay before Parliament in the first Queen's Speech of an incoming Conservative Government.

I want to look at the Bill in a little more detail. As has already been made clear, we are in broad agreement with its contents and intent. I should like to acknowledge the helpful advice that I was given by Mr. Martin Beaumont, a constituent of mine who is the chief executive of the Co-operative Group. Until last September, he was also chief executive of United Co-op, which serves the citizens of the north-west, including the local village shop in Bunbury, in my constituency, where my family and I shop every week. It is apparent that the governing legislation is outdated in comparison with company law, and it can be argued that that acts as a disincentive to wider use of industrial and provident societies, as they are still called, as a form of enterprise and organisation.

The hon. Member for Harrow, West, who has already intervened, should be congratulated again on his efforts to reform the situation. The Bill before us attempts to move the law on, building on the industrial and provident societies legislation that he introduced so successfully in the previous Session. As I have said, the reasoning behind the Bill is sound and well-intentioned, but I have a few minor reservations and certain questions, which I hope the Government are ready to answer in summing up today's debate.

It is perhaps easiest if I discuss the Bill's clauses, if I may, in reverse order. We support clause 3, as it will remove an often onerous and cumbersome regulation from the day-to-day running of such societies. It seems somewhat strange that, in a modern society, the formalities for executing documents still require the use of an authenticating stamp. I am old enough—as the colour of my hair perhaps displays, I am afraid—to remember what used to happen. Even in the late '80s, when I was acting group secretary of a large FTSE 100 company with 44,000 shareholders on its membership register, we would spend many hours signing share certificates individually. Nothing has changed to the detriment of those shareholders by the fact that that system is no longer current practice, and has quite properly been consigned to history, important though it was. The measure in clause 3 is an equivalent one, and it is therefore wholly appropriate and does not carry grave risk.

Of course, the continuing justification for the use of seals is that they provide protection from wrongdoing. During the Committee stage of the Industrial and Provident Societies Bill, which was enacted last year following the hard work of the hon. Member for Harrow, West, the Government expressed sympathy with an amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love)—he, too, has intervened today—the aim of which was similar to clause 3. Have the Government reviewed this procedure as part of the charity law review or the strategy unit's report, and in terms of protection against wrongdoing, what are their views on the use of seals and the replacement of that process?

A great deal of work is going on in connection with the strategy unit's report. Does this Bill pre-empt proposals that the Government have yet to put forward, and which arise from recommendations by the strategy unit that are still being consulted on? Have the Government established what effect this change in the law might have on societies, and are they—as I hope they are—expressing towards it more than the mere sympathy that they expressed towards the amendment, to which I have referred, tabled by the hon. Member for Edmonton?

We support clause 2, which will bring the law applying to societies into line with company law. It is essential that all parties dealing with co-operatives and community benefit societies can rely on the usual rules of ostensible authority, without risking being ultra vires. This is working well for companies under current companies legislation, and before such changes were introduced there was considerable discussion about the potential for abuse. In my business and professional career before being privileged enough to be elected to this place, I worked for a large manufacturing company with many subsidiaries, all of which had to comply with the Companies Acts. When the procedures for the use of seals and certification were relaxed for such companies, there was no demand, in the absence of evidence to suggest an increase in wrongdoing or uncertainty, to return to the status quo ante or an equivalent. So it is important to recognise that the track record should encourage support and acceptance of clause 2.

This issue was examined before. In 2000, the Government reviewed the situation through a Treasury consultation on the proposal for a new industrial and provident societies Act. Paragraph 22 of that consultation states:

> "This aspect of the ultra vires rule no longer applies to companies, following enactment of the Companies Act 1989. There seems no reason why societies should not have an equivalent legal capacity to deal with others. So it is proposed to cease to apply this aspect of the rule to societies."

It would be helpful if the Government could explain today why this recommendation has not been acted on. Do they still stand by the proposals included in that report, which was issued jointly with the Registry of Friendly Societies. If they do still agree with their own proposals, why has there been such delay? Surely today is the chance to ensure that they are implemented.

Clause 1 offers the most potential for debate, as the hon. Member for South Derbyshire pointed out in his introduction and the time and detail that he devoted to

[Mr. O'Brien]

that clause. The Government's strategy unit report, "Private Action, Public Benefit", recommended that community benefit societies should be permitted to protect their assets—this is the crucial point—in perpetuity for a public purpose. That is the nub of the matter. It is that important purpose that underpins the rationale and intent of the Bill.

As the law stands, societies and the communities that they serve could easily be vulnerable to asset stripping. If a society converts to a company, it will be easier for the members to alter its rules and to allow distribution of valuable assets to members without thought of the consequences for the greater community. The Bill relates to assets that have been granted, or given, in perpetuity for the community, so it is right to protect such assets from distribution to members of a community at a given time. For these purposes, it is the community that evolves and changes, not the asset base that was granted to benefit that community generation after generation.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): I declare an interest as I am a member of the West Quarter Labour and Community club in my constituency, which is owned by the community and local Labour parties.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the British Legion. Is it not often the case that such social clubs have been superseded by many other facilities? Might it not be better to transfer the value of those assets to something that would be more valuable to the community to which they were originally gifted?

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. As I understand both the intent and the detail of the Bill, it would provide that, in the event of evolution such as he describes, purpose is the important factor. There is provision for transfer on dissolution—the most difficult aspect—to another benefit society that satisfies the purpose. The main thing for us to do is rigorously to ensure that there can be no possibility of asset stripping. That would be a wrong motivation. As long as the purpose of the asset is kept, the community benefit is likely to be sustained. However, it would be wrong to set provisions in such a solid form of aspic that there was no chance of responding to changing circumstances such as those described by the hon. Gentleman.

I was pointing out that the Bill would rightly entrench the assets, apart from a purpose-based transfer, such as we have just discussed. A transfer should not benefit an existing cadre of members. Transfer by conversion is a possibility, but the presumption is that the benefit should be maintained for the community over time.

In the past, the Government have been against entrenching assets in principle. That applied to the co-operative sector, too. Do the Government agree with the strategy unit's recommendations and the supporters of the Bill that a different approach is appropriate for community benefit societies? During the proceedings on the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 2002, the strategy unit deliberations were referred to frequently, especially as regards the use of an asset lock and how it could be introduced for community benefit societies. The unit's recommendations supported the concept of entrenchment and the modernisation of industrial and provident society law.

In parallel with this debate, we need to consider the wider implications; for instance, the Government's proposals for foundation hospitals, which also have an element of asset lock. The Government need to ensure consistency and clarity in their approach to legislation for different bodies; I hope that they will support the Bill in that regard.

Mr. Love: There is already an asset lock in relation to charities and credit unions. As Members who have read the strategy unit report know, it suggests that community benefit societies are a halfway house and that such protection should also be available to them.

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman is right. However, the Government have not yet made clear their response to the recommendations in the very good report of the strategy unit. Of course we need to debate many aspects of the detail but the report is extremely useful in broad terms. In a sense, the Bill pre-empts much of what might follow from the recommendations and is one of the three measures that might be developed from them. We await the Minister's comments on that.

As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, the Bill would regularise the position for the community benefit societies, which have become trapped between two stools. As he and my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) have pointed out, it offers a middle way.

The Government need to show that they have internal consistency in their approach to that aspect of the law. The point also applies to their proposals for foundation hospitals, which are being considered by Parliament.

Naturally, we have reservations about some of the technical aspects of how asset locks might work. For example, what would happen to the assets of a society when it dissolved? That is addressed in paragraph (a), subsection (1) of clause 1, and although the Minister may not be able to go into such points in detail on Second Reading, they certainly warrant careful scrutiny in Committee.

I urge the Government to support the Second Reading of the Bill. We are generally supportive of the measure and I look forward to debating a number of the points raised today during its—I hope—successful passage through Committee.

10.38 am

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Harrow, West): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien), especially given his fulsome support for the objectives of the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd). As I am the first Back-Bencher to speak in support of the Bill, may I lead the tributes to the way in which my hon. Friend introduced the Bill? He demonstrated a grasp of the legislation and of many of the difficulties that face the community benefit society sector. His introduction of the subject will give the House confidence as he takes the measure into Committee and beyond.

My hon. Friend has done an especially important job. As he rightly said, the fundamental legislation on industrial and provident societies dates from the

19th century and has been largely unreformed since then. He offers the House the chance to modernise a little further the rules and regulations under which co-operatives and community benefit societies operate and that is enormously welcome.

Such organisations have, unfortunately, been in a twilight zone between the public and private sectors. Some of the enormously good work undertaken by the most successful co-operatives and community benefit societies has not received the publicity and attention that it warrants.

For example, the excellent Tower colliery in south Wales—the only employee-owned coalmine in Europe—was set up precisely because a public sector organisation wanted to shut down the coalmine, with devastating consequences for that constituency. The initiative and entrepreneurial skills of the local community, using the co-operative model, have restored the coalmine for the community and kept wealth locked in that area.

The attraction of co-operatives and community benefits societies is that they entrench real power and decision-making opportunities in the communities that are affected by the decisions that need to be taken. Many public sector organisations and, now, many private companies recognise the need to consult local people. Some of the best local councils use citizens juries, citizens panels and residents forums to assess what they do. Companies—for example, developers involved in planning—also seek to consult local communities. However, whereas those organisations retain the real power to make decisions for themselves—they keep it in the council chamber or the corporate boardroom—co-operatives and community benefit societies keep the power with the people who are affected by the decisions that have to be taken.

Mr. Colin Challen (Morley and Rothwell): My hon. Friend talks about strengthening power in the community. Does he agree that the Bill, if passed, should enhance that power against that of financial institutions, which tend to regard community benefit co-operatives or mutual sector bodies as rather strange, unusual things to which they cannot lend money and on which they put pressure to transform themselves into the normal kind of institution that they recognise?

Mr. Thomas: My hon. Friend is right to suggest that there is a lack of understanding about the co-operative and community benefit society model. Indeed, the fact that it is unreformed compared with company, building society and friendly society legislation has put off many organisations that may have wanted to use that structure. That has helped to reduce any enthusiasm among those who might lend to such organisations and has prevented them from doing so. The Bill offers the opportunity to reform several weaknesses in the legislation, which is excellent news.

I particularly welcome clause 1. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire said, we attempted to cover that topic last year in considering the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 2002. Indeed, those on all three Front Benches supported our proposals, but we were unable to resolve some of the technical concerns that rightly needed to be resolved. So my hon. Friend deserves particular praise for giving the House the opportunity to put that provision into law so soon after the strategy unit's ringing endorsement of the principle of clause 1. As the hon. Member for Eddisbury rightly said from the Opposition Front Bench, there are examples where the provisions in clause 1 already apply. Charities, housing associations and credit unions were mentioned. Clearly, clause 1 gives us an opportunity to provide consistency across the community sector.

In addition, it is worth highlighting the importance of clause 2, on modernising the ultra vires or capacity issues, particularly given my hon. Friend's intervention. Clause 2 would help to give confidence to third parties in dealing with co-operative or community benefit societies. Let us consider the rugby club analogy. It is possible to imagine that similar towns have two clubs. We might call one the Tigers rugby club, which uses the industrial and provident society model; the other rugby club in the neighbouring town might choose the company model. Both clubs decide that they want to borrow £250,000 from the bank to build an extension to house a bar facility. If the England rugby team starts to do very badly in future and that has an impact on the membership of those clubs, the revenues will start to decline at both clubs. Both clubs run into financial trouble and cannot pay back the loans. The bank considers its options. What can it do? The bank knows that the rugby club that is a company has a charge on the club's assets and could get its money back. However, the rugby club that is an industrial and provident society could argue, if there is no reference in its constitution to providing social facilities, that the loan was ultra vires and therefore that it does not have to pack it back.

That type of problem has occurred in the past. For example, in the 1980s, councils engaged in a number of interest-rate swaps. As has been said, that problem motivates financial services organisations to be cautious about lending to industrial and provident societies, so we need to use the Bill to resolve that unreformed element of the legislation.

As I have said, this is an excellent Bill. I hope that the House will not only agree to it on Second Reading, but speed on to consider it in Committee and on Report. I hope that the House will consider in Committee or on Report whether the Bill offers the opportunity to modernise the legislation on a number of other issues, too. For example, it is worth seeking clarification on why Northern Ireland should be exempted from those reforms, given the existence of so many industrial and provident societies there. Why should those organisations be excluded from the benefits?

I also hope that, now or on Report, the Minister will give some clue about a time scale for reforming the audit and accounting requirements that impose a much greater financial burden on industrial and provident societies than on companies. Will she say whether the Bill offers the opportunity to reform the regulator's powers to inspect societies? At the moment, the Department of Trade and Industry can, of its own volition, investigate a company that it suspects of fraud or wrongdoing. In the case of a regulator for co-operatives and community benefit societies, the Financial Services Authority cannot do that; it has to wait until it receives a complaint from a society member. Again, reform is needed because of the FSA's lack of power to intervene of its own volition, as that puts off

[Mr. Thomas]

organisations from dealing with industrial and provident societies or from using that route in the first place.

Mr. Love: One of the more successful aspects of company law has been the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986, which does not apply to industrial and co-operative societies. If we are to get some of the benefits, we must ensure that directors of those societies are treated in exactly the same way as company directors.

Mr. Thomas: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I hope that we might hear about when such reforms might take place for co-operatives and community benefit societies. He may well remember that some of those issues were thrown into stark relief during the consideration of the Enterprise Act 2002, as such provisions were reformed and modernised for companies, but not entirely for industrial and provident societies.

I hope that, during our consideration of the Bill, we might also hear whether there is a time scale for introducing, by statutory instrument, powers to modernise the insolvency provisions that exist for industrial and provident societies but have not been implemented.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire for choosing this topic. He has done an excellent job in introducing the Bill, and I hope that it will have a smooth passage today and throughout its remaining stages.

10.49 am

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West): In speaking in support of the Bill, I should first declare an interest. I am a Co-operative Member of Parliament and vice-chair of the co-operative group in Parliament. Prior to coming to the House, I was employed for 18 years as a national organiser of the Co-operative party, and I am a member of many co-operative societies. To keep a certain political balance, I was once a member of the Winsford Labour club. I do not know whether it still exists and—if it does not—what happened to its assets on dissolution. Perhaps the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) could advise me.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) on promoting the Bill. He may not recall the first time that we met. It was several years ago on a wet, windy, dark night in south Derbyshire, when he agreed to address a function that I had arranged on co-operation. On that occasion, he waxed eloquently on his commitment to the co-operative cause. In these days of cynicism about politicians, it is gratifying to see him demonstrate ably that he practises what he preaches in public. As he and others have said, one of the Bill's main purposes is to ensure that community benefit societies, registered under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 1965, can dedicate their assets permanently for the community: the so-called asset lock.

Ironically, the democratic nature and management of bencoms contain the potential for their ultimate self-destruction. The more successful such open and democratic organisations become and the more assets they accumulate, the greater their vulnerability to takeover by those whose only desire is to enter the organisation, manage it, and asset-strip it for their benefit. It seems appalling that, hitherto, there has been no legal barrier to prevent bencoms from being taken over by such a self-seeking bunch of individuals.

Earlier, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire referred to the sepia-tinted photographs associated with co-operative societies. In my previous incarnation, I visited societies on many occasions to see those sepia-tinted photographs of the bewhiskered, waistcoated gentlemen who founded such societies—unfortunately, it was mainly gentlemen. We may feel that the values of those philanthropic visionaries are a little outdated, but the Bill is a way of updating those values and providing a framework in which they can continue to serve the very objectives that those bewhiskered Victorian gentleman envisaged.

Fresh in the minds of most co-operators are the events that occurred in relation to building societies a few years ago. There was little protection within the rules, or within legislation, to prevent them from being taken over. About two thirds of the building society movement disappeared over several years. While there may have been legitimate issues to be debated concerning building societies, there can be no doubt whatever that the motives of the great majority of people in voting to privatise those companies had nothing to do with the long-term welfare of those societies. It was merely an opportunity to gain a windfall profit.

Building societies have adapted their rules. The Nationwide led the way by enforcing a rule that new members should donate any windfall gains to charity. In many ways, that principle has been incorporated in the Bill. It would be a mistake, however, to think that the danger has passed for organisations registered as industrial and provident societies. It is astonishing that there are more than 8,300 of them, with assets of £61 billion, which provide potentially rich pickings for anyone motivated to try to take over some of those societies.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: In a constructive attempt to help the Bill's progress, may I ask the hon. Gentleman whether he accepts that there is a clear difference between building societies, whose purpose is to benefit current members at any one time, and community benefit societies, whose assets would be deliberately endowed in perpetuity for the purpose defined? That is why a proper distinction should be drawn and why it is proper to consider the asset lock provision in the Bill.

Mr. Bailey: I accept the hon. Gentleman's point, but the point that I want to emphasise is that a group of highly organised individuals are targeting mutually based organisations with a view to exploiting any deficiencies in their rules or legal structures in order to take them over and asset-strip them. There is an organisation that is specifically dedicated to that purpose, but I will not advertise it in the Chamber today. It exists, however, and we must be aware of it and the threat that it poses to co-operative and community benefit societies.

One positive development that arose from what happened to building societies was that it forced those that survived to demonstrate the virtues of mutuality. It also provoked something akin to a public debate on the advantage of mutuality. Above all, it alerted the Government to the potential that community benefit organisations can offer to the delivery of public services in a more market-sensitive way. The Bill is needed not just to protect existing bencoms but for a positive purpose: to enhance the attractiveness of alternatives to existing company models. It is not just a defensive piece of legislation, but one that offers enormous potential. I would single out three areas in that regard.

The first is the existing social enterprise sector, which is growing but will no doubt grow faster if it feels that enterprises will not at some time in the future succumb to members taking over and using their accumulated efforts and assets for speculative purposes. People who invest in social enterprise do so to meet specific social needs. They will have the security of knowing that there is a way of protecting their form of contribution, whatever happens in the future of the bencom. Existing bencoms will also be provided with an opportunity and an incentive for members, in considering whether to introduce the asset lock, to debate the long-term purposes of their organisation. That will raise awareness and potential commitment.

It is not only the existing social enterprise sector that could benefit. My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire mentioned in his speech the dissatisfaction with the privatised utilities. It is fair to say that the privatisation of those utilities demonstrated that shareholder-driven priorities did not sit comfortably with public good or public welfare. The route proposed in the Bill offers an alternative somewhere between the monolithic state provision of old and the profit-seeking, shareholder-driven private sector company of more recent years. Currently, the favoured replacement mechanism appears to be the company limited by guarantee, which may be appropriate in some cases, but I and many others believe that the model proposed in the Bill offers far more potential for the future. Above all—this may be crucial in the Government's development of public service policy—the Bill offers a model to provide public services, particularly in health and social care, that will enhance participation, enable access to a wider source of investment and develop roots in local communities. The Bill will deal with one of the major problems that impede that development—the security of public assets once they have been transferred.

In many ways, the old demarcation between the public and the private sector is becoming blurred. The consumer is more concerned about the quality of services than how they are delivered. In order to improve services, it is important to give people a stake in them, and I believe that bencoms, by reinvesting profits in the service rather than rewarding shareholders, and by encouraging community involvement and participation by employers, offer an important alternative to existing structures and models.

The Bill removes a major obstacle to the development of bencoms. They may or may not be the answer in every case, but there can be no doubt that if the Bill is enacted they will become a relevant and significant option in the delivery of our public services.

11.1 am

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I support the Bill both as a party spokesman and as an individual. Indeed, I was privileged to be asked to sponsor it. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), who led the way in developing legislation in this field.

I came 10th in the ballot for private Members' Bills last year, and was treated to a seminar from the Government Whips in which it was spelled out in terms that even the slower among us could understand that there are two choices: either one can choose a Bill that is useful, practical, sensible and uncontroversial, in which case there is a reasonably good chance of its going through, provided that the shadow Leader of the House is in a benign mood on the relevant Friday morning, or one can go for something radical and controversial that annoys Ministers, in which case one gets a few hours of fame and then nothing else. I can see that the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) benefited from the same seminar and came to the same conclusion as I did. As a result, we have a useful and practical Bill that I hope we can all rally behind.

Five years ago, many of us who were enthusiastic about the mutual movement felt that there was an opportunity for a big leap forward. There was a burst of enthusiasm for mutuality among think tanks such as Demos, philosophers such as Anthony Giddens and politicians such as the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who was suggesting that the welfare state should be recast around mutual institutions. There was a great deal of hope, but in practice, although there has been some growth, it has been modest and incremental. The positive changes to the building society regulations have certainly helped. The legislation promoted by the hon. Member for Harrow, West helped, too, as will the three Bills in the pipeline, but they are quite modest.

The paradox is that, although there is great enthusiasm for mutuality across the party political spectrum—many people think that it is the model of organisation—many mutual bodies have struggled. That is especially true of the traditional mutuals rather than the community benefit societies. The hon. Member for West Bromwich, West (Mr. Bailey) spoke about the tribulations of the building society. When I first became a Member, I belonged to a group called Save Our Building Societies, which tried to stop the process of attrition. Market share has now stabilised at around 20 to 25 per cent., with the help of regulatory change and the ingenious asset lock devised by the Nationwide, but it is not an expanding sector. The mutual insurers—Equitable Life, Standard Life and others—have struggled even more. There are problems in the friendly society sector, which does much useful work but is a shadow of its former self. The Co-op almost suffered a humiliating takeover by an asset stripper.

At the same time, there has been tremendous grassroots growth of mutuality, although it is sometimes difficult to recognise. For example, there are the after-school kids' clubs, which have about 15,000 to 20,000 members and are growing rapidly, and the pre-school playgroups, which had well over 100,000 members at their peak, although they have taken a hammering from the nurseries. They are predominantly community benefit mutuals.

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There are also groups such as the Workers Education Association and, in a way, its successor, the University of the Third Age, which is a nationwide mutual with many thousands of adherents, providing community benefit, which is expanding and flourishing.

There has been a growth of mutuality in the health sector. Regardless of whether foundation hospitals succeed and take a mutual form, many local doctors have formed mutuals to deal with after-hours care, for example. Mutual organisation provides a useful vehicle for that. Many mutuals are so successful that we forget that they are mutuals at all: we tend to think of BUPA as private medicine, but in fact it is a mutual. Some mutuals have become highly successful multinational companies. If Bill Gates lies awake at night worrying about competition, he worries not about traditional companies, but about Linux, which is a true mutual. I am interested in whether the community benefit provisions would apply to such big operations, which could well define themselves as community benefit societies. Would they fall within the provisions in the Bill? I do not know whether the Government have thought about that.

All those new organisations are not emerging artificially. Several of those who have spoken today have explained the demand and need for mutuals, which is partly an impetus towards diversity and getting away from the rigidity of the private limited company on the one hand and state or local government bureaucracy on the other. It also stems from the fact that many activities require a blend of community mindedness with businesslike efficiency and entrepreneurial flair. Somehow, those have to be combined in the same institution. Mutual organisations, and especially community benefit institutions, are really the only models that achieve that. The mutual structure is ideal for something that is rooted in the local community but none the less businesslike.

Despite the need, and the good things that are happening, community benefit societies are not spreading as rapidly or on the scale that they should be. One of the main reasons for that is tackled in the Bill—the problem of assets. There are many reasons why the lack of an asset lock can be extremely debilitating to mutual organisations. The Co-op has been mentioned. Although I represent the Rugby Football Union as the Member for Twickenham, my heart is still with my old football club in York, which is where I grew up. York City is a wonderful example of a club succumbing to unscrupulous asset strippers but then being rescued by community spirit.

A problem that is perhaps less acute than that of asset stripping is, however, more difficult to deal with. When a mutual community benefit organisation has become fuddy-duddy and inward-looking and people within it want to do new things and make it grow, they often take the view that the only way of doing that is to escape from the mutual structure. There are often, in a sense, creative reasons why mutuality breaks down, and somehow that has to be overcome.

Then there are cases in which a community benefit group is providing a useful service but has valuable assets. Allotment holders and British Legion clubs, for example, find themselves, because of economic change and development, sitting on a gold mine. There is great temptation to try to find a way of cashing in the assets and distributing them among members in such a way that the community benefit is lost. Those different factors lead to the need for a more positive approach to the asset lock question.

I understand the dilemma. I remember debate on the Industrial and Provident Societies Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for Harrow, West, in which the Treasury argued that there are dangers in asset locks—assets get tied up in unproductive uses. That is a problem, for example, with private trusts. However, there is now a weight of evidence that one must be much more positive.

The hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) intervened to remind us that asset locks are available in the credit union and charitable sector. They are widespread in the European Union, which is one reason why mutuals on the continent are so much more successful. The Government strategy unit report effectively endorses the principle, too. So, we have got to the point where I hope that the Government accept the principle and recognise that the argument is not always clear cut.

The one question that I have is why the provisions must be quite so restrictive. As I understand the Bill, in order to vote an asset lock into perpetuity it is necessary to have a 50 per cent. turnout and 75 per cent. agreement. I would have thought that 50 per cent. of members voting for such change would be adequate. I ask the Minister and the hon. Member for South Derbyshire to justify such a restrictive provision. Given that minor query, I strongly support the Bill. It is an excellent step forward. I hope that the Government will endorse it and that it speeds through the House.

11.12 am

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): I am a member of the Co-operative group of Members of Parliament and I am very pleased to support this very important Bill. I add my congratulations to those paid to my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) on bringing the Bill before the House. As he said in his initial comments, it is about taking co-operation forward and building on the co-operative movement, which has achieved so much and become such a fundamental part of our society.

I see this Bill as an opportunity to move us into the future and to build on all that is good in co-operation. Co-operation in essence is about people working together to provide goods or services that benefit members or the community on the basis of mutual support or ownership. That is extremely important and has been a fundamental contributor to what is good in our society. Co-operation has a very fine history. Many are aware of its importance to production, retail services, agriculture, banking, finance, housing, funeral provision, and more recently, as hon. Members have said, to the wide range of social clubs.

Co-operation is part of a movement. When co-operatives were first developed in strength they were seen as the beginning of a co-operative commonwealth—a new society where the values of mutuality and self-help were central. The co-operative movement is a proud part of the Labour movement, but its virtues are so self-evident that they are supported and, indeed, adopted by those well outside those confines. Indeed, judging from the comments this morning of the hon. Members for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) and for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), we are all co-operators now.

One area in which co-operation has been distinguished and has a great future is finance. The successes of credit unions are well known. They are an excellent example of applying loans on the basis of self-help and mutual support without exploitation. Over the past few years, credit unions have grown considerably in number from 73,000 in 1992 to 220,000 in 1999, although we still have a long way to go. It has already been clearly shown that credit unions make a great contribution to individuals' well-being and to dealing with social exclusion. Indeed, they are a vital part of regeneration.

I want to draw particular attention to the Co-operative bank as a fine example of co-operation—working for individuals, proving that it is a commercial success and leading the way in the development of our communities and society. I pay tribute particularly to its former chief executive, Terry Thomas, who is now a Member of the other place. During his tenure at the Co-operative bank, he began what has become commonplace in banking but was unusual and revolutionary in its time: ethical banking. The Co-operative bank led the way, showing that banking could be commercially successful while at the same time responsible to the community as a whole.

Moving on from ethical banking, the Co-operative bank took a lead in working with business, in particular to improve the environment. It set up the first business environment centre in the country when establishing its organisation in Manchester some years ago. The bank is a fine example of co-operation, showing how the co-operative movement combines individual need, self-help, mutuality and commercial success, leading the community forward on the basis of those values.

Several hon. Members have mentioned the importance of the growing social enterprise sector. That is one area where the Bill will have particular relevance. It is highlighting the importance of mutuality to production, enterprise, people working together and to meeting community need. There are particular examples of social enterprise in Liverpool that have national significance. In developing the provision of furniture particularly for poorer people, in providing training and now in developing Bulky Bob's in recycling, not just in Liverpool but in London and other areas of the country, the furniture resource centre has shown the importance of social enterprise and individual initiative.

It is in Liverpool, too, that another body vital to the development of social enterprise is already working successfully. I refer to the Merseyside special investment fund, which was set up in 1996 as an experiment in how the private sector could work with objective 1 funds to develop business in the Merseyside area. In the five years that have passed, it has invested £32 million, attracted another £88 million and supported 600 businesses and 5,000 jobs. What is most significant is that only a few months ago it set up a new loan fund, initially of £2 million, and it is ready to lend between £3,000 and £100,000 not to conventional businesses but particularly to community-based businesses. It anticipates that over the next few years it will be supporting 80 such community-based businesses, involving 1,000 jobs.

I find it highly significant that the successful Merseyside investment fund, which started in Liverpool and is now working with objective 1 areas throughout the United Kingdom, regards as important the opening of a new fund that is directed especially towards community-based businesses. That is a clear indication of the importance of social enterprise and community business. I am sure that the fund will work with the already established Phoenix fund and local investment funds, as well as Business in the Community and the funds in which it is involved. The Bill is an important element in giving more support to the social enterprise movement and community businesses in general as they develop.

The work of the Eldonians in the Vauxhall area of Liverpool is well known. Indeed, they are hailed in this country and throughout Europe as a fine example of co-operative enterprise that considers both individual ventures and community regeneration. Their successes include housing, care for young and older people, sports facilities, and wider regeneration activities in the Vauxhall area. I hope that the current discussion of schools' reorganisation in Vauxhall will take account of the excellent work being done by the Eldonians. The Bill is directly relevant to the work of such groups.

The Bill is important because it marks a new and significant stage in the development of co-operation. It is about protecting assets, thus helping the work of community-based organisations to proceed more smoothly and supporting those who want that part of the sector to expand. The value of co-operation and the co-operative movement has already been shown by its direct achievements and the direct support that its has attracted. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire on bringing the Bill to the House. In years to come, it will be seen as another staging post in the growing success of co-operation, and the growing acceptance and recognition by the whole of our society of the fact that co-operation is a vital part of our economic progress, based on the everlasting values of mutuality and community benefit.

11.22 am

Ms Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley): Like other hon. Members, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) on obtaining first place in the ballot and on his choice of subject for his private Member's Bill. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman), I am a member of the Co-operative group of MPs, and I am delighted to support the Bill.

By building on the improvements made last year, the Bill extends into public services. This week, I met groups of constituents who are extremely concerned about council housing and what might happen to them in the light of changes in ownership. They want to know from whom they will be renting properties in future. Developing other forms of organisation such as housing co-operatives, and ensuring that such organisations enjoy greater security, will enable more people in local communities to have greater confidence when changing from state and local authority ownership to locally

[Ms Meg Munn]

owned organisations. In delivering public services, it is vital that people do not feel that they are being "done to", but feel empowered to be more involved in the delivery of the services that they receive.

One sector in which co-operatives have started to develop is care services. Having worked in social care for many years, I am especially interested in the sector. In September, I visited the Willows residential home in Codsall, which is part of the West Midlands co-operative society. I was impressed by the home, but asked myself whether it was merely well run, or whether it was different because it was a co-operative. As I talked to the staff, it became clear to me that the values that are at the heart of co-operatives make a real difference to staff teamwork, their investment of their time in the home, the training that they receive and the qualifications that they are able to gain. Furthermore, the residents feel confident in the home and its future because it is a co-operative.

In my view, residential care should not be the only service that is provided in the co-operative way. Much of our debate on care of the elderly focuses on residential and nursing homes, but most elderly people want to stay in their own home, and if they need care, they want that care to be provided in their home. I was encouraged to learn that the West Midlands co-operative society is already considering both the provision of care through short stays in the care home, to enable people to recover from illness, and how to ensure that after the short stay, when the person returns to their own home, domiciliary care can be provided. In that way, if people become so disabled that they need permanent residential care, they will already be familiar with the home and the people who will care for them there. That is an extremely beneficial model of care.

Co-operatives can provide such services better than private organisations, not only because they recognise the benefit of providing through care, but because of the values that are at the very heart of co-operation—the social values that co-operatives hold dear, the investment of surpluses to build service quality and capacity rather than generate profit, and the drive to engage and empower service users. The residents of the home that I visited were seen as partners in provision—care was not simply given to them; they were asked about how they wanted the care to be provided and they were involved in the running of the home. The West Midlands co-operative society is examining ways of involving other stakeholders—families and other interested parties in the community—in discussions about the way in which care is provided.

Co-operation is about engaging and empowering people—engaging communities in service development and management, and in monitoring and sustaining provision. For me, the heart of the process of providing services in a co-operative way is the long-term commitment to sustainable local provision. It is not about going in, providing a service and continuing to do so only as long as it delivers a profit. Especially in the sustained provision of services to vulnerable people, only that long-term commitment can provide the security that both services users and communities seek. I am delighted to be here to support the Bill on Second Reading.

11.28 am

Andy Burnham (Leigh): A Bill has to be a good one to keep me from Leigh on a Friday, and I am delighted to be able to say that the Bill before us is one such Bill.

Supporters trusts have been mentioned during the debate. I have an interest in that I am the chair of Supporters Direct, the Government-backed initiative to promote supporters trusts. The fact that the past two years have seen two prominent Bills that are relevant to the mutual sector provides clear evidence that the sector is on the march again. It is only a matter of time until many more people recognise that mutual ownership has answers to some of today's problems, whereas other, corporate forms have failed communities and people. Nowhere is that analysis illustrated more starkly than in professional football.

The welcome proposal in the Bill of an asset lock has great relevance to the beautiful game. Today, football is bringing the concept of mutual ownership to people who might never have tasted its benefits before. Hon. Members should reflect on the fact that, in the past four years, 50,000 people, many of them young men who had taken little interest in the democratic process hitherto, have become members of supporters trusts. They are now experiencing at first hand what mutualism is all about.

There are now 80 not-for-profit democratic supporters trusts in England and Scotland, all of which are industrial and provident societies, owning varying percentages of the league clubs with which they are associated. In the most celebrated cases—Lincoln City, Chesterfield and the new AFC Wimbledon—the supporters trust owns the club outright. It is my view and my hope that, if passed, the Bill will strengthen and protect these trusts.

The prolific growth of mutualism in football is a direct consequence of the way in which the private ownership model—the company model—has been shown to fail supporters and communities throughout the country. Today, professional football in England and Scotland is in financial crisis, and some of the game's oldest names—York City, Port Vale, Bradford City, Tranmere Rovers—stand on the brink of extinction.

Each club is a proud and cherished community institution. I stress the word "club", because they all had typical mutual beginnings—factory teams, church teams, boys clubs. However, as football became more popular and players began to be paid, the clubs set up as companies to limit the liabilities of their directors. At the time, the Football Association recognised the potentially devastating conflict of that, and introduced rules to prevent asset-stripping of grounds and the leaching of money out of the game by payments to directors. Sadly, its fears have been proved well-founded in recent years and the finances of many once-proud clubs have been plundered for private gain.

Let me mention two case studies that show why the Bill is relevant to football and why the asset lock proposals could be of great benefit to football supporters.

York City, a club mentioned by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) and a great name in English football, is today in administration, on the brink of extinction. Two weeks ago, the York City Supporters

Trust, a mutual society that Supporters Direct helped to create, had to pump £90,000 into the club just to keep it going over the next few weeks, for no share return whatever. It is in this parlous state because of the actions of its former chairman, Douglas Craig, whose activities were brilliantly exposed in *The Independent* by columnist David Conn. Unbeknown to the fans, he transferred the ownership of Bootham Crescent, the club's main asset and traditional home, to a holding company called Bootham Crescent Holdings, specifically to bypass FA rules. Craig—I hate to inject a partisan note into the debate—formerly a Tory councillor, stands to profit personally to the tune of £3.5 million if a bid to build houses on Bootham Crescent is approved, having bought his shares for not much more than £120,000 in the early 1990s. By contrast, the club is crippled with a range of debts and now fears that every match will be its last.

York City is an organisation nurtured and cherished by its community. One of its stands—the David Longhurst stand—was built in memory of a player who died on the pitch during a game, and was built with money donated by the fans and ordinary people. Now it will be bulldozed for houses.

The case of Wimbledon football club is a different example. It highlights the strengths of the community benefit society model and the appalling weaknesses of the private company model when it comes to safeguarding a community organisation such as a football club. The key word is democracy. Whatever anyone in football says, supporters see these clubs not as businesses but as public bodies—public property. It has been widely reported that the club's chairman, Charles Koppel, plans to remove Wimbledon FC from south London to Milton Keynes, 100 per cent. against the wishes of the fans, who have not been consulted on whether they think that it is a good idea. Those two examples illustrate why mutual solutions have, by necessity, gained currency among football supporters.

A supporters trust is initially a vehicle to raise cash to save a club, but if it builds influence and ownership in the long term it can save the club for future generations, protect the assets and exert direct democratic control over how the club is run. Douglas Craig is certainly not the first person to asset-strip a football club for personal gain, and he will not be the last. The private ownership model has left clubs too unaccountable and too lightly regulated—easy meat for the unscrupulous to ransack and bleed dry.

If, back at the origins of the game, clubs had set up as mutual organisations, as other professional sports clubs did—my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) mentioned that—many of these problems might have been avoided, but they were not and we are where we are. Nevertheless, I hope that, in the early part of this century, football will belatedly go down the mutual path.

Supporters Direct has been behind the spread of supporters trusts. We shall soon be looking to engage directly with clubs to see whether we can develop a full community mutual model for football that will bring financial incentives for going down that route and ensure that all proceeds are reinvested in the club. Some would say that that is not the big league; cynics say that football league clubs have been not-for-profit for many years. I would not comment on that; suffice it to say that, at the moment, football league rules prevent a mutual organisation from owning a football club, and I hope that the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir Brian Mawhinney), the new chairman of the Football League, who is not present today, might consider that and allow mutual organisations to own football league clubs. It is in that way, if the measures in the Bill become law, that football assets throughout this land will be protected against the abuse and asset-stripping that we have witnessed in recent years. It will help to preserve a diverse and extended football league across all the towns of this country.

If that day comes when we see mutualism in football, the great attraction of the Bill for football fans will be that the profiteering motive will be entirely removed from the equation. For supporters trusts it holds out the enticing prospect that if they can take control of their club they can effectively save it for this generation and generations to come. It is unlikely, but perhaps one day a few football grounds may ring to the chant of, "There's only one Mark Todd".

11.35 am

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Ruth Kelly): I should like to start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) for introducing the Bill so eloquently. He set out the issues clearly and in depth, and demonstrated a thorough understanding of them. There have also been interesting and important contributions from several of my hon. Friends, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), who has led the way in this matter, and also from my hon. Friends the Members for West Bromwich, West (Mr. Bailey), for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman), for Sheffield, Heeley (Ms Munn) and for Leigh (Andy Burnham).

The Government are clearly committed to the mutual sector, but we are keen to ensure that the industrial and provident society is seen as a modern and flexible corporate form within that sector, while retaining the unique and distinctive qualities that mark it out as a mutual organisation. That is why we gave our support to the private Member's Bill introduced last year by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West, and I congratulate him on his achievements in ensuring that it reached the statute book.

In addition, last September the strategy unit completed "Private Action, Public Benefit"—its review of legislation for the charity and not-for-profit sector. It proposed wide-ranging reforms, including proposals to modernise the industrial and provident society legal framework. Those recommendations have been the subject of a public consultation, which has now finished. We are currently examining the responses received and considering options for taking forward the agenda, but I emphasise to the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) that the Bill does not pre-empt reforms that the Government may otherwise have made, somewhat further along the path, as the initial responses from the consultation are very positive towards modernisation of the sector.

The Government certainly welcome this new opportunity to update industrial and provident society legislation. I am very sympathetic to the changes and the

[Ruth Kelly]

reforms that it is trying deliver, because they are consistent with our aim to support and modernise industrial and provident society legislation, and to strengthen such societies' contribution to social enterprise. I am therefore pleased to say that, in principle, the Government can support the objectives behind the Bill.

However—*[Interruption.]* There is always a "however." We believe that the Bill will require amendment to ensure that those objectives are genuinely achieved. I have had constructive discussions with my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire on the nature of these amendments, and I hope that we shall shortly be able to agree where changes might be made, so that the Government can give their full support to the Bill.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: I hope that in the spirit of the constructive approach that hon. Members on both sides of the House have taken to the Bill, and to speed its passage, any amendments that the Government have in mind can be shared, perhaps even before we reach Committee.

Ruth Kelly: We shall certainly seek support from hon. Members on both sides of the House to ensure the smooth passage of the Bill. I look forward to fruitful discussions with all interested parties.

I should like to examine briefly the main clauses. Clause 1 proposes to allow community benefit societies to include a rule in their constitutions, which could not subsequently be reversed by its members, prohibiting the distribution of their assets to any person or body other than another society with an equivalent rule or a charity. It also prohibits conversion to a company or other body, unless that company or body has an equivalent rule.

At the moment the Financial Services Authority will not in practice register a community benefit society unless it has such an asset lock-in in its constitution, but that restriction is not totally binding. For example, a society could convert to a company and some time later reverse the asset lock-in rule in its company constitution.

During the passage through Parliament of the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 2002, the same asset lock-in provision was considered. At the time it was acknowledged that there were benefits and potential drawbacks to such an approach, but we were not in a position to consider both the policy and legal implications within the time scale of the private Member's Bill process. Since then the strategy unit has recommended that an asset lock-in provision is made available to community benefit societies.

We will need to study carefully responses from the public consultation on the strategy unit report, but I understand that those on the asset lock-in proposals have been positive. The Government therefore wish to undertake further work on the possibility of an asset lock-in provision for community benefit societies to examine how a scheme might work. We will further consult on the detail and the possibility of introducing legislation to enact such a regime, if it continues to appear sensible and feasible to do so.

I am doubtful that it will be possible within the time scale available in Parliament for the Bill to establish in detail exactly what substantive provisions should be made in relation to an asset lock-in regime and what amendments would be needed to make it fully workable. However, the Government support that proposal and wish to examine the suitability of an asset lock-in regime. I therefore commit to continue to work with my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire to see whether proposals can be brought forward during progress on the Bill that will ultimately facilitate the implementation of an asset lock-in regime for community benefit societies.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) raised a couple of specific issues in relation to a possible asset lock-in. In particular he asked whether a large mutual might consider changing its constitution to become a community benefit society so as to take advantage of the proposals that are under consideration. In principle, we believe that a company could set up a community benefit society and transfer its assets to it. However, it would need to satisfy the criteria of benefiting that society, a condition which is part of the constitution and make-up of community benefit societies. He also queried the 75:50 thresholds for conversion. I cannot give a commitment now that the Government would wish to pursue that matter, but I am sure that the issue will be debated further in Committee and I look forward to the hon. Gentleman's contributions on that subject.

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way a second time. I understood her to say that, while the Government broadly support the Bill, she is concerned that the timetable for private Member's Bills might mean that the Government will not be ready with the detailed proposals that might fit into the Bill. She cloaks that with the promise of further consultations with the hon. Member for South Derbyshire. Can she explain the impediments to fitting in with that timetable? It seems to me that, with the support of hon. Members on both sides of the House, delay may be unnecessary so she might need to revise her idea that this measure is not intended to pre-empt the strategy unit report, given that she also supports its recommendations in this regard.

Ruth Kelly: Yes, I can. The strategy unit report raises various issues that we will need to consider in detail. They include precisely how a regulator would work, and the precise terms under which assets could be transferred to another community benefit society. In principle, we could overcome many of these difficulties, given more detailed consultation. The plan is to enable the passage of such legislation in due course, subject to detailed consultation, particularly with the benefit society movement, to make sure that we get it right, rather than to suggest provisions during the passage of the Bill which may be counter-productive to the movement. In particular, we are concerned about preserving the flexibility of the movement to deal with unforeseen circumstances. Clearly it needs to be sufficiently flexible to evolve over time to changing circumstances. We will need to get the precise details right, but in principle the Government are supportive of such a move and it may well be possible to work with my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire and come up with a proposal that would allow us to pass legislation in due course.

Clause 2 proposes to change the powers and capacities of industrial and provident societies in order to improve their ability to enter into business transactions. The current risk for those dealing with societies is that transactions may be invalid if a society performs an act that is within the law but outside the rules of that particular society. An apparently legitimate business transaction might then prove to be invalid. The current situation therefore places a burden on those trying to do business with societies to investigate the societies' rules. It may also deter some from conducting business with a society if it is perceived to involve a higher risk of a contract being declared void.

The Bill seeks to address this by applying to societies and their committees certain company law provisions which allow a company and its directors to bind the company if it acts outside its constitution but within the law—a contract made under these circumstances remains in force between the contracting parties without absolving directors and other company officers from their obligations or liabilities to company members.

These principles are easily transferable to the industrial and provident society context and measures to this effect would increase protection for those doing business in good faith with a society. They should also facilitate the ability of societies to conduct business and we therefore fully support the principles behind the clause.

Clause 3 aims to make it easier for societies to enter into contracts and execute documents. I do not propose to examine those provisions in detail now, but I take note of the comments made by the hon. Member for Eddisbury.

Mr. Love: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. A number of hon. Members have suggested further amendments that could be included in the Bill, very much along the lines of the Treasury consultation document that was circulated in 1998 and which included many non-controversial provisions. Would the Minister be sympathetic to some of those non-controversial amendments being included in the Bill?

Ruth Kelly: Following the strategy unit report, the Government will have to make a number of decisions about priorities and which areas we wish to pursue in relation to industrial and provident societies. The Bill's progress and what we can do within its framework will determine how we can take the movement forward. It is a little early for me to say precisely what those priorities may be, although in due course we will make recommendations for the sector.

In principle, we are sympathetic to clause 3, which makes it easier for societies to enter into contracts and execute documents, and we very much hope to be able to support it in Committee. In that context, I look forward to the debate with the hon. Member for Eddisbury on the nature of protection for members.

The proposals are a welcome step towards the modernisation of the industrial and provident society movement, as they would increase its operational flexibility. The Government therefore support the principles behind the clause, but again we will need to examine it in detail, and work with my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire to table any necessary amendments to ensure that the Bill achieves what is intended.

Finally, I reaffirm the Government's commitment to a thriving mutual sector. I congratulate all those who have been involved in the preparation of the Bill and look forward to assisting with its progress through Parliament.

11.50 am

Mr. Todd: With the leave of the House, I should like to respond briefly to Members' comments and speeches. First, I thank everyone who has attended the debate, whether they have spoken or not, for demonstrating support for the sector and their interest in its future development.

I thank the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) for his thoughtful and positive contribution to the subject and the way in which he reinforced his points with his experience in the corporate sector. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) drew attention to the issue of ultra vires and a possible discussion about audit and accountancy frameworks which arises if relevant amendments are tabled in Committee. I am sure that those issues will be debated again should the Bill reach that stage.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, West (Mr. Bailey) debated the issue of the asset lock and its meaning, and emphasised the future use of the industrial and provident society in developing the mutual sector. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) touched on the diversity of existing mutuals and made some detailed points about the democratic framework which, I am sure, will be debated further in Committee. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) spoke powerfully about the sector's contribution to social enterprise in her constituency and area. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Ms Munn) spoke interestingly about care services and added greatly to my knowledge of the sector. She reinforced the benefits of the co-operative model for that sector.

May I tell my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) that I look forward to my name being used in football chants, although I suspect that I may have to wait some time for that? He rightly drew attention to the importance of the sector in football and the reasons why it is relevant to the football community, which is all too readily dominated by wealthy people with short-term interests. Finally, I thank the Minister for her careful but positive response to the Bill. I look forward, if the House wills it, to debating many of the issues raised this morning in Committee. I very much hope that the House will give the Bill a Second Reading.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

Company Directors' Performance and Compensation Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

11.53 am

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Harrow, West): On a point of order, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 163 (Motion to sit in private):—

The House divided: Ayes 0, Noes 23.

Division No. 70] [11:54 am

AYES

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jim Knight and
Mr. Mark Hendrick

NOES

Bellingham, Henry
Bercow, John
Browning, Mrs Angela
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Forth, rh Eric
Gray, James *(N Wilts)*
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hoban, Mark *(Fareham)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Lilley, rh Peter
Loughton, Tim
Maclean, rh David
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & M-Kent)*
Thurso, John
Wiggin, Bill

Tellers for the Noes:
Phil Hope and
Huw Irranca-Davies

Question accordingly negatived.

It appearing on the report of the Division that 40 Members were not present, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *declared that the Question was not decided, and the business under consideration stood over until the next sitting of the House.*

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for Labour Members to use a parliamentary device to kill a Bill that has widespread support from all parties, simply because the Government are embarrassed to hear the case against compensation for company directors who have failed in their role? They have taken no action in the past and hope that, by obscuring debate, they can take the matter off the table and ensure that their inactivity receives no press attention.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is not it extraordinary that about 30 or 40 Labour Members are in the Chamber and have chosen not to go through the Division Lobby? By that strange device, under the Standing Orders of the House, they have allowed the Bill to fall. If we were in a Standing Committee, the number of people present would be counted, not the number of people who voted. Should not the Procedure Committee examine that?

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is not there a convention in the House that the vote and the voice should go together? Is not it slightly extraordinary that no one voted in the No Lobby having shouted?

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If none of the interpretations offered by my hon. Friends the Members for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) and for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) is correct, the only remaining possible explanation is that a number of hon. Members who came this far with the intention to vote were somehow physically prevented from entering the Division Lobby, to which problem we would obviously need to attend.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I understand the disappointment of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) in the circumstances, but nothing out of order has taken place. If hon. Members are dissatisfied with any aspects of the procedures of the House, there are opportunities for pursuing that. I am sure that the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir N. Winterton), as Chairman of the Procedure Committee, would always be willing to entertain approaches for matters to be examined by his Committee.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Given the turn of events, which must have taken many hon. Members who are in other parts of the parliamentary estate watching what is happening by surprise, will you consider suspending the sitting briefly to give them time to attend the next debate? They will have assumed, in all reasonableness, that the debate on the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) would have taken some time. Surely in fairness, given what has just happened, a brief suspension of the sitting is in order to allow colleagues to gather themselves properly for the next debate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I should have thought that the right hon. Gentleman, who is punctilious in matters of attendance in the House, would expect the same standard to be observed by all hon. Members. Everyone is expected to know the Order Paper for the day and to make themselves available within the normal periods of time that the House allows for both Divisions and debates.

Mr. Bercow: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Of course the interpretation of the rules that you offer is not to be disputed or contradicted in any way, but I wonder whether it might be courteous and germane to take account of the fact that, despite the unparalleled assiduity of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), he does have to trouble himself only to come in from a London residence in Kennington. Is the inclement weather not a relevant factor in the circumstances and might we not allow for it?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Of all the matters of which the Chair has to take account, inclement weather is the least of them. Indeed, it might be said that some hon. Members are closer to the parliamentary estate than they might otherwise have chosen to be, with constituency duties in mind.

Health and Safety at Work (Offences) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

11.59 am

Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

May I extend my thanks to the House for allowing me this privilege today? The Bill's purpose is self-evident in its title. If it is successful, it will have an impact on every workplace, not only in my region, but across the rest of England, Scotland and Wales. It would also influence the best safety practices in Northern Ireland.

My message is simple and I am sure the House will agree that it is common sense. Anyone who breaks safety law should pay for that breach. Parliament has responded to the changes in workplaces over the past 30 years since the introduction of the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974.

I hope to explain in a nutshell the Bill's principal provisions. It seeks to raise the maximum level of fines for most health and safety offences to £20,000, thereby allowing for more fines to reach that level. It also makes it possible to imprison employers for the most serious offences, and raises the fine for not being properly insured. If these measures receive the support of Parliament today, I hope that the Bill will then receive a fair wind and become law by the autumn.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I take account of what the hon. Gentleman says about the ambition to increase fines and to provide for the possibility of imprisonment in the most serious cases. It is obviously incumbent on him to take account of the likely impact of that proposal. Can he tell the House what assessment he has made of the likely effect on prison overcrowding of the Bill's provision for imprisonment?

Lawrie Quinn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He anticipates the next phase of my speech, and if he will allow me to continue I shall speak not only from my professional experience in these matters, but from the perspective of my region of Yorkshire and the Humber.

In doing so, I should like to begin by reviewing aspects of the health and safety record in my region. In the past three and a half years, 29 employers in Yorkshire and the Humber have had to pay fines of more than £20,000. As the published record of the Health and Safety Executive shows, only 10 of the 291 criminal convictions for health and safety offences in my region between 1 April 1999 and 1 December 2002 resulted in fines of £20,000 or more. Most of the convictions led to fines of less than £5,000, which is why it is time for the level of fines and the tariff in the primary legislation to be examined, revitalised and increased significantly. This legislation is some 30 years old, and it is about time that Parliament attended to its duty to revisit it.

Mr. Bercow: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his generosity in giving way again. Punishment for breaches of the kind that the Bill is designed to address should certainly be condign, but has he based the intended fines on the increase in the retail prices index in the past 20 years, or has he used a factor such as company turnover as his guiding criterion?

Lawrie Quinn: Again, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman; one would almost think that he has helped me with my speech, because I am coming on to those matters, too. If he will show some patience and allow me to progress, I will willingly deal with any interventions that he cares to make. If he examines the issue, he will doubtless discover that workplaces in his own region of the south-east have a similar record and experiences.

In Yorkshire and the Humber, 19 of the top 29 fines were for accidents resulting in fatalities. Tragically, they included the death of one child, so these are very serious matters that I am rightly bringing to the House's attention. Other offences resulting in prosecution involved amputations, paralysis below the neck, serious electrocutions, bad burns and the exposure of workers to fatal asbestos fibres. Regrettably, the latter issue, which the House considered recently, is a particular problem in my region.

Eight of the top 10 fines, four of which were for incidents resulting in fatalities, were for exactly £20,000. That begs the question: what value a life? The highest fine in the region was £400,000; regrettably, it was for a fatal electrocution.

In my constituency, there have been only six convictions during the three and a half year period of my research, with penalties ranging from a fine of £5,000 to a conditional discharge. As the people responsible for these important health and safety issues, we are giving the wrong signal.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The hon. Gentleman seems to imply that one of the problems is the low rate of conviction, which is a different matter from the penalties that can be imposed on conviction. Will his Bill do anything to raise the number of convictions, or is his interest solely focused on penalties? If the conviction rate is a problem, can something be done about it?

Lawrie Quinn: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. My purpose is simple: to tell the whole country that Parliament takes these matters seriously. The measure is about prevention and ensuring a correct workplace culture for everyone—from the operative on the shop floor or the site to the top person in the company. I want to demonstrate that Parliament is conscious of all the problems and wants a safety culture that is upheld with due consideration across the board. The current legislation has been in force for 30 years and, as I continue with my speech, I shall explain some of the reasons that it is time to revitalise it.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): I note the hon. Gentleman's point about updating the law, which is in some cases more than 100 years old. Why, however, does he want to amend section 40(9)(d) of the Explosives Act 1875? Is that really necessary?

Lawrie Quinn: I am especially pleased that the hon. Gentleman has made that intervention. His record in the House, as demonstrated at many Question Times, is

[Lawrie Quinn]

proof of his interest in these matters. As he will recall, I wrote to him asking if he would act as one of the Bill's sponsors; regrettably, he did not reply positively. I am conscious that he takes these matters seriously and I commend him for that. If he will bear with me as I develop my speech, I hope that he will find that his intervention has been answered.

I commend the excellent work done day in, day out by health and safety inspectors not only in my region but throughout the country. My previous professional experience showed me that in the vast majority of workplaces there is a real sense of partnership between the inspectorate, employers, employees and trade unions and that they continue the fight against complacency, bad practice and neglect. As I know only too well, if all those dominoes of ignorance fall over at once, it can lead to serious accidents and, tragically, the fatalities that I have frequently encountered.

I have reached the point in my speech that covers the question of the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who, unfortunately, is no longer in his place. As part of my preparation for the Bill, I conducted many face-to-face interviews with key stakeholders in industry, including discussions at Congress house with Mr. Owen Tudor, who is recognised nationally as a champion of health and safety policy. I am also especially grateful to one of the unions for my own industry—the railway industry—the Transport Salaried Staffs Association and its general secretary, Richard Rosser, for his personal support in encouraging me to pursue my Bill.

The House may be pleased to know that my concerns were spurred on by direct contact with my constituents. People came to my surgeries and wrote to me to explain their deep anxiety about the matters that I want to address in the Bill.

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his generosity in giving way. He talks about consulting various organisations. Has he consulted employers' organisations, such as the CBI and the Federation of Small Businesses? There is a risk the Bill would have a regulatory impact on businesses and that they might go out of business.

Lawrie Quinn: I commend Opposition Members on anticipating the direction of my speech. The hon. Gentleman may be pleasantly surprised by what I am about to say.

I have had contact not only with people from my own industry and construction, but with the CIA—not the organisation that those initials suggest, but the Chemical Industries Association. I am pleased to be serving on a fellowship with the Industry Parliament Trust and Degussa—a well-known, internationally respected chemicals company. I am particularly grateful to Dr. David Campbell of Degussa for his good common sense and advice about issues that affect the chemical industry across Europe. Along with others in construction, insurance and other major employers, he has urged Parliament to take action.

The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne) asks me about the Federation of Small Businesses. On 3 January this year, I met the chairman—I forget his actual title—of the Yorkshire and Humberside regional federation of small businesses and I outlined the Bill's provisions. Those conversations helped me to prepare and draft some of the provisions.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Lawrie Quinn: Will the hon. Gentleman please allow me to continue? I have often seen those on the Front Bench take lots of interventions, and I think that I have taken 80 per cent. If he will bear with me, what I am about to say may answer his question.

Mr. Gray *rose—*

Lawrie Quinn: Let me have a go at answering before the hon. Gentleman asks the question.

Again, on 3 January, I met Mr. Tony Cherry of the Federation of Small Businesses, and I was able to raise the wide range of concerns of small businesses not only in my constituency, but across the region. The House will know that the Federation of Small Businesses deserves respect and needs to be commended on the very important work that is does in helping its members. I am a big fan of what it does locally in my constituency. Many small businesses in the Yorkshire and the Humber region benefit from its work.

However, the House needs to understand what the federation in my region tells me. Admittedly, I have not spoken to it at national level, but it should be borne in mind that I am private Member and that I have access on that level. The federation has told me that the vast majority of small businesses attend to their business in a very safe manner, but, like me, it is concerned about those businesses that do not meet the current legal provisions.

The House will be horrified to hear that there are many instances where people are not adhering to the current law on employers' liability insurance, simply because the premiums that insurance companies require have grossly increased compared with the value of the fines and penalties under the existing 1974 legislation. The hon. Member for North-West Norfolk (Mr. Bellingham) will know about that, as he has asked a question on that very subject.

Anyone with any common sense will realise that a provision that is 30 years old needs to be revitalised. That is why I have introduced the Bill. On the point raised by the hon. Member for Tatton, I certainly believe that small businesses in my part of the world agree with what I am trying to do.

Let me take this opportunity briefly to commend the Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, South (Nigel Griffiths), who is responsible for small business—and whom Mr. Cherry also commended strongly—on the pilot grant scheme for small firms to cover the costs of health and safety training. Along with many other colleagues, I am pleased to endorse the Federation of Small Businesses' campaign for the provision of 100 per cent. tax relief for capital purchases intended to increase protection and reduce risks at source within the workplace. The time has come for Parliament to respond to that agenda. Two years ago, the Deputy Prime Minister, after consultation across industry, recognised that agenda in his document on revitalising safety in the workplace, which I have used as a source for this Bill.

Let me say a brief word on the concerns about human rights, on which the hon. Member for Buckingham touched. I have every confidence—those to whom I have talked in industry have given me that confidence—that the Bill would not affect the compatibility of the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 with the European convention on human rights. A reverse burden of proof provision such as section 40, to which I think the hon. Member for North-West Norfolk referred, may offend against the presumption of innocence in article 6.2 of the convention.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Lawrie Quinn: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will understand that I wish to continue.

Recently, however, the Court of Appeal examined section 40 and concluded, on the basis of a number of compelling factors, that it represents a fair balance between the rights of the individual to a fair trial and the protection of life and limb from dangerous work practices.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Lawrie Quinn: I have already been generous in giving way to the hon. Gentleman.

In conclusion, I hope that the House will respond to the national disgrace of 28,000 serious accidents each year and, tragically, 300 fatalities each year as a result of health and safety breaches at work. That means that one worker dies on our sites every working day. That is a national disgrace, and it is about time that Parliament tended to it. I hope that the House will give my Bill a Second Reading.

12.33 pm

Mr. Mark Hoban (Fareham): The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Lawrie Quinn) made some important points about health and safety. It is clearly a matter of concern to employers and parliamentarians that proper safeguards are in place to ensure the health and safety of employees.

One of the issues that employers have raised with me in the past 18 months has been the level and volume of health and safety regulations, and there is some concern about their complexity. The Bill would increase the penalties incurred by an employer who breached the regulations. In preparing for the Bill, the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby consulted the construction industry and the Chemical Industries Association—complex and dangerous industries unless the correct safety procedures are in place. I know how important health and safety is to members of my family who are involved in the construction industry, and how important it is to the way in which sites are run and projects managed and the safeguards that they put in place.

Mr. Bercow: I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that we should legislate not in anger but on the evidence. Can he tell us something about the increasing incidence of offences that formed the evidential base on which the review of the current penalty maximums was conducted by the Home Office, the then Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Health and Safety Executive between February and September 1999?

Mr. Hoban: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments, but I suspect that he may have an opportunity to elaborate on that evidence himself later on, for the benefit of the House. That evidential base was indeed an omission from the speech of the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby. He simply said that the Bill was a good thing rather than explaining it fully. Given the way in which the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) was killed off earlier, he had plenty of time to give a full explanation.

Mr. Bercow: I have the highest regard for the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby, and I respect his intentions in promoting the Bill, but my concern is not that he did not want to develop the evidential premise for the provisions but that one or two of his colleagues, for their own reasons, were not keen that he should do so.

Mr. Hoban: Perhaps the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby can tackle that valuable point when he winds up.

Mr. Forth: Perhaps my hon. Friend would say a few words about whether he shares my disappointment that the promoter of the Bill did not provide more evidence of international comparisons, in which I have always thought that we have an exemplary health and safety record. Surely we should have international, as well as domestic, sector-by-sector evidence.

Mr. Hoban: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. British industry is indeed perceived as having a good health and safety record. Is it fair to increase the penalties here, when our businesses are competing internationally? My understanding is that, in order to change the penalties, it is necessary to amend the European Communities Act 1972, which perhaps makes it all the more important to understand the international comparisons behind the Bill.

Mr. Leigh: It is unfortunate that the promoter was clearly told to sit down. This was his big day, and he could at least have been allowed to develop his case. I am confused about why these changes are being made by way of a private Member's Bill. After all, the Government amend fines all the time, often as an adjunct to a Government Bill. What does my hon. Friend think is the provenance of this Bill? Is it a Government handout? Surely the point of a private Member's Bill is to progress some great private issue of interest to the promoter.

Mr. Hoban: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. On the cover of the Bill, we are told that the explanatory notes were provided by the Department for Work and Pensions, so perhaps, to use an unparliamentary expression, it is indeed a handout.

[Mr. Hoban]

The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby perhaps gave the game away towards the end of his speech when he referred to the review that the Deputy Prime Minister initiated in the early years of the last Parliament, which produced the recommendations that the Bill puts into effect.

I wonder where the Government's priorities on legislation lie. I would have thought that the Deputy Prime Minister, a man of some weight and stature in the Labour party—both metaphorically and literally—would have been able to find time in the Government's legislative programme, which certainly was rather light in content last year, to introduce a Bill such as this. Indeed, the provisions could have been introduced by way of statutory instrument. The hon. Gentleman might explain why that was not so, but he is clearly not interested in responding.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Lawrie Quinn) has a great personal interest in the railways and a distinguished history of speaking on behalf of the industry before he entered the House. Is not it disappointing, therefore, that the Government have given him this thin little Bill rather than allowing him to take up one of his interests, such as the railways?

Mr. Hoban: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. I have heard the hon. Gentleman wax lyrical on many subjects. I have heard him speaking in European Standing Committee A on the fishing industry. His interests in the railway industry are well known. Indeed, he cited it as a source of inspiration for the Bill. How significant that inspiration is compared with that which he found in the Department for Work and Pensions, I do not know. Perhaps he could clarify that.

Lawrie Quinn: In 19 years of working in the railway industry I was responsible for jobs that, sadly, resulted in six fatalities. I mean it most sincerely when I say that I promise everyone in the House that if they had to attend the funerals and become involved in the inquiries and the human pain and suffering as a result of an accident at work, they, like me, would be passionate about safety. It is for those private reasons, and owing to issues in the fishing industry and others that I cited, especially the construction industry, that I have promoted this Bill. I cited the industries that are getting it right, but through the Bill I am trying to encourage those that are not committed to health and safety in the way that I believe I am.

Mr. Hoban: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. From personal experience, he has demonstrated why the Bill is important and so dear to him. All those who as employers had responsibility for their staff will share the concern that he has shown by promoting the Bill.

I was referring to the hon. Gentleman consulting employers in sectors of industry where employees are at great risk. I know from talking to employers in my constituency that there are problems not just in manufacturing but in construction and distribution. A number of employers in white-collar businesses have complained about the level of health and safety regulation and the need to introduce it in accountancy firms, for example. The issue of risk assessment and the level of regulation required are of deep concern to them. My concern—perhaps we can explore this in Committee—is about the higher penalties applying to businesses in which risk is limited but which, through some slip in understanding the complexities of health and safety regulations, inadvertently breach the rules.

Lawrie Quinn *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Hoban: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head. Perhaps he would like to explain.

Lawrie Quinn: I believe that a good employer has nothing to fear from health and safety legislation. It is those who do not adhere to such provision—the so-called cowboys—whom I am trying to encourage to change through my Bill. It is extremely important to recognise that good employers have nothing to fear from the Bill. They will find that it is good for their staff, good for their business and, in the long run, good for the development of their company.

Mr. Hoban: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, but one that slightly misses the mark. The problem for many employers is that the rules are so complex and the changes to them so frequent that any breaches that they inadvertently commit are due to that complexity, not to whether they are good or bad employers. It is important that the House understands that and takes note of it, because if employers breach regulations by mistake they will be subject to a regime that is much tougher than it was before, and there is a risk that they will be unfairly penalised for mistakes that were not their fault.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) has, rightly, emphasised that it is the cowboys who are his target, but I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Mr. Hoban) agrees that that fact does not obviate the need for a proper debate about the nature and extent of the condign punishment that offenders should suffer. Given that the prison population—a matter to which I animadverted earlier—is projected to rise from approximately 72,000 now to between 99,000 and 109,000 by 2009, do we not need to know what the likely impact of this well-intentioned Bill would be on prison overcrowding?

Mr. Hoban: Yet again, my hon. Friend makes a telling point. It is interesting that paragraph 17 of the explanatory notes to the Bill states:

> "There are no significant public expenditure implications. Making imprisonment available for more health and safety offences is expected to lead to a minimal increase in the prison population."

One has no reason to doubt that assertion, but at a time when the prisons are under pressure in terms of population, and when that pressure appears—at least to those of us who do not have a legal background—to have triggered demands by the Lord Chief Justice to stop imprisonment for most type of burglary, which should relieve the pressure, it seems odd that the Bill might lead to additional overcrowding pressures in prisons. If under this provision persons who commit a health and safety offence are to become liable to imprisonment, one wonders whether the Government believe that the provision is unlikely to be used and is therefore of minimal benefit; and, if that is the case, one wonders why the provision appears in the Bill.

Mr. Bercow: I am sorry to trouble my hon. Friend unduly, but does he agree that the Bill appears to be flawed on one or the other or both of two counts? Either the Bill is guilty of a lack of transparency or honesty in the intended sentencing policy, because it provides for imprisonment without the intention that effect will be given to that provision; or it is based on a calculation of the likely deterrent value of the new sentences, in which case we need to know on what basis—what evidential yardstick or international comparison—the promoter's confidence about the deterrent effect is founded.

Mr. Hoban: On the first point, the question is: if there is to be a sanction, will it be used? On the second point, if there is no expectation that the Health and Safety Executive will use the sanction, will it ever act as a deterrent? If it is not intended to use the sanction, there will be no deterrent. If it is intended to use it more widely, the financial implications of the Bill for public expenditure are rather greater than the explanatory notes suggest. *[Interruption.]* The Minister for Work says that we must be kidding. When he replies to the debate, I am sure that he will answer the valid points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) about the use and effectiveness of the sanction.

I have devoted most of my speech to discussion of health and safety offences and the punishments that will be brought into effect if the Bill becomes law. Opposition Members have expressed concern about the nature and purpose of the sanctions outlined in clause 1. I am sure that we shall return to that point in Committee, because it is important to ensure that the true purpose and intent of the clause are well known to employers and to the Health and Safety Commission, which will be responsible for putting the Bill into effect if it becomes law.

Mr. Leigh: My hon. Friend speaks for the Conservative party this morning, which traditionally speaks for business. Will he outline what the Bill will cost business, any burdens that it might place on business and whether those on the Conservative Front Bench therefore have anything to say on these subjects?

Mr. Hoban: My hon. Friend is tempting me down a route that even the Government probably have not explored fully—the Bill's impact on business.

Mr. Forth: I might be able to give my hon. Friend some help. He knows, because he studied them closely, that in the explanatory notes, which are a very fertile field of information on the Bill—quite a lot of it rather controversial—item 19 says, incredibly:

> "The Bill will not impose new requirements on business."

Even if the Government have failed to make any proper impact assessment, and say that there is no need for one, do not our joint and collective knowledge of business, and our instincts, tell us that it is bound to add a burden if it is going to have any effect at all?

Mr. Hoban: My right hon. Friend, with his usual incisive powers in looking at legislation, makes a very valid point. I know, from my own experience of looking at regulatory impact assessments, that often they are incomplete or ill thought-through. If the Government are saying that no such assessment is needed in this case, I do wonder whether they have looked at the matter fully. My right hon. Friend is right: if the Bill is passed, employers will review their procedures. It will provide fertile employment for human resources consultants and safety consultants, who will point out to businesses that these punishments have been introduced, and that the liabilities that they will face are much steeper than they were previously.

Mr. Bercow: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hoban: Will my hon. Friend bear with me? I have given way to him several times already and I will of course give way to him imminently, but I want to finish this point.

The Bill will provide a sales pitch for health and safety consultants throughout the country. They will tell employers, "We must look again at your health and safety procedures, because you do not want to go to jail." Even those employers who are comfortable with their existing health and safety procedures will feel under considerable pressure to accept the blandishments of health and safety consultants who are using the Bill—

Lawrie Quinn *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Hoban: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head, but I have learned from talking to employers in my constituency that often nothing will open their cheque book more easily than the threat of sanctions or penalties. Good employers, not only bad ones, will feel the impact. I worry that the legislation will be used unscrupulously by some consultants, which no Member intends, to generate more business and cause businesses to incur additional costs. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) for raising that valid point because it is important to place on the record that we must be wary about the use to which the Bill will be put by consultants.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. That last point is especially applicable to small firms, which typically do not have in-house legal, finance or personnel departments and will therefore be required to seek and pay for outside consultancy advice. Given that 99.6 per cent. of companies in the UK employ fewer than 100 people and that those companies generate approximately two fifths of our national output and employ more than 50 per cent. of the private sector work force, are these not relevant matters that must be taken into account in our deliberations?

Mr. Hoban: My hon. Friend, as ever, makes a telling point, particularly about the impact of regulation on

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small businesses. It came as a surprise to me, having worked in the large corporate sector before coming to the House, that when I looked at an analysis of businesses in my constituency I found that very few of them—only 30 or 40 organisations—employed more than 50 people. The rest were small businesses, many with fewer than 10 employees. My concern is, as ever, about the impact of legislation on businesses. What pressures arising from the Bill will they need to reflect in their own procedures and what additional costs will they bear?

Clause 2 deals with employers' liability insurance, which is of great concern to employers up and down the country. The British Insurance Brokers Association claims that 500 small and medium firms went out of business in 2002 because of a sharp increase in employer liability premiums and that a further 10,000 are at risk. In trying to understand the reason for increased premiums, many commentators have referred to the growing compensation culture, the sense that the litigation that we see as characterising the American legal system is creeping across to the UK and that employees, customers or passers by will sue if they suffer an injury that can be related back to a business or a Government body. Indeed, the compensation culture has had a dreadful impact on the health service.

There has also been a rise in successful claims by staff injured at work. Each year, 30,000 people are seriously injured in the workplace. Another consideration is the impact of asbestos-related claims. Three or four months ago, I remember my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham making a very measured and thoughtful contribution on the impact of statutory instruments on asbestosis. Indeed, if he catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, he will be able to relate that experience to the Bill that we are considering today.

Insurance companies also refer back to the impact of 11 September, which resulted in many of them suffering large claims. It brought a greater appreciation of the risk that companies suffer from terrorist and other activities, which has led to an increase in insurance premiums.

Another factor is the stock market slump. Many insurance companies invest the proceeds of their policies in bonds and equities as a way of reducing the cost to businesses as they set aside a reserve for claims. That money is invested and it is assumed—or hoped—that the investment value of the reserves will increase. The increase is used to offset the cost of insurance to employers as well as to householders, car owners and so on. The downturn in the stock market in the past fortnight, when there were 10 consecutive days of falls in the FTSE 100, was a historic occasion and indeed a sad one for those with pensions or investments in the stock market. It will have made the financial pressures facing the stock market even harder. This week, there was a severe markdown in the share price of one insurance company because there were unwarranted concerns about its solvency. Insurance companies are working in a difficult market, and consequently premiums for employers liability insurance have increased. Aon, the world's second largest insurance broker and a major employer in this country, said in a survey published in December that many firms' premiums had doubled in the past 12 months. It also suggested that premiums are set to rise by a further 15 per cent. in the current financial year.

Mr. Bellingham: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way in his superb debut on the Front Bench. He talked about premiums doubling, but has he heard about a family-run steel fabrication business in the Deputy Prime Minister's constituency that has just made five people redundant and is likely to cease trading because its combined public liability and employers liability bill has increased from £3,600 to £28,000?

Mr. Hoban: The scale of the increase that my hon. Friend has just outlined will, I am sure, trigger a request for clarification from the *Hansard* reporters, as it seems beyond belief that a company can face such an extensive increase in its premiums. That highlights the problems that businesses face as premiums go up. Some employers will decide to reduce the scale of their operations, as the steel fabricator in the Deputy Prime Minister's constituency has done, by reducing the number of employees. However, some employers will make an ill-judged if well-intentioned decision not to cause hardship among their employees and will avoid those huge increases in premiums by not paying them. That is a regrettable decision, and I do not believe that businesses should make it. If they are interested in the long-term welfare of their employees, they need to ensure that liability insurance is in place, and should not base their decision on short-term financial gain.

Employers face difficult decisions. Faced with that trade-off, should they make staff redundant or cancel their employers liability insurance? People who cancel their insurance will be caught by the Bill's provisions.

Mr. Gray: The conundrum that my hon. Friend has described particularly affects the stone-quarrying industry in many parts of England, including my constituency. Employers will not lay people off, but they cannot pay the higher premiums. Many of them are seeking to set up a co-op and become joint owners of a business to try to see the problem off, but that means that they are not paying insurance and are taking on the risk themselves, rather than giving it to the company. Does my hon. Friend not agree that that too is regrettable?

Mr. Hoban: My hon. Friend has raised an important and worrying issue for businesses and their employees. Business pressures are forcing employers to look at measures such as setting up co-operatives or cancelling their liability insurance, which will lead to a dangerous trend in the insurance market. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing that issue to the attention of the House.

Hon. Members have spoken about problems that they have encountered in their constituency or that they are aware of through their business contacts. The Engineering Employers Federation released details last December of its experience. Many of its members have faced premium increases of up to 300 per cent. in the past year. In August 2002, the BBC's online service published an article entitled "Insurance woes hit small firms". It highlights the risk to which I referred earlier and claims that because of rises in premiums, many firms continue to trade without cover, in contravention of UK law.

Mr. Bellingham: The Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Nigel Griffiths), told the House on 5 December that the Government had set up a comprehensive review of the matter and would report to the House. As the Minister for Work is present today, would it not be in everyone's interest if he made a speech—quite a long speech, we hope—telling us how that review is going?

Mr. Hoban: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the matter. With his usually prescience, he highlights the point that I intended to raise next. I am concerned that the provision will have an impact on employers liability insurance. I believe that we should consider the matter carefully and wait until the Department for Work and Pensions has reviewed employers liability insurance and see the conclusions that it has reached. The House should not act precipitately.

The Minister for Work (Mr. Nicholas Brown): I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his Front-Bench responsibilities. It is a delight to see him at the Dispatch Box. I will make a deal with him. If Conservative Members do not talk out the Second Reading of the Bill today, I will serve on the Standing Committee that considers the Bill and we can have a comprehensive discussion of these important matters relating to employers liability insurance. In Committee there will be a chance to question me, not just on issues of principle, but on issues of detail. That is a very fair deal.

Mr. Forth: The Minister did not make such an offer on the previous Bill.

Mr. Nicholas Brown: If the hon. Member for Fareham (Mr. Hoban) will allow me to take an intervention—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. To keep ourselves in order, the Minister ought to let the hon. Member for Fareham (Mr. Hoban) respond to his intervention, before he responds to the next one.

Mr. Hoban: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for your protection. As hon. Members have remarked, it is my first occasion at the Dispatch Box, so I am grateful for your direction to ensure that we remain in order.

We would all welcome a detailed explanation and discussion of the Bill in Committee, but it is important that we debate the issue in full on the Floor of the House before we proceed to Committee stage. Only a limited number of hon. Members can serve on the Committee, and the Bill is clearly of interest to a large number of hon. Members, especially Conservative Members. We need to explore the issues in full. I will allow the Minister to intervene again.

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He makes a perfectly fair point. I would be happy to return to these matters, either by giving a full report to the House on our review of employers liability insurance later in the spring or early summer, or at the Report stage of the Bill.

The shadow Leader of the House seemed to suggest in his sedentary intervention that talking the Bill out was a quid pro quo for the previous business not being quorate. May I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman and the rest of the House that it is always open to the parliamentary Conservative party to make sure that the House is quorate for business that the Opposition consider important.

Mr. Hoban: Those of us who have been in the House this morning witnessed the way in which Labour Members used parliamentary procedure to stifle discussion of a Bill that some have characterised as an attack on fat cats. Perhaps it is all the more ironic that it was Labour Members who prevented discussion of that Bill. However, I am conscious that I would be deviating from order if I continued down that track for much longer.

Mr. Gray: My hon. Friend has been most generous in taking interventions. Does he not find it extraordinary to hear a Minister of the Crown begging from the Dispatch Box for the Bill to be allowed to go through today and not be talked out, as he calls it? Of course we have no intention of doing that, as we have important things to say. Twice the right hon. Gentleman stood at the Dispatch Box, begging. If it is all that important to the Government, why do they not just make it a Government Bill?

Mr. Hoban: My hon. Friend makes a valid point.

Mr. Forth: A killer point.

Mr. Hoban: My right hon. Friend is right. The Bill is about the protection of employees, but I point out that Labour Back Benchers—I would hate to think that the earlier use of a procedural device was inspired by the Government or the Labour party's usual channels—killed a Bill about the protection of shareholders, who are often workers who hold shares in their firms or pensioners. We have today had opportunities to talk about protection for different classes of people, but it is disappointing that one of them has been quashed.

Mr. Brown: That is not true. Employers operating legitimately are protected by the penalty regime. The penalties fall only on those who have been taken to the courts for cheating.

Mr. Hoban: Without wishing to engage in a ding-dong about this particular aspect of the Bill, I point out that when we discussed the Bill previously, it was seen as a deterrent. It was seen not as protecting employers, but as beating them around the head if they failed to comply.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is developing his arguments powerfully, but does he agree that this debate has a lop-sided character? If the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby had been at liberty properly and in detail to defend some of the excellent arguments that I think he had intended to develop and had not been

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subject to the selfish parliamentary thuggery of the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), who is now noticeably absent from his place, many of our concerns might have been allayed at a much earlier stage in the proceedings. The hon. Member for Hendon is guilty as charged.

Mr. Hoban: My hon. Friend's intervention requires little or no answer from me.

Before we were diverted briefly into discussing protection of different classes of people who work for the same firm, whether they are employers, shareholders or employees, we were discussing employers liability insurance. Clause 2 increases the penalty for employers who do not have employers liability insurance. I explained why there are pressures in the insurance market that have resulted in employers ceasing to hold such insurance. My hon. Friend the Member for North-West Norfolk (Mr. Bellingham) pointed out that the Department for Work and Pensions is reviewing the matter. The Minister for Work said that at a later stage he would expand on the results of the Government's review, but I was disappointed when he said that the results would be available in late spring or early summer. Given the increase in employers liability insurance that people in the insurance sector are predicting, it is clear that, as a result of higher premiums, a great many more businesses will go out of business, more employees will be laid off and more employers might be tempted to take the foolish route of ceasing to have such insurance.

It would be better for the Government to release the results of the review sooner so that we can see whether the increased penalties that the Bill sets out for those who do not hold employers liability insurance are appropriate, given the current market conditions. It is not only the Government who are inquiring into employers liability insurance; I understand that the Office of Fair Trading is engaged in a similar review. It is important to wait for the results of both those reviews. Given the importance of employers liability insurance to employees and employers, I wonder whether a private Member's Bill is the appropriate vehicle for tackling the subject.

I want briefly to refer to a couple of other clauses. I am conscious that Conservative Members want to participate in the debate; I do not know whether that applies to Labour Members. The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby did not mention proposed new section 5(4) of the Employers' Liability (Compulsory Insurance) Act 1969, which clause 2 would introduce. It reconsiders the time for bringing a prosecution for breaches of health and safety rules. Currently, a prosecution can be brought within six months of the offence occurring. The Bill would change that rule and provide that such an offence could be tried

> "within the period of five years beginning with the date on which the offence is alleged to have been committed, and . . . within the period of six months beginning with the date on which evidence sufficient in the opinion of the prosecutor to justify the proceedings comes to his knowledge."

That is a significant change.

The explanatory notes claimed that the Government would incur no additional financial cost. However, I wonder about the impact of the change. I am worried that employers and the Health and Safety Executive might be exposed to a series of vexatious claims by employees, who would know that they had a longer period in which to claim and might think up opportunities to do that, not through interest in their well-being but to create a problem for the employers. One can imagine, for example, an employee who had been dismissed thinking back to an incident that took place three, four or five years ago and bringing it to the attention of the HSE. The clause could be used to take up a case with the HSE, which would need investigation by the inspectorate and require employers to go through their records and spend time appointing a solicitor, taking legal advice and perhaps employing one of the health and safety consultants to whom I referred earlier.

The Bill provides a window of opportunity for a backlog of claims.

Mr. Bercow: I do not want to be unduly troublesome or question my hon. Friend's motives. We all understand the danger of vexatious claims, against which the House should guard. However, will my hon. Friend take great care not to give the unworthy and untrue impression that Conservative Members tolerate wrongdoing? We recognise that, even if something happened a long time ago, it should be investigated. I refer my hon. Friend to the statute of limitations, which typically covers a period of not five but six years.

Mr. Hoban: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a valuable point. It is right to provide protection in law and to ensure that any wrongdoing can be rectified and that those responsible can be punished.

I used the example of someone who had been dismissed from a company using the Bill to make a vexatious claim. One could present the contrary view. Unscrupulous employers, to which the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby referred, might apply pressure to employees. They could say, "We do not want you to raise this matter with the HSE." Free from the contract of employment, the former employees could use the measure to right the wrongs that they believed were committed at a time when they did not feel able to bring the matter to the HSE's attention.

As in all cases of extending a period for making a claim or reporting an offence, the provision is a double-edged sword. It should be explored in detail in Committee because we must ascertain the size of the potential backlog. We need to understand how the Health and Safety Executive would consider such claims. What standard of evidence would it require from the person who brings the allegation to it before initiating an investigation into an offence that may have taken place four or five years ago? It would be worth seeking advice from employers and the Health and Safety Executive on the level of burden that might be inflicted by the Bill's provisions.

The five-year limit is within the limit set out in the statute of limitations, as my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham said. The Committee should question whether five years is too short and six years is more appropriate, but that is a debate for another day.

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Serve on the Committee.

Mr. Hoban: I am sure that there is gainful employment to be found for many colleagues in considering this important Bill.

Mr. Bercow: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hoban: I will happily give way to my hon. Friend, but I hope that he is not exhausting his contribution to the debate by intervening so much.

Mr. Bercow: I am alarmed by my hon. Friend's evident lack of confidence in me. I assure him that my fund is very far from being inexhaustible, but it has not yet been exhausted. To put it another way, there is still lead in the pencil.

In addition to guarding against vexation, hon. Members on both sides of the House should be suspicious of arbitrariness. Has my hon. Friend reflected on the arbitrariness of the contents of clause 4, which says:

> "This Act shall have effect in relation to an offence committed or alleged to have been committed after the end of the period of two months beginning with the day on which this Act is passed"?

Why two months? Why not one month, three months or four months? That is peculiar.

Mr. Hoban: My hon. Friend demonstrates yet again that his contributions to such debates are inexhaustible. *[Interruption.]* The Minister encourages my hon. Friend to participate in the Standing Committee debates, and I am sure that he is contemplating that prospect as we speak.

My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. I am sure that the parliamentary draftsmen recruited by the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby will have a good justification for choosing two months. *[Interruption.]* There seems to be an element of horse-trading between right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House on the period set out in clause 4. I do not think that that is a matter for Second Reading. It is perhaps better suited to a debate in Committee.

Subsection (5) extends the Bill's provisions to Scotland and subsection (4) extends them to England and Wales. What about employees in Northern Ireland? Can the Bill be amended to extend that cover to fellow members of the United Kingdom in Northern Ireland? There is no reason why they should be denied the opportunity to benefit from the same protection that the Bill affords to people in Scotland, England or Wales.

I hope that I have not trespassed too much on the good will of the House by speaking for nearly an hour on my first outing at the Dispatch Box, and apologise if I have done so. The Bill is important. Many people will follow its progress closely if it proceeds to Committee. It is an important Bill for employers and employees, and it addresses some important issues. However, I wonder whether it is appropriate for this Bill to be introduced in this state, and at a time when the Government and the Office of Fair Trading are looking at the availability of employers liability insurance in detail.

1.25 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I share the slightly sad and frustrated approach to this legislation. This is clearly an enormously important subject to companies and to the work force, but, although I share many of the sentiments expressed by the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Lawrie Quinn) in his introductory remarks, the Bill is unsatisfactory for two reasons. The first is that a perfectly good and interesting Bill was bulldozed out of the way to make way for it. Secondly, as it stands it is neither one thing nor the other. It is too ambitious and far-reaching for a private Member's Bill, but it does not have the rounded sophistication of a full Government Bill.

I am mystified as to why the Government have not introduced their own health and safety legislation, as I believe they undertook to do. For that reason, and although Conservative Members are talking at some length about the Bill, I hope that they will allow it to go to Committee, so that we can tease out the Government's intentions a little more. For example, I should be very happy to work with the Minister and Government Back Benchers to produce a clause on corporate killing. The Government have a clear manifesto commitment that they have yet to honour in that regard, and perhaps this is an opportunity to debate that properly.

There are three elements to the Bill. The first I agree with, and it would be very useful: simply to increase the fines imposed by magistrates courts. They are far too low—ridiculously and insultingly low—and very out of date, and if the Bill were limited simply to dealing with existing offences and increasing fines appropriately, it would be a very useful addition to existing legislation, and I would fully support it. The second element is extending the scope of imprisonment. That raises big issues of legal principle and implementation with which there are serious problems. The third element, which deals with employers' liability, is irrelevant and fundamentally misses the point of why we have a problem with employers' liability.

A useful starting point is the earlier intervention of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). He asked whether the problem with health and safety is really one of penalties, and the answer is no. Figures produced by the Health and Safety Executive itself suggest that only one in 10 of serious injuries are ever investigated, and that only one in 10 of those are ever brought to the courts. So we are dealing with the tiny fraction of very serious injuries at work that reach the judicial process, and focusing on the penalties for those misses the essential point: how do we strengthen the health and safety framework—one hopes in a non-bureaucratic way—to ensure proper prevention and investigation, and effective prosecution? Those are the links in the chain that we are not addressing.

I shall deal with the three elements of the Bill in turn. As I have pointed out, an increase in magistrates courts' fines would be appropriate and I would support it, but what the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby did not mention is that when health and safety failures reach

[Dr. Vincent Cable]

Crown courts, there are unlimited fines. So the question arises of whether it might be better to increase the scope for taking cases to Crown courts, rather than escalating fines in magistrates courts. We should consider jurisdiction as well as the level of fines.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman is being as constructive today as he always is, but does he not agree that, if we were to follow the route that he suggests, it would be necessary to consider the regulatory impact assessment? What would be the public expenditure implications of pursuing the route of the Crown court, rather than that of the magistrates court?

Dr. Cable: The entire Bill gives rise to the question of the regulatory impact assessment, and there are major regulatory implications and costs for business. It is not so much a public expenditure issue, but I agree that there are regulatory implications that clearly need to be properly evaluated and considered.

I mentioned Crown courts in relation to the fines issue. Alternatively, an individual could pursue their claim with a civil claim. We need to consider both routes. However, I hope that the proposal in the Bill to increase the fines in magistrates courts survives in some form, as it is a worthwhile initiative.

On imprisonment, I start from the same position as the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby. Health and safety is not dealt with in the same way as, for example, consumer protection or environmental offences, where it is much easier to obtain a prison sentence. A few years ago, the case of the Scottish butchers who produced beef in unhygienic conditions that was heavily contaminated with salmonella resulted in a prison sentence. It would be extremely difficult to get a prison sentence for health and safety breaches, even in extremely serious cases. It may be possible in principle, but only in cases where a company has actually breached an order rather than merely committed an offence. That needs to be tackled, but it should be done in the context of the extremely difficult issue of corporate killing, about which the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby is extremely knowledgeable due to his experience in the railway industry.

I do not know why the Government have not pursued that important issue, as they promised to do, although there are obvious difficulties. How does one obtain the right standard of proof? How does one identify the responsible individual in an organisation? Is it the personnel director, the supervisor or the chairman of the board? None the less, it is unsatisfactory that we are not dealing with those problems as part of the reform of health and safety legislation.

Mr. Bellingham: The hon. Gentleman is right to focus on that aspect. He will be aware of my interest in the Potters Bar train disaster which occurred approaching a year ago—the train was heading into my constituency. We are still waiting for the HSE report on that tragedy. There has been much speculation that charges of corporate manslaughter could be levied against the contractors, Jarvis. There is much uncertainty, so does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is time that the HSE published its final report? Furthermore, the Government really need to look into the situation as regards corporate manslaughter.

Dr. Cable: Indeed. The hon. Gentleman is right. I was making exactly that point. However, when pursuing such cases, the problem for the authorities is determining the individual—in Jarvis, in this instance—who would face prosecution. There is a difference between prosecuting an organisation and an individual. It is extremely difficult to identify the relevant person in an organisation; the Government need to address that issue, as it is not tackled in the Bill.

The Bill is not helpful on the problems relating to employer liability on which I initiated an Adjournment debate about six weeks ago. As has already been pointed out, many companies face massive increases in employer liability insurance charges. Some companies have been cut off altogether—

Mr. Nicholas Brown *indicated dissent.*

Dr. Cable: The Minister shakes his head, but surveys undertaken by chambers of commerce show that about one in eight or one in 10 companies face difficulties in getting any liability cover at all.

Mr. Brown: That is an important point and I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman would drop me a note listing companies that to his certain knowledge are wholly uninsurable. My understanding is that the problem relates to rates for insurance rather than its availability.

Dr. Cable: My impression is that both are involved, although I shall be happy to correspond with the Minister and send him the record of my debate where I made relevant references.

Mr. Hoban: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that there are problems both with the rates charged for cover and because insurance companies are withdrawing capacity for employers' liability insurance from the market?

Dr. Cable: That is my point. Employers liability cover is not being withdrawn maliciously; it has been withdrawn because the market cannot fulfil it in certain sectors, such as quarries, for example, where the safety factor is especially difficult to cover. Although the Minister disputes whether this is a serious issue—it is—I can envisage difficulties with the Bill because companies would be open to fines and workers could be dismissed even though they cannot obtain satisfactory insurance. That is not satisfactory.

Mr. Brown: I do not dispute the fact that that is a serious issue, but I am trying to get the hon. Gentleman to say whether the problem relates to the absolute unavailability of insurance or to the increased premiums. In other words, the problem is that insurance is available, but at a much higher rate.

Dr. Cable: I shall happily guide the Minister to the surveys that have been carried out, I think, by an amalgamation of chambers of commerce.

Mr. Bellingham: It is not just a question of the premiums going up very sharply; a number of companies have had to restrict greatly the categories of business that they continue to conduct. For example, a small specialist construction firm on the south coast requires £5 million of cover to secure contracts from its regular customers, but it has been able to secure only £1 million of cover this year at a cost of £8,000, whereas £12,000 bought £10 million of cover last year. That specialist company is now contracting out work and getting rid of employees. It is facing a crisis, as are many other companies.

Dr. Cable: That is an accurate description of what is happening. I know that the Minister is supervising an inquiry in his Department, which is very welcome, and which is due to report very soon, perhaps in March. I hope that, when that report is available, we shall be provided with a good analysis of the problem, why it has arisen and the best way to deal with it. Perhaps then the Bill will be seen to be helpful, but I think that the problems lie elsewhere.

The conduct of the insurance industry itself should be considered. Despite the fact that the life insurance industry is in terrible trouble, normal commercial insurance is currently rather profitable. It is worth considering how the insurance companies have dealt with their clients, because that has caused a good deal of hardship and disruption.

As has already been mentioned, "no win, no fee" litigation is also imposing costs. That is partly an issue for the Government because of the way in which the Lord Chancellor's Department, in effect, sets the compensation tariff. That interlocking series of policy issues must be addressed. I am not sure whether the Bill is helpful, but we need to wait for the outcome of the Minister's inquiry before we decide what is the most productive way forward.

I should be happy to support bits of the Bill, but I am less happy with other provisions. However, at least we would benefit from considering the Bill in Committee to find out how it could be augmented and improved.

1.37 pm

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): I certainly congratulate the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Lawrie Quinn) on introducing the Bill, which he has obviously put a great deal of thought and effort into. I am a retread, and those of us who have been involved with previous private Members' Bills know only too well that they require a great deal of effort and a huge of amount of consultation with different organisations and bodies. There is no question but that the hon. Gentleman has put a lot of work into the Bill.

It is a great pity that the Company Directors' Performance and Compensation Bill was not given a proper debate. It is bizarre that a rather scurrilous, squalid attempt was made to scupper that Bill, which, I am afraid, succeeded. I do not understand the motives for that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are now considering this Bill, and the hon. Gentleman ought to deal with it.

Mr. Bellingham: Of course I will, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but it is very important to put the Bill into context. If the other Bill had not been scuppered, we would still be discussing it. I wish to make it clear that that was not the fault of the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby; he is a very genuine, honest person, and I am sure that he had nothing whatever to do with what happened.

Mr. Bercow: Decent.

Mr. Bellingham: He is a decent person, as my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) rightly points out.

All that is history, but I am sure that there will be various post-mortems into what happened, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) is given a change at some stage to reintroduce his Bill.

The wider economy forms the background to the Bill, because no Bill that affects businesses, particularly small and medium-sized businesses, can be judged without taking a very close look at it. There is no doubt in my mind that the current macro-economy is starting to stall as part of the global slowdown: we need only look at the way that stock markets have reacted in the past 11 days or so. Very serious concerns exist about the fragile nature of our economy and we must examine the Bill in that context. As my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Mr. Hoban) has made clear, the Bill will have regulatory implications. All businesses, large and small, are very concerned about the forthcoming national insurance increases, which will take place in the spring, around the time that this Bill would be introduced. The avalanche of red tape and bureaucracy that is piling down on businesses is having the biggest impact on corporate Britain at the moment.

We all know that a framework of health and safety legislation is needed. It is interesting, however, that while in the United States every effort is being made to combat the fall in consumer confidence and in stock markets by examining measures to reduce regulatory burdens and to cut taxes, Britain and the EU appear to be going in the opposite direction. What is unfortunate is that the UK supply side economy was previously the envy of Europe. In terms of burdens on business, our regime was probably the most sensibly balanced anywhere in Europe and, consequently, we attracted a great deal of inward investment. Obviously, that was important to small firms. That was why, in the opinion of many pundits and experts, this country has done so well over the past few years. We had an excellent supply side, and a Chancellor who, until recently, had control of public finances. We had flourishing small firms and a light regulatory touch that was very much part of the reforms introduced by the previous Government.

As for red tape and burdens on business, taken individually, they are not showstoppers or deal breakers, but the drip, drip, drip—the accumulated impact—of those burdens is starting to have an effect. Some of those burdens on business are manifestly home-grown. The Employment Relations Act 1999 has led to a flurry of statutory instruments; indeed, I was involved in considering one of those—the regulations on maternity, paternity and adoption—the other day in Committee. Compliance with such regulations is fine for bigger organisations—firms such as ICI or SmithKline

[Mr. Bellingham]

Beecham—which have large human resources departments. However, a small company, which will also be impacted by the Bill—

Mr. Deputy Speaker : Order. I am prepared to allow a certain degree of reference to background in a Second Reading debate, but the hon. Gentleman should relate his remarks to the Bill fairly soon.

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It was not a point of order. I was simply putting the hon. Gentleman on the right track.

Mr. Brown: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, would it be right for me to point out to the House that the Bill does not alter the regulations imposed on business at all? It relates to the penalty regime.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order for the Chair but more a matter for debate. The right hon. Gentleman has made the point.

Mr. Bellingham: When examining the overall framework of burdens on business, we must consider what businesses must do when things go wrong. There is no question but that parts of this Bill, although it is well-intentioned, will lead to more paperwork. The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby wants to encourage best practice, in which we support him, but is he not using a sledgehammer to crack a nut?

Lawrie Quinn: I accept what the hon. Gentleman says about the cost of regulation to business, but what is his assessment of the cost to the British economy of the 28,000 serious accidents and 300 fatalities that happen at work each year? Would not it be very good for business to bring down that burden? Would not that help the economy?

Mr. Bellingham: It is right for business to tackle that problem, but the hon. Gentleman is talking about the very small percentage of companies that follow worst practice. The overwhelming majority of our companies have best practice in place and do not have problems in the workplace. Their accident record is excellent.

Lawrie Quinn: The hon. Gentleman commended me for the research that I have done. I note from my documents that accidents at work cost British business between £11 billion and £18 billion each year—that is equivalent to between 2 and 3 per cent. of GDP. To bear down on that burden and prevent injuries must be a sensible target for the House to aim at.

Mr. Bellingham: I quite agree, and that is why it is important that the Bill goes to Committee, but it is also important to consider what businesses and business organisations such as the CBI, the Institute of Directors and the Federation of Small Businesses have to say about it. The hon. Gentleman mentioned that he had talked to the FSB in his region, but the federation nationally, although it understands the aims of the Bill, is concerned that aspects of it will bear down harshly on businesses that make what could be simply a one-off mistake, and perhaps close them down.

Mr. Hoban: My hon. Friend has painted a clear picture of the burden of regulation on small businesses. Does he agree that the sheer rate and volume of regulation, and regulatory changes, make it difficult for business to keep in touch with what is happening, so there is a great risk of inadvertent breach of the rules, for which people could even be liable to imprisonment?

Mr. Bellingham: That is a fair point. Again, my hon. Friend shows prescience, because I will come to that in a moment.

The average small business man now spends up to 14 hours a week dealing with paperwork and form filling. Many businesses have taken years to build up, and many have been passed down the generations, and the law of unintended consequences following the enactment of the Bill could mean the end for them. That is what I am extremely anxious to avoid.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is developing his arguments in his usual measured way. Does he accept that it is important not to compromise the Conservative commitment to, or record on, health and safety at work, a useful adumbrated summary of which can be found in that excellent tome "Conservative Social and Industrial Reform" edited by Mr. Charles Bellairs?

Mr. Bellingham: I expect that there will be snow on the ground and little to do outside this weekend, so I will follow my hon. Friend's advice and go home equipped with that volume to study. He is absolutely right, because the whole thrust of our policy is not to bear down on existing health and safety legislation but to reconsider some of the other burdens on business. I am sure that he will agree that we do not want to make the health and safety regime any harsher, as we probably have the right balance in place for business, employees and the wider public who may have contractual relations with businesses and could be the victims of injuries.

Mr. Bercow: I assure my hon. Friend that there need be no disharmony between us on this or any other matter. Does he agree that it is also important to establish clarity as we contemplate legislation? In that context, what assessment has he made of paragraph 12 on page 2 of the explanatory notes, in which reference is made to the intended replacement of the current maximum fine of £2,500 "for each day prosecuted" with a maximum fine of £20,000? Could not the significance of the words "for each day prosecuted" be very great for an accidentally errant firm?

Mr. Bellingham: I spotted that as well. Again, my hon. Friend shows prescience because I shall come in a moment to the issue of fines and the threat of prison sentences. First, however, I want to flag up one further set of regulations that have arisen from the Government's legislation, which I would describe as home-grown red tape. I refer to the flexible contracts regime. Although a larger corporation could cater for and cope with that, a small contracting business of perhaps 10 employees—a firm with an excellent record of avoiding accidents, which implements a regime that goes far beyond that proposed in the Bill—could, albeit in extraordinary circumstances, become involved in some accident and, as a consequence, suffer a heavy fine. Such small firms might find it difficult to cope with demand for flexible contracts. That is another reason why we feel strongly that the Government have gone too far on the supply side of the economy. Moreover, a great deal of legislation has arisen as a result of the social chapter, to which the Government signed up when they first came into power—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is again straying wide of the mark.

Mr. Bellingham: I am grateful for your advice, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Page 5 of the Bill makes it clear that the social chapter is relevant, but I shall not push my luck with you. I merely point out that the sort of firms that the Bill would catch will be affected by the agency workers directive and the equal treatment directive. Such directives are coming down the track at an alarming rate and will hit corporate Britain very hard.

Mr. Bercow: I do not want to go down the wrong path any more than my hon. Friend wanted to do so. We all take note of your exhortations in these circumstances, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but does my hon. Friend recall that the working time directive—I shall relate that directly to this important Bill—was justified at the time of its introduction by many of our European Union partners by reference to health and safety considerations, which, as all hon. Members present know, are subject to qualified majority voting? Is it not pertinent to ask the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Lawrie Quinn)—or through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister for Work—whether the Bill's provisions would, at European level, be subject to majority voting under the social chapter? That is relevant when considering whether we should take this measure further and into Committee.

Mr. Bellingham: I agree with my hon. Friend; the Bill needs to go into Committee and be discussed in more detail.

Perhaps even two years ago, before various additional burdens were imposed as a result of the social chapter, one might have said that businesses could easily live with this legislation. We should consider the Bill in the context of legislation that might not immediately impose regulatory burdens on business but could do so if things started to go wrong. That is the background of today's businesses. There is serious wealth destruction in the small firms sector, which is why the Government have said that the key test that they will apply to any new measure is whether it will hit wealth creation. Perhaps that is why this is not a Government Bill, but the Government have instead chosen to rely on a Back Bencher to promote the Bill as a handout.

I have explored the wider business context, which is important. Although you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, were slightly irked when I strayed a bit too widely on two occasions, which is understandable, when a Bill affects business it is incumbent on hon. Members to examine the wider business context in which the Bill is to operate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Fareham talked about the compensation culture, which appears to have got completely out of control in this country, and he rightly mentioned the crisis in public liability insurance. Employer and public liability insurance premiums have gone through the roof. Although we are pleased to see him here, I was slightly concerned when the Minister for Work said that his report would come out in late spring or early summer, because the crisis is happening now. I shall remind the House of the two cases that I mentioned earlier, because they are not one-off cases. I have been in close contact with the Federation of Small Businesses, the Forum of Private Business and several other organisations that have been feeding me and other hon. Members horror stories about what is happening.

A small specialist construction firm on the south coast requires insurance cover of £5 million to secure contracts from its regular customers. This year, that business was able to secure cover of only £1 million at a cost of £8,000, whereas last year £12,000 bought cover for £10 million. As we speak, the firm, which is in the specialist contract hire business, is getting rid of employees and restructuring its business entirely. It has had to tell a number of its key customers, "Sorry, but we cannot trade with you."

That is a classic example of a firm that has faced an extremely difficult choice: whether to continue to serve the customers that it has successfully served for many years, or to tell those customers that because it cannot get insurance, it is having to get rid of staff and turn away business. Many firms have taken the first option and are now trading illegally, which is extremely unfortunate and we cannot condone it.

Mr. Hoban: Let me take my hon. Friend back to a point that our hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) took from the explanatory notes about the fines that businesses might face if they do not have employers' liability insurance. Does he agree with my interpretation of paragraph 12, which is that the current maximum fine of £2,500 per day is to be replaced by a maximum fine of £20,000? Under the current regime, if a firm were found to have traded without insurance for 10 days, it would be fined £25,000, but under the regime proposed in the Bill, such a firm would be fined only £20,000. Does that not seem rather perverse?

Mr. Bellingham: It does seem perverse, and it is something that I picked up on. Perhaps the Bill's promoter would like to comment.

Lawrie Quinn: I am sure that the hon. Member for Fareham (Mr. Hoban) realises that the provision is simply a toolbox that is available for judges to use.

Mr. Bellingham: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for clarifying that point.

Mr. Hoban: I am sorry to intervene on my hon. Friend again, but the explanatory notes state clearly that the current maximum fine of £2,500 for each day prosecuted is being replaced with a maximum fine of £20,000. Therefore, we are dealing not with a toolbox but with a change in the legislation that reduces the number of tools available to the judge in such cases.

Mr. Bellingham: Indeed, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for picking up that point. The measure is

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perverse because, on the one hand, it will create a much tougher and more onerous regime that includes the possibility of imprisonment, and on the other hand, whereas it is currently possible in some of the more extreme cases to mete out a tougher fine, the Bill raises the possibility of the court only being able to mete out a less tough fine. That strikes me as perverse.

Mr. Bercow: The purpose of these exchanges is to clarify and not to obfuscate. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be genuinely helpful if the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Lawrie Quinn) could clarify that point? From my point of view, the fog has intensified, and the reference to the toolbox has served not to illuminate, but to obscure.

Mr. Bellingham: I do not doubt that the toolbox of the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby is full of kit, and when Opposition Members have finished speaking perhaps he could wrap up some of these points and put that toolbox to good use.

I return to the crisis that we are facing as regards small firms and insurance premiums. I mentioned a steel fabrication business in the Deputy Prime Minister's constituency, which has been forced to make five people redundant. As we speak, it may well be looking at the possibility of ceasing to trade, because its combined public liability and employers liability insurance bill has increased from £3,600 to £28,000. I hope that the Deputy Prime Minister will visit that firm and explain to those who work there why this crisis has taken place, because every organisation that I have spoken to is very concerned about the problems faced by the small firms sector—especially the heavier, more specialist end of the construction sector.

I quoted remarks that the Minister with responsibility for small business, the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Nigel Griffiths), made on 5 December, when he said that the Government were concerned about the matter and would take action. He said that the Treasury had put in place a report; the Department for Work and Pensions was conducting an inquiry; the Office of Fair Trading was looking at the matter; and an independent report was being prepared. Let me remind the Minister for Work that there is a crisis right now. Members of the Federation of Small Businesses have told me in no uncertain terms that they do not want reports in the spring or early summer; they want action now, because many of those firms will not last until the spring or early summer. Is there any possibility of those reports being consolidated? I do not understand why we need four. The Minister is known for his strong leadership and the way in which he gripped, for example, the foot and mouth crisis. Perhaps he could grip this crisis too, consolidate those four reports and, in a matter of weeks rather than months, come up with a definitive statement on what is needed.

I mentioned that the Bill was ill-timed and premature, because those four reports are in the preparation pool. We want the Bill to pass into Committee, but it is premature for the Government to come forward with what is basically a Government Bill with the help of a Back-Bench Member, at a time of huge uncertainty and when there is the prospect of the reports being published in the near future.

I also said that the Bill was draconian. Raising the fine to such a level does not make sense; nor does creating the option of prison for health and safety offences in the lower and higher courts. When prisons are full to bursting point, do we really need to imprison small business men and women—company directors—who have committed offences of this nature? I would question that. We may well want to fine them. We might want to strike them off and prevent them from being company directors again. There may be other measures that would deter such offences. However, prison is needed to harbour dangerous criminals and to act as a deterrent to prevent very serious crime.

Mr. Bercow: I strongly agree with the point that my hon. Friend is making. Does he accept not only that it would be inappropriate to impose custodial sentences, but that such a provision would exacerbate the phenomenon of prison overcrowding, the effect of which is to undermine rehabilitation programmes in prison for persistent offenders? The Government are supposed to be committed to such programmes, but the Bill's casual drafting imperils that important objective.

Mr. Bellingham: I agree that it is casual drafting and it sparks off an anti-business streak, which I find very distasteful. We all know that the overwhelming majority of small business men and women work incredibly hard in difficult conditions. They employ a large number of people, perhaps 35 per cent. of the entire work force. As a result of the Bill, the prospect of prison would hang over a percentage—albeit a very small percentage—of those who commit offences. Employers who follow worst practice or have been personally responsible for serious injuries and accidents occurring certainly need help, but they also need to be prevented from going back into business. Ironically, the Bill would mean that they could go to prison for six weeks, come out and carry on exactly as before. There is no provision in the Bill for having them struck off so that they cannot become company directors again, and can be prevented from owning a business.

The Minister is on record as saying in a debate only two or three months ago, when we discussed corporate manslaughter, that there is a huge amount of uncertainty in respect of the Government's attitude to corporate manslaughter and we need clarification. It cannot be right to introduce a Bill that imprisons business men at a time when the Government are conducting another review. When I intervened on the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), who has now left the Chamber, probably to have a bowl of soup before returning to his constituency, I asked him about the HSE report on the Potters Bar rail crash. Although an interim report has been produced, we are still awaiting the final report on that crash, which took place in May 2002. Constituents of mine who were injured on that train are extremely concerned about the time that report is taking.

Another reason why it is premature to introduce this Bill now is that the Government are looking at all aspects of corporate manslaughter. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that if he has time to reply to the debate.

I have troubled the House for half an hour and I know that others are waiting to speak, so I shall conclude my speech. I congratulate the hon. Member for

Scarborough and Whitby on the work and effort that he has put into the Bill. He has obviously made a great effort to talk to many different business organisations. Not all of them are completely on side or in favour of what he is trying to do; they are concerned, for various reasons, including the overwhelming reason, which is that small and medium enterprises face a crisis as a result of insurance premium hikes. Until that crisis can be resolved, or examined by the Government in a systematic and comprehensive way, it would be premature to move any Bill quickly into law. I hope the Minister will comment on that. I wish the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby well and hope that the Bill goes into Committee, there is proper debate on it and that the good parts of it become law.

2.8 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chiselhurst): One cannot but feel a lot of sympathy for the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Lawrie Quinn). I have no doubt that the history is fairly clear. Here was an innocent little Government handout Bill designed to tidy, as the Government saw it, a small part of the health and safety world. They found a ready, willing and dedicated—

Ian Stewart (Eccles): And able.

Mr. Forth: Indeed, and an able person in the shape of the promoter. When he saw the running order for today, I am sure that he felt rather confident that this measure would slip quietly through the House with barely a ripple, as is often the hope on the Labour Benches.

Our sympathy for the hon. Gentleman stems from the fact that he has run into one of these occasions when, happily, a Friday springs surprises. Parliamentary Fridays are a delight to us dedicated fans and anoraks, as almost anything can happen, and today almost anything has. Indeed, almost anything may still happen—I would not be at all surprised. My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) put his finger on it. We all witnessed a quite disgraceful little episode. The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby was seeking to explain in a full, calm, dedicated and passionate way what the Bill meant to him and his constituents, but he was bullied by the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), who was selfishly looking at his rather pathetic little Bill further down the Order Paper and seeking to truncate the hon. Gentleman's speech persuading the House about the Bill. Even before the debate started and we got into our stride, we were denied a full explanation of the Bill's contents by its promoter because of the behaviour of the hon. Member for Hendon, whose Bill does not have a hope in hell.

Mr. Hoban: May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the Bill's sponsors, who include, ironically, the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore)?

Mr. Forth: The ironies abound. I have not seen too many of the Bill's other sponsors today. I shall not name names—that would be invidious, even for me—but the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby must feel a little lonely as he casts his eye over the acres of green leather, looking in vain for the Bill's sponsors. We can assume that there is not much enthusiasm for the Bill among Government Members, who are not greatly evident by their physical presence and do not appear to be prepared to give the hon. Gentleman any support. We have not heard a word from any of them, and very few are seeking to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I am setting the scene, as it is important that we understand the context in which Bills are introduced in the House before we start to analyse them. I hope to dig into the depths of the Bill, but time is short and I do not want to deny my hon. Friends the opportunity to speak, although there is a risk of that.

Mr. Bercow: My right hon. Friend chided Government Members for their failure of collegiality and their failure to support the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Lawrie Quinn). Does he not think it lamentable and evidence of a lack of esprit de corps that the hon. Gentleman is not supported even by his boss, the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Paisley, South (Mr. Alexander)? The hon. Gentleman labours for his boss, but his boss stabs him in the back—what a way to behave!

Mr. Forth: I could easily be diverted into making comments about the lack of collegiality among Government Members, but I will not, as I shall do so next Tuesday in the debate on reform of the House of Lords. However, I will not be distracted, even by my hon. Friend, from talking about the Bill.

We missed some nuggets from the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby—I bet that they were in his toolbox—including an analysis of why the Bill would be beneficial. He expressed his hopes, desires and aspirations, and tugged at our heart strings when he talked about his constituents and experience—all good stuff—but what we really wanted was analysis and an international comparison of health and safety in Britain and other countries.

In the dim and distant past, I had some responsibility for the Health and Safety Executive, as I had the honour of serving in the old Department of Employment between 1990 and 1992. I was proud to make excellent speeches—they were excellent because my civil servants wrote them—praising this country's health and safety record. We therefore have to be careful about saying that because our record is deplorable and disgraceful we have got to tighten the screw, increase fines and perhaps impose more imprisonment. Internationally, a case has not been made for that. There has not been any attempt, either, to address sectoral issues—as we know, the health and safety record varies enormously from one sector to another. If the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby had been allowed a bit more time by his hon. Friend the Member for Hendon, who is not even in the Chamber now, he would have been able to develop those arguments. But lacking, as we do, all these arguments, we have to look at the Bill a bit more objectively and conduct our own analysis of it.

For example, the simple raising of fines is assumed to be some sort of beneficial mechanism, and is assumed to have a deterrent effect. I am not sure that the case is self-evident. We have to consider who pays the fines. If we look at the hierarchical structure in the construction industry, for example, and in many others as well, we see that the people who deliver health and safety in a

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meaningful sense are relatively low in the hierarchy, if I am allowed to speak in such incorrect terms these days—people who do real jobs on the construction site and have a real involvement in health and safety. However, it is almost certainly someone else who will end up paying the fines. There is the danger of a disconnect between those who will suffer the penalty—the increased penalty, if the Bill goes through—and those who have the real responsibility for delivering health and safety.

Mr. George Osborne: There is a question about the effectiveness of fines. A National Audit Office study—I see the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee sitting next to my right hon. Friend—found that 40 per cent. of fines levied by courts are never collected, so it is legitimate to question whether fines are an effective mechanism in the criminal justice system.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. That is an extremely relevant point. There is a glib assumption that if we increase the rate of fines, people will have their minds concentrated, they will do what we want them to do, and that will be the end of the matter.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Leigh *rose—*

Mr. Forth: Before I give way to my hon. Friends—my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) in particular may have something to add—I should finish the point.

The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby made a passing reference to conviction rates in his abbreviated opening speech, which his hon. Friend the Member for Hendon did not allow him to complete. That was an important point, but it was not developed. Related to the question of whether fines are ever collected, there is the prior matter of whether convictions are obtained for the offences outlined at some length in the Bill. If convictions are not obtained and fines are not collected, I fail to see how a case can be made for the provisions in the Bill.

Mr. Bercow: What my right hon. Friend says about conviction is of the essence, but, notwithstanding the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne), is it not possible—indeed, likely—that the promoter has taken account of the possible ineffectiveness of the fines regime by providing the backstop power of imprisonment? If my right hon. Friend is prepared to concede that that backstop power is available, is it not incumbent on the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby to assure us that there is honesty in sentencing, and that imprisonment would apply without causing the overcrowding that I and others fear?

Mr. Forth: I was about to come to that. By my count, there are 13 additional imprisonable offences outlined in the Bill. That is a considerable broadening of the number of possibilities for imprisonment, yet the explanatory notes—always a rich seam of information on such Bills—imply the contrary in paragraph 17. I suspect that the promoter will want to deny authorship once he hears what I have to say.

The Minister boasted that his Department had written the explanatory notes. That is an oddity, for a start. Here we are on a Friday, allegedly discussing private Members' Bills—in this case a Bill sponsored by private Members, most of whom are not present—yet the explanatory notes are written by the Department. That gives us a clue as to what is really going on.

In the inadequate explanatory notes that the promoter did not write, we read—this follows directly from the point just made by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham:

> "Making imprisonment available for more health and safety offences is expected to lead to a minimal increase in the prison population."

How does the Department know that? That is the first question that we have to ask. Imprisonment is a matter for the courts. How can even a Minister, who obviously drafted the notes on a rather bad day, know what the effect is likely to be? Furthermore, if it is so minimal, why are we bothering with it? We are caught in a paradox. It is one thing to argue that the provision will be phenomenonally successful and that lots of people will be banged up for health and safety offences, but we are being told that hardly anybody will be imprisoned. That hardly makes it sound as though the measure will be effective.

Mr. Leigh: I must put the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne) into context. It is true that only about half the fines are paid, but that will not be the problem in this case—these are business men and they will pay their fines. Although very few would go to prison, the threat would still be in place. I return to the point that I made in an earlier intervention: the provision will place undue burdens on business, which is continually told by numerous consultants that it must do this or that. That often affects small businesses in particular. These are new regulatory burdens that would add to the burden on business.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend has got ahead of me slightly. In a moment, I shall deal with paragraph 19 of the explanatory notes, which touches on the very matter to which he refers.

However, I have not yet finished with paragraph 17. We are aware of the paradox about whether more people will go to prison and of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham has made more than once regarding the possible effect on prisons, but, intriguingly, the paragraph goes on to state:

> "Making two offences which are triable only in the lower courts into 'either way' offences (triable in the lower or the higher courts), could lead to a few additional cases being heard in the higher courts."

That tells us that the courts, which are already under enormous pressure, will be under more pressure as a result of the Bill.

Assuming that we believe what is set out in the explanatory notes to be true, we can begin to see the cumulative effects of what might happen. The courts will be doing more work, more people will be going to prison and more fines will be imposed, although they probably will not be collected. Yet the whole emphasis of the notes is to say, "Don't worry folks; not much will really happen." Until the Minister gets to his feet or seeks to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we will be in a complete fog about what is in his mind and his intentions, although they are not really his intentions, because this is not really his Bill. In fact, therefore, he will have to guess what was in the promoter's mind in drafting the Bill.

On paragraph 18—

Mr. Hoban: Before my right hon. Friend moves on, I should like to draw his attention to a statement at the end of paragraph 17:

> "The public sector is generally exempt from the 1969 Act."

We are being told that the legislation would hit the private sector, but not the public sector.

Mr. Forth: I hope that that is not true. Again, we might hope for clarification from the promoter or the Minister in that regard. It would be very odd if it were true, given that the Government seem hellbent on renationalising large sectors of our economy, which presumably means that the public sector will expand into some of the very areas in respect of which we should be most concerned about health and safety. That is another lacuna that requires explanation.

I shall not dwell on that point, however, because I am very eager to get on to some other aspects of the explanatory notes that have caught my eye. Paragraph 18 states:

> "The Bill will have no significant manpower implications for the Health and Safety Executive".

Why not? If the provisions are going to make everything more effective, might not more people be needed? *[Interruption.]* We are all welcoming the hon. Member for Dismore back into the Chamber—*[Laughter.]* I apologise, I meant to say Hendon. Perhaps the hon. Member for Hendon is going to bully his hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby yet again, as he is sitting rather threateningly behind him. I hope that he will not try to prevent his hon. Friend from making a winding-up speech. When the time comes for the winding-up speeches, after my hon. Friends and the Minister have spoken, and when I have completed my remarks, we may see whether the hon. Member for Hendon is able to prevent his hon. Friend from winding up the debate. I hope that he does not do so.

Mr. Bercow: My right hon. Friend read out to the House only part of paragraph 18. He told us that the Bill would have no significant manpower implications for the Health and Safety Executive, but I am sure that he was about to point out that it will also have no significant manpower implications for the criminal justice system. How is that compatible with paragraph 8, which advises us that

> "At present, imprisonment is an option only in certain cases. The Bill will make imprisonment available for most health and safety offences."

Is not there a problem of the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is rightly famed for his ability to think of many things at once. I can think of only one at once. I therefore had to consider the paragraphs seriatim rather than at the same time. I was talking about the Health and Safety Executive; I shall briefly comment on the criminal justice system later.

Throughout the explanatory notes, the arguments appear to be "on the one hand, on the other hand." For example, the Bill provides for more fines, but they probably will not be collected. Under the measure, not many more people will go to prison, yet it is supposed to be a deterrent. We are told that although a significant improvement in health and safety will ensue, not many more people will work for the HSE.

It has been admitted that additional cases are expected in the higher courts. That means delays in other cases in the higher courts. That is another unintended consequence of the Bill. Neither the promoter nor the Minister foresaw it.

We have finished the starters, so let us get on to the main course. Paragraph 19 of the explanatory notes states:

> "The Bill will not impose new requirements on business."

That is unbelievable. If there is any hope of the Bill making a material improvement in health and safety in the workplace, how can it not impose new requirements on business? The statement is ridiculous and frankly untrue. Paragraph 19 continues:

> "A Regulatory Impact Assessment is not, therefore, required."

How do people know that the measure will not impose new requirements if they have not attempted to make an impact assessment?

The more I read the explanatory notes, the more I believe that we should know the identity of the author. Is it the Minister? When he winds up the debate, I hope that he will admit authorship. I hope that the promoter does not want to claim authorship, given the inconsistencies.

The statement in paragraph 19 that the Bill will not impose new requirements cannot be true. The annexe to the explanatory notes sets out matters that may be subject to fines and so on. They include a

> "duty not to interfere with or misuse things provided for health and safety."

Those who have such a duty will have to put in place procedures and possibly additional manpower to ensure that they can adhere properly to such requirements or go to prison. Another item in the annexe reads:

> "Contravening any requirement imposed by an inspector under section 20 (eg. to give information . . . or to leave premises undisturbed after an incident)".

The requirements are proper. It is implied that if they are not being fulfilled now, the new regime of fines and potential imprisonment will mean that people adhere to them more closely in future. How can that be done without additional burdens on business? My hon. Friend the Member for North-West Norfolk (Mr. Bellingham) rightly drew attention to that.

Mr. Bellingham: The specialist contractor in the Deputy Prime Minister's constituency whose insurance premium is going through the roof will have to appoint expensive consultants to advise him on the Bill. It will probably result in a thick wad of paper that requires many ticks in many boxes. That will surely have a

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regulatory impact. I am at a loss to understand why the explanatory notes state that no regulatory impact assessment is required. That makes no sense.

Mr. Forth: If my hon. Friend, whose expertise in such matters is legendary, cannot understand it, then what hope have I of understanding it? That is my difficulty.

I want to break off from my brief and superficial analysis of that part of the Bill and get stuck into the second part. We all know that the health and safety aspect is vital, as the promoter so eloquently set out—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

It being half-past Two o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 7 February.

Remaining Private Members' Bills

CROWN EMPLOYMENT (NATIONALITY) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 7 February.

Anti-Semitism (Arab World)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Joan Ryan.]*

2.30 pm

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): I issue a wake-up call to those who ignore the growth of pernicious anti-Semitism in the Arab world. In doing so, I wish to expose a case of double standards.

The tragic Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not justify mainstream Arab media and politicians merging long-standing religious pseudo-scientific and political anti-Semitism with demonic images of what they call the "Zionist entity." That is then transferred to Jews as a whole, wherever they may be. Zionism is the national self-determination of the Jewish people in the state of Israel. It encompasses a wide range of religious and political perspectives. Criticising the Israeli Government is not intrinsically anti-Semitic. I deplore the occupation. I have long supported the need for a Palestinian state alongside Israel. I despair at this week's victory for Ariel Sharon and the defeat of Amram Mitzna. But when Arab media demonise Israel and Jews in the language of the Third Reich, alarm bells ring. They ring particularly when Arab official spokespersons either repeat those utterances or clearly support what is said in state-sponsored media.

Holocaust denial is officially promoted in many Arab countries and communities. Seif Ali al-Jarwan, writing in the Palestinian newspaper *Al Hajar Al-Jadeeda* in 1998, is one example of that. The article mocked pictures of Jews pushed into the gas chambers as

> "a malicious fabrication 'by Shylock-like' greedy, cunning, evil and despised Jews".

In April 2002, *Al Akhbar*, the Egyptian Government-controlled and supported daily newspaper, called the holocaust

> "a huge Israeli plot aimed at extorting the German government and European countries."

"Mein Kampf" and the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" are near the top of the bestsellers list in Cairo, Beirut, Damascas, Gaza and Ramallah. As part of its 2002 Ramadan celebration, Egyptian television has just shown the 40-part epic "Horseman without a Horse", based on the infamous forgery the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion", proclaiming a Jewish plot to take over the world as if it were historical fact.

Blood libels are regularly repeated. An article in *Al Akhbar* last year announced that the Jewish

> "Talmud determines that the matzos of atonement must be kneaded with blood from non Jews, the preference is for the blood of youths after raping them."

The Saudi Government daily, *Al Riyadh,* published another article in March 2002, in which Dr. Umayma Ahmed al-Jalahma stated:

> "the Jews spilling human blood to prepare pastry for their holidays is a well established fact, historically and legally, all throughout history. This was one of the main reasons for the persecution and exile that were their lot in Europe and Asia".

However, these statements are not confined to the Arab media, or even to the media supported by the Governments of the countries concerned; they are also made by Ministers and people in senior positions in those countries. For example, in his book "Matza of Zion", the Syrian defence Minister Mustafa Tias says:

> "The Jew can kill you and take your blood in order to make your Zionist bread."

The same Minister told a visiting delegation from the Royal College of Defence Studies last October that Israel was responsible for the attack on the twin towers in New York—a view that is widespread in the Arab and Muslim world.

Blatant theological anti-Semitism was clearly alive when no less than the current President of Syria, Bashar al Asad, welcomed Pope John Paul II to Damascus in May 2001 with these chilling words:

> "They"—

the Israelis and Jews—

> "try to kill all the principles of divine faiths with the same mentality of betraying Jesus and torturing Him in the same way they tried to commit treachery against the Prophet Muhammad."

Not to be outdone, the London-based Saudi daily, *Al Sharq Al-Awsat,* recently published an article by Yasser Arafat's aide, Bassam Abu Sharif, charging Jews with

> "nailing Jesus to the cross."

The examples of theological anti-Semitism are numerous and frightening, and I have merely touched on them in the few references that I am able to make in the time allowed.

Last year, the Iranian Government felt able to reject the appointment of David Reddaway as the new British ambassador on the spurious grounds that he was a spy and a Jew. Despite the fact that the Leader of the House informed me in this House that David Reddaway was an excellent diplomat and a fine candidate for that position, it appears that Iran was able to get away with that action—to dictate to this country who will be our ambassador and to dispense with an excellent diplomat—on the spurious ground that he was a spy and a Jew.

From its charter, Hamas teaches Palestinians that Jews control the world's wealth and mass media, that they caused the French and Russian revolutions, and that they formed the League of Nations to rule the world. It preaches to Palestinian children and students that killing Jews is a religious commandment. Indeed, the teaching of hatred towards Jews is rampant in the Palestinian Authority. It is rampant in the schools and it is rampant on the streets.

However, these messages are no longer confined to the Arab world. In Pakistan, journalist Daniel Pearl was filmed having his throat cut as he was forced to declare, "I am a Jew". Shamefully, the 2001 United Nations anti-racism conference in Durban was overshadowed by Arabs and supporters distributing pamphlets that featured Adolf Hitler and the following caption:

> "If I had won the war there would be no Palestinian blood lost."

The caption was accompanied by cartoons of hook-nosed Jews. People who were present at that conference told me that the atmosphere was intimidating and frightening, and unacceptable in this century. The venom and intimidation reached such heights that the conference chair, United Nations human rights commissioner Mary Robinson, declared as an act of solidarity, "I am a Jew".

The echo of these insidious assaults is even reflected in some of the United Kingdom's liberal media. The front cover of the *New Statesman* of 14 January 2002 depicted a large Jewish star of David impaled on the Union Jack, above the caption, "A Kosher Conspiracy?" I was dismayed, as well as relieved, when the magazine's apology explained that it had not appreciated the Nazi association that such images would invoke.

Why do I bring this matter to the attention of the House of Commons and of the public? Because it produces a poisonous cocktail of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, laced with the venom of Islamicist jihad. That is an inoculation against peace and could fatally damage the prospects for long-term rapprochement between Israelis and Palestinians. It has an impact in the United Kingdom, where the recent report, "Anti-Semitism on the Streets", produced by the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Community Security Trust, shows an increase in racial attacks on Jews as a result of the preaching of hate.

October 2000 was a watershed. In the following 22 months, 78 synagogues were desecrated compared with 22 in a similar period previously. Although the number of racial assaults on individual Jews is still small, it has increased and includes the attempted murder of David Myers in Stamford Hill and attacks on individual Jews in London, Manchester and Birmingham. The activities of al-Muhajiroun, which publicly displays posters in London and Birmingham with the words

> "the final hour will not come until the Muslims kill the Jews",

have been credited with inciting further attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions.

The report stated:

> "The largest proportion of anti-Semitic activity, however, is abusive behaviour which, more than any other category reflects the general feelings of those who hate Jews, coming as it does from face-to-face encounters and spontaneous acts. Perhaps more than any other trend this reflects the cumulative effects of biased and/or inaccurate media reporting on the Middle East or the promotion of hatred against the Jews that comes from the Middle East and from radical Islamist groups. The change in the direction from which anti-Semitism now comes is therefore a worrying one."

The far right has promulgated anti-Semitism for a long time, and is a known enemy. However, there is a new source of anti-Semitism from the Arab world, which is too much ignored. The report notes that one reason for that growth of poisonous anti-Semitism and hatred in Arab countries, which is being repeated in this country, is the failure of anti-racist groups to condemn what is happening. That is shameful.

When anti-Semitism comes from the political far right, it is almost universally condemned, yet when the same phenomenon occurs in the Arab world, demonising Jews as well as the Jewish state, it is almost ignored. That is a case of double standards. The cancer must be stopped; it is time to speak out.

I ask the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell), to acknowledge the importance of these issues and to make strong representations in his bilateral contacts with the countries and Government institutions involved. The phenomenon that I have described is not a fringe activity; it is mainstream and it is deeply damaging to society. The Government should make it clear that the

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demonising of Jews, whatever its source, is not acceptable, whether it is found in countries such as Egypt, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Palestinian Authority—the embryo Palestinian state—or, indeed, on the streets of this country. Nor should the demonisation of any other group be tolerated. I look to our Government to make a stand.

2.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Bill Rammell): I should certainly like to take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) on raising this serious and important subject and on the way in which she has articulated her case. This subject is important not only in the United Kingdom, but in the wider world.

The Government's approach to anti-Semitism in the Arab world is in line with our policy of tolerance to people of all faiths, societies and cultures in the United Kingdom. In Britain, we very firmly wish to encourage people of all faiths, cultures and traditions to play a full part in British society. I recognise that, for different reasons, not everyone shares that view of tolerance. I should like to offer the House just a few examples of the actions that the Government have taken to encourage that aim both in Britain and internationally. I shall adopt that approach to assure my hon. Friend about the seriousness with which we view the subject, rather than to make any suggestion that the real and perceived problems to which she refers are resolved, because that is far from the case.

It is a fact that the Government are vigilant to the threat of rising racism and are committed to tackling anti-Semitism in Britain, wherever it exists. For example, we have taken significant action to tackle anti-Semitism in two ways. First, we have strengthened the criminal law to ensure that the police and courts have effective legislation to deal with those who seek to stir up racial and religious hatred. The Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 increased the maximum penalty for inciting racial hatred, and that has been widely welcomed. Secondly, by ensuring that the police work closely with the Jewish community, we have sought to reinforce the security of Britain's Jewish communities.

My hon. Friend referred to the fact that at the very least there has been a perceived increase in anti-Semitic activity in the United Kingdom following the atrocities of 11 September. The Government share her concern about attacks on Jewish people and Jewish property. For example, I am well aware of the strength of feeling especially, but by no means only, in the Jewish community about holocaust denial. I firmly deplore the sentiments expressed by the exponents of holocaust revisionism. Those views are offensive and repugnant, and I do not in any sense underestimate the hurt, offence and distress that they cause. All hon. Members would wish to be associated with saying that strongly and clearly.

It needs to be said that British Jews have a strong and inspiring history of academic, scientific and cultural achievement. It is particularly important that we celebrate and value the contribution made by the Jewish community in Britain—economically, socially and culturally—to the stability and prosperity of British society as a whole. Certainly, the Government's relations with the Jewish community are extremely important to us, and we will continue to do everything possible to strive to improve them.

The Government also welcome all moves intended to break down barriers between people—irrespective of whether those barriers are due to religion, faith, race, culture or tradition. We most certainly wish to encourage people of all faiths, cultures and traditions to play a full part in British society. We most certainly view interfaith dialogue as being most important, and we are keen to facilitate that dialogue to ensure that the good relations between faith communities in Britain are maintained and enhanced. Ministers rightly continue to meet representatives of the Jewish and Muslim communities regularly to take that process forward.

Following those approaches in the United Kingdom—in many senses this is what my hon. Friend was referring to—our activities overseas are consistent with the overall aim of promoting religious tolerance. We certainly condemn all instances where individuals are persecuted because of their faith or belief, and we are committed to tackling anti-Semitism in all its forms.

Ministers and officials take every opportunity, including with our European Union partners, to urge states to pursue laws and practices that foster tolerance and mutual respect and to protect religious minorities against discrimination, intimidation and attacks. We have sought opportunities to deal with that issue in international forums. For example, the UK co-sponsored a resolution at the United Nations General Assembly in New York in November 2002, to work to eliminate all forms of religious intolerance. We are committed to that aim and we will continue to pursue it.

Rightly, we also raise regularly specific cases of religious persecution with the Governments concerned, and have done that in cases of persecution against Jewish people and communities in Arab countries. We have done that for other religions in the Arab world, and for Jews in other parts of the world, too. For example, the issue of anti-Semitism in the media in the Arab world was raised in May 2002 during a meeting between Foreign Office officials and leaders of the British Jewish community. Following that meeting, which I feel was important, some of our ambassadors in the middle east were again asked to raise our concerns with the relevant authorities, which happened. I am pleased to say that we were able to report back in generally positive terms on the attitudes of the Governments concerned.

The attitudes of individual commentators and media outlets, however, continue to cause concern. Many of my hon. Friend's comments referred to that. We take the matter seriously and we continue to monitor the situation closely. She also mentioned the recent publicity surrounding the Egyptian television series "Horseman without a Horse", which was shown in Egypt in November and December 2002. We were concerned about that, and we raised the issue formally in November 2002 with the Egyptian Government, and received an understanding that all the episodes had been reviewed and amendments made to ensure that the programme did not contain anti-Semitic material. That was an important step.

My hon. Friend also referred to articles of an anti-Semitic nature that have appeared in newspapers in the middle east. One of our actions in response to that, to promote religious tolerance, is to build up links with newspaper editors so that we can maintain a dialogue on this issue. That is particularly important.

It would be wrong, however, to view the whole Arab world as at variance with our approach on religious tolerance, which a stereotypical view might suggest. In Morocco, for example, official announcements on issues connected with the Jewish community are very different from the stereotyped view. The Moroccan Government are proud of their country's tradition of diversity and value the long and distinguished history of its Jewish people. They rightly take care to draw a distinction between the role of the Moroccan Jewish community and the difficulties experienced in Palestine between Arab and Jewish people. In a warning to radical Muslim fundamentalists over actions against the country's 6,000 Jews, who live in Morocco's main cities, King Mohammed VI said in 2000 that

> "this does not mean we abandon our religious, historical and constitutional duties towards our Jewish subjects".

He said that in a televised speech, and we welcome such statements and actions.

My hon. Friend also talked about these concerns within the context of the situation in the middle east. I and the Government are gravely concerned about the situation in the middle east at the moment. There has been too much violence and loss of life, and neither side can achieve lasting security through force. We want to see a complete cessation of all acts of violence, withdrawal of Israeli forces from Palestinian cities, and action by the Palestinian Authority to bring those responsible for terrorist acts to justice, as called for in United Nations Security Council resolution 1435. We played a key role in the adoption of that resolution.

We continue in our efforts to advance the cause of peace in the region. As will be well known, the Foreign Secretary hosted a meeting on Palestinian reform and nation building on 14 January. Discussion in that meeting was wide-ranging and constructive and recognised the Palestinians' clear commitment to the reform of their institutions. It secured a welcome and clear Palestinian declaration against violence and terrorism and an acceptance that there must be practical action to implement it.

The participants applauded the work that the Palestinian Authority has done on financial accountability and recognised that the Palestinians need to do more on the judiciary. We warmly welcomed the conference as a significant step forward and see the reform efforts on both sides in the region as consistent with our policy of tolerance to people of all different faiths, societies and cultures.

My hon. Friend expressed concern about Palestinian school textbooks. There has been concern about the European Union funding of text books with anti-Semitic content for the Palestinians. We have investigated that and concluded that the quotations that are claimed to be taken from Palestinian textbooks have not been found in the new books funded by some EU member states.

The European Commission has also rightly looked into the allegations and confirmed them to be baseless. European aid is not provided for projects intended to seek to influence internal politics in the Palestinian Authority or Israel. The Commission, rightly again, will always be ready to investigate specific allegations of misappropriation or misuse of funds that it provides. Textbooks provided as part of an EU programme to re-equip Palestinian schools are free from negative content or any content that is likely to incite religious hatred, and are a major improvement on the books that they are replacing. We believe that the Palestinian Authority should be encouraged and supported to complete the replacement of the earlier textbooks as soon as possible.

My hon. Friend mentioned some detailed concerns about Iran. UK policy in the area mirrors the EU's twin-track approach: encouraging the changes under way in Iran while maintaining pressure to improve Iranian policies that cause us concern. We welcomed the re-election of President Khatami in June 2001 with an increased share of the vote, which demonstrated the Iranian people's clear will for reform and gave him a strong fresh mandate. We hope that he will be able to push through his policies of political and economic reform. It is important that he should do so. We strongly support his stated objective of an Islamic civil society based on the rule of law.

The resumption of high-level contacts in recent years does not mean that we have forgotten all our concerns about the situation in Iran. We and our EU partners want positive movement by the Iranians in our long-standing areas of concern, and in particular human rights and religious tolerance. Despite some improvements, especially in the area of freedom of expression, we still have major concerns. We shall continue to tackle those through our bilateral contacts and through the EU-Iran dialogue.

My hon. Friend specifically raised the matter of our ambassador to Iran. The Iranians' decision to reject David Reddaway as ambassador reflected negatively on their attitude to relations with the UK and had an impact on the conduct of our bilateral relations. Following our decision to give the Iranian ambassador in London the same level of access as our chargé in Tehran, there were signs that the Iranians did not want to jeopardise the dialogue that we had started. In response, we proposed another nominee as ambassador, and we are pleased that Iran has agreed to the appointment of Richard Dalton, who took up his post on 1 December. I reject the reported reasons for Iran's rejection of David Reddaway, which we have found to be without foundation.

We have concerns about the statements on behalf of representatives of the Syrian Government, and we will continue to raise those.

My hon. Friend has raised serious concerns about this important subject. There are problems of anti-Semitism, religious intolerance and racism throughout the world, and it is crucial that we do everything possible to combat the malign forces. That is certainly something that the British Government are committed to and that the Foreign Office will pursue very actively indeed.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at Three o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 21 January 2003

[MR. EDWARD O'HARA *in the Chair*]

UK Manufacturing Industry

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Dan Norris.]*

9.30 am

Ross Cranston (Dudley, North): On Friday, just around the corner from my office in Dudley, I visited an archaeological dig led by Pete Boland, Dudley's archaeologist. The dig is uncovering features of the local glass industry dating from the 1700s. It closed around the mid-19th century. I saw the remains of a glass cone and its furnace, which are now being unearthed, cleaned and studied with the help of Birmingham university archaeologists.

So Dudley has had a long association with manufacturing. Abraham Darby, father of the industrial revolution, was born on the Wren's Nest in 1678. A forerunner of the coking process had been developed earlier by the son of the local Baron of Dudley. By the mid-19th century, glass, iron and other manufacturing dominated the life of Dudley, as manufacturing did other parts of the black country. Stuart Crystal—a major glass company in the area—was the manufacturer of the crystal glass used on the Titanic.

Although manufacturing is alive and well in Dudley and the black country more generally—and I will return to that later—its character and size have changed. The large iron and steelworks have closed, although there are still castings and the fabrication of metal products. Royal Brierley Crystal has a limited presence in my constituency. There was a steep decline in those employed in manufacturing in the 1980s from 43.3 per cent. of the work force in 1981 to 31.9 per cent. in 1991. The relative number employed in the manufacturing sector seems now to have stabilised at about a quarter of those working in Dudley.

Also on Friday, I spoke about this debate to four people in Dudley whom I know especially well: Bob Duncan, Barry Guest, Rod Adams and Melvyn Mottram. All have worked in manufacturing and all have experienced its vicissitudes, the redundancies, the closing of factories. It is fair to say that they all acknowledge the realities of a globalised economy—the competition from cheap-labour economies such as China and the restructuring of British industry that that involves. They are conscious of the present downturn in the world economy, but they are adamant about the continued importance of manufacturing to this country. They raise serious issues, with implications for Government policy—the loss of skills, the availability of training opportunities, the access of smaller businesses to finance, the balance between large and small companies and the burdens on business such as the present costs of liability insurance. I would welcome the Minister's assurances on some of those points.

As to the continued importance of manufacturing to this country, those four men are absolutely right. Manufacturing contributes importantly to our earnings from abroad with more than three fifths of our exports. Any further fall in manufacturing's share of the economy would, as the Engineering Employers Federation has put it, create the danger of a large structural trade deficit, which would leave us dependent on our earnings from investments abroad and on attracting capital inflows. Moreover, manufacturing is a key to closing the productivity gap with other European countries such as Germany and with the United States, as it achieves faster growth in productivity than the rest of the economy.

Manufacturing is also an important source of innovation in the economy; it is responsible for around 80 per cent. of research and development. Finally, there is the contribution of manufacturing to particular regions of the country. In the west midlands, more than 500,000 people are employed in manufacturing—more than in any other English region. In the 1980s, manufacturing took a hammering in the west midlands, with devastating consequences for individuals and their prospects. Any downturn in manufacturing has a disproportionate impact on the region, and on Dudley, which is part of it.

In the past year or so, the Government have made explicit their belief that a strong manufacturing sector is vital to our future prosperity. That explicit commitment to manufacturing in "The Government's Manufacturing Strategy" published in May 2002 was important in correcting a perception that in their first term the Government did not take manufacturing as seriously as they should have done. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment Relations, Industry and the Regions have done much to assert that manufacturing matters. The seven pillars that they identified in the strategy highlight key goals and policies and will prove useful in measuring progress. I commend them for their work so far.

In the past six years, the Government have provided macro-economic stability, with low inflation and low interest rates, and there have been specific fiscal measures such as the lowering of corporate tax rates, especially for small firms. The issue that manufacturers consistently raise with me, however, is the value of the Cap pound. Yesterday, Gemini Ernst and Young helpfully provided me with the results of the business outlook survey carried out in December 2002 on 750 manufacturing companies. It found that 38 per cent. of UK manufacturers increased the proportion of their total output produced overseas during 2002 in a bid to cut labour costs and—this is the point relevant to macro-economic policy—to obtain a more favourable exchange rate.

I cannot see an easy way round the exchange rate issue. Manufacturers are certainly not overwhelmingly of the view that entry to the euro will solve the problem. In the *Financial Times* yesterday, a MORI poll of 164 chairmen and chief executives from the country's top 500 companies showed that 50 per cent. do not support the principle of entry, against 42 per cent. who do. That reflects a movement against entry, which is also evident in the recent British Chambers of Commerce survey.

[Ross Cranston]

An attempt to manipulate the exchange rate, by the Bank of England lowering interest rates for example, would stoke inflationary pressures. That might be good for property owners in the south-east, but not for west midlands manufacturers. Deflating the economy through fiscal measures, in another attempt to manipulate the exchange rate, would have unacceptable social consequences as well as reducing the demand on which manufacturers partly depend, unless they export their total output.

I return to some of the concerns raised by my four Dudley informants: first, the loss of skills. By that they mean not simply personal skills but our collective knowledge as a nation. Firms in Dudley and the black country were often pioneers and innovators. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister is concerned with encouraging more innovation and getting British companies to invest more heavily in R and D. Compared with other major industrial countries, we have invested proportionately less, although the Treasury's reports on productivity in the UK chart encouraging improvement since 1998. The R and D tax credit and the fiscal measures to encourage science should reinforce that trend. Although the UK has a strong science base, however, the conventional wisdom is that we fail to translate that into commercial success. The most recent confirmation of that was the report last June, to my noble Friend Lord Sainsbury, by the UK nanoscience and technology advisory group.

There is much to hope for with the launch of the Department of Trade and Industry Manufacturing Advisory Service and its mission to encourage manufacturers to innovate with new technology and practices. I am especially pleased that the regional centre for manufacturing excellence in West Bromwich adjacent to my constituency is up and running and already providing advice and assistance to companies in Dudley. I congratulate the Minister on that initiative, with which he had a close involvement. Perhaps he can inform us of the experience of MAS to date and the comparisons with other national advisers to industry such as MICE, which seeks to deliver improvements in the metal sector through the application of lean manufacturing practice and supply-chain efficiency.

The picture is disappointing for individual skills in Dudley and the black country. In January 2001, the Basic Skills Agency reported that 46,660 adults in the borough aged 16 and over had poor literacy, and that 48,920 had poor numeracy. That places Dudley slightly above the national average for poor literacy and numeracy. Information technology skills are also under-represented in the Dudley work force.

The low skills base is reflected in the vacancies that are unfilled at professional, technical and senior levels. However, I am especially pleased at the progress that David Wray and his team at the Black Country learning and skills council have made. The black country has had one of the worst staying-on rates in the country for young people over 16, but there are the first real signs of change. Reports published in December suggest that Dudley has seen the largest increase in 16 to 18-year-olds staying on in sixth-form colleges, which takes us from well below the national average to just above it. Tackling adult literacy and numeracy skills has taken a turn for the better after a local publicity campaign overcame the shortage of tutors.

I am especially pleased with the excellent work being done by Dudley college, which has 1,000 staff and 40,000 students, including 500 from abroad, and has earned the Basic Skills Agency post-16 kitemark and three beacon awards for excellence. The college provides most of the training for MG Rover apprentices. An adult learning inspection recently awarded MG Rover six grade 1s for its training for apprentices. The inspectors' report states that work-based learning in engineering, technology, and manufacturer business administration and management are excellent. The college is in the process of establishing a Black Country centre of vocational excellence for engineering and manufacture to provide for advanced technology skills in support of regional manufacturers. I invite my hon. Friend to visit the centre once it is established.

Skills are also necessary at the top level of manufacturing. The Engineering Employers Federation report of late 2001 identified important management failures, such as not adopting techniques such as lean manufacturing, despite evidence that 30 per cent. of companies that do so reap significant productivity gains. Last October, a McKinsey report examined 100 manufacturers and concluded that the crisis in the sector was due above all to poor management. It suggested that the key to the relatively strong performance of foreign-owned companies in the United Kingdom was management, not employee performance or Government regulation.

There are good UK managers in manufacturing, who are concerned about innovation and investment and not simply about reducing costs. They focus on design and marketing as much as on making things. On 26 March, the Black Country chamber of commerce will launch its manufacturing support campaign in the Palace of Westminster. My hon. Friend is sure to be invited. The policy and representation director of the chamber of commerce, Ian Brough, told me about some of its major themes. I am pleased that helping management to identify niche segments, promoting high value-added products and fully exploiting design and innovation will be at the forefront.

That approach resonates with that advanced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. Last year, she launched a study led by the United States management expert Professor Michael Porter to review and collate existing studies of UK management practices and to analyse their effect on productivity. I hope that his report, which I understand is due to be published soon, will help to guide those in British management to make the best of their resources in people, processes and equipment. They need constantly to ensure that they are providing the right products for the world outside. British managers should try to keep up to date with developments and provide the right environment for harnessing innovation in their organisations. I look forward to seeing Professor Porter's report, and hope that there will be useful lessons for the black country.

The McKinsey study downplayed the role of regulation in manufacturing difficulties, yet a constant refrain from business is that it is overly burdened by regulation. Only last Friday, the Black Country chamber of commerce was quoted in *The Birmingham*

Post as calling on the Government to help to boost business confidence by slashing red tape. Indeed, at regular meetings with the chamber of commerce, the subject of red tape is raised, but when members of the chamber are challenged to produce examples, they are strangely silent. I would need several hours to unpick the notion of over-regulation. I do not deny that in some cases, a lighter touch might be justified, but let me make three brief points.

First, the notion of regulatory burden often ignores the interests of other stakeholders in manufacturing—notably employees and their interests in, say, a healthy and safe working environment. Secondly, the notion is not always borne out by the response of management to specific aspects of regulation. For example, I was especially taken last year with the SGS Consultancy national survey of small and medium-sized enterprises. Nearly three quarters of respondents said that the minimum wage had had no effect, while almost two thirds said that equal opportunities legislation had had no effect and 19 per cent. said that it had had positive effects.

That leads to my third point: the acknowledged benefits of regulation. One example that I shall mention in passing is the Black Country forging and foundry project, the aim of which is to reduce noise in the industry. That will benefit employees and residents of the area.

The Government have a prime role in providing institutional support to industry and not just in regulating it. I mentioned the Manufacturing Advisory Service. The Small Business Service is also up and running, providing support to small manufacturers and other businesses. In its 2002 report, the Trades Union Congress warmly welcomed the refocusing of the Government's industrial and economic policies towards regional level, as do I.

Last week, my hon. Friend the Minister met the new chairman of the West Midlands regional development agency, Advantage West Midlands, to discuss its priority of supporting industry. Perhaps he can give a brief report on those talks. It is early days for AWM, although I have struck a couple of unexpected bottlenecks in relation to projects in Dudley, which I may need to bring to my hon. Friend's attention later this month. That said, AWM's agenda for action—modernisation, diversification and excellence—is certainly the right one.

In 200 years, industrial archaeologists will, I imagine, still be excavating in Dudley. If industry invests in R and D and pursues technical design and innovation, and if the Government's manufacturing strategy delivers skills and expertise to factories and workshops, the archaeologists' reports will be of the historical success of manufacturing and its adaption to the challenges in the first part of the 21st century.

9.48 am

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): I was particularly interested in what my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Dudley, North (Ross Cranston) had to say about manufacturing. I think that we are really talking about the situation in the west midlands and nationally. Some hon. Members will know that the west midlands has been one of the economic powerhouses of the country in manufacturing innovation. However, it is fair to say that in western countries manufacturing has been in decline for some years, and the decline in the United Kingdom seems to have been sharper. Let us consider the economy of the west midlands, for example. A quarter of the industries are manufacturing industries, so a quarter of the jobs are in the manufacturing industries.

One issue that my hon. and learned Friend touched on and which we have campaigned about is research and development. Anyone who knows anything about manufacturing knows that a considerable percentage of outside labour costs goes into R and D. A company such as Rolls-Royce, for example, would invest heavily in projects and new engines, but would not get a return on that for 10 to 15 years. That is one of the problems that such companies have experienced over the years. Over the past five or six years, Rolls-Royce—as I am sure hon. Members know—has gradually been shedding labour. That process started before 11 September; I remember attending a series of meetings with the company. It might be argued that, in that loss of labour, there is an element of outsourcing to other countries. The trade unions will raise that as an issue, if anyone ever has discussions with them, but such outsourcing does not occur only in companies such as Rolls-Royce. Outsourcing is widespread, and it might be said that it is costing jobs in this country.

A further aspect of declining manufacturing in the west midlands is one that we sometimes tend to forget: the small supplier. The small supplier can be badly hit when there are cuts. Such suppliers are often small companies which, in brighter times, we would say were the backbone of innovation in British industry. We should be aware that some of the events and actions that emerge from central Government or result from world events can often hit the small company.

I am sure that some hon. Members will remember the Rover situation a few years ago. Anyone who visited the area at that time would have been struck by the fact that many people—even those who worked at the corner shop—knew someone or had a relative who worked at Rover. It is probable that thousands of small suppliers would have been badly hurt if Rover had been allowed to go to the wall. The Government and the Trade and Industry Committee put tremendous effort into trying to save Rover, and, fingers crossed, MG Rover seems to be thriving these days.

Coventry, in a similar way to the black country, has a tremendous industrial history, from the manufacture of bicycles to motor cars. Coventry was one of the first places to be devastated by the recession of the early 1980s. I remember the thousands of redundancies there during that period. However, through diversification over a number of years, the city has been able to reinvent itself economically.

Although we should not be alarmed by current trends, we should nevertheless be cautious. Recently, there has been the Marconi situation and its ramifications not only in Coventry but nationally and internationally. Although Marconi has restructured, it is still going through a process of job losses. Over the next couple of weeks, the local MPs will meet the employees of Marconi to see how far the company has progressed in its restructuring and, more important, how many jobs can be saved or will be lost.

[Mr. Jim Cunningham]

We should not talk ourselves down; we should remain optimistic. However, the textile industry gives cause for concern, as I am sure the Minister will be aware. We might debate the reasons why the textile industry is in decline in this country. Traditionally, the industry has been the preserve of the east and west midlands as much as of any other part of the country, and its decline has been having a sharp effect on the east midlands. I am sure that colleagues from the east midlands could elaborate on that a great deal better than I can.

We should, however, welcome the new manufacturing strategy; I am sure that those who work in industry will also welcome it. A manufacturing strategy can offer a five to 10-year programme for training and investment to meet the needs of the economy and, more important, to promote exports. The strategy is probably the first attempt for about 30 years to try to take manufacturing seriously. We must also encourage investment —my hon. and learned Friend mentioned red tape—and do nothing that hinders it, because investment is very important to manufacturing industry.

It is also important to get our transport structures right. We all know of difficulties with the railways, which play a vital part in transporting our manufacturing goods abroad. That is why, a few years ago, the west midlands took an interest in the Hams Hall project. My hon. Friend the Minister will know exactly what I am talking about. Without that project, goods coming from and going to Europe would not have stopped in the midlands. The next stop would have been Newcastle and then Glasgow. The midlands would have been bypassed, accelerating its decline. That shows how vital it is to have a proper transport structure for transporting our goods.

The regional development agency has been up and running over the past two or three years; it played a major role in reviving Rover. The RDA is still in its infancy, but the resources made available to it to help industry are insufficient and should be increased. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that. More generally, we need to help industry by providing a major retraining programme. Several retraining programmes are in force in Coventry, but I wonder how strong programmes like them are nationally and in the east midlands more widely.

I welcome this morning's debate and I thank my hon. and learned Friend for introducing it. Despite what people think, the west midlands still takes manufacturing seriously and we are always guarded about its future. The area has a tremendous history of innovation, enterprise and inventions such as the motor car.

The bulk of employment today is in small rather than major companies, many of which outsource. Today, about 4 million people work in the manufacturing sector. It is worrying, but I try to remain optimistic without being over-confident. We should certainly be vigilant about manufacturing in this country and try to learn from our competitors abroad.

One important body not often mentioned is the World Trade Organisation. People do not realise the significant role that it plays in manufacturing. Some agreements are made—or foisted on us—that make it difficult for us to subsidise our industries, whereas the French and certainly the Americans can, particularly to do with research and development for defence. The costs of such R and D are covered through defence programmes—always a burning economic issue. The public in this country often do not realise that the WTO fixes everything from the price of sugar to that of an aircraft engine. We do not debate the WTO often enough, though it is half the problem of third-world exploitation. We should focus more on the effect of the world economy on people's daily lives.

I shall conclude on that note and congratulate my hon. and learned Friend once again on securing this debate.

9.58 am

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am pleased to participate in this debate at such an opportune time and I congratulate my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Dudley, North (Ross Cranston) on securing and introducing it. He gave a precise run across the terrain, though manufacturing is so diverse that much more could and should be said—and I hope to make a few additional points.

When people hear of Stroud, they often misunderstand the nature of the area that I represent. To many people, it means the Cotswolds and the Severn vale—a beautiful environment with a large service industry. In fact, something approaching 40 per cent. of employment in the Stroud valley is still in manufacturing. Therefore, when manufacturing catches a cold, at the very best we sneeze but sometimes we get the flu. We saw the decline of the early 1980s, which my hon. and learned Friend well described. Manufacturing has been in the doldrums for some years, but there is another side to consider.

I had the opportunity yesterday to visit one of the new companies that have come into my constituency. It is a company of which many hon. Members will have heard, and it has held a conference today at the Queen Elizabeth II conference centre. It is Unite, the leading manufacturer of what are technically called modular built units, which we are now providing for students and key workers. It was good to see under the leadership of John Tonkiss the way in which the company has embedded itself into the local economy. It is providing jobs and would seem to be destined for success.

I want to make three points to put manufacturing in a sensible context. One is entirely positive, although the other two are less so. I start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Minister. We have had dealings on a particular case, which I will not mention for reasons that he and I both know about, and he has always been interested and responsive when I have been to see him. I hope that that relationship can continue, as the nature of manufacturing means that the Department of Trade and Industry has to act quickly on particular cases.

The positive point, which relates to those congratulations, is about the work of regional development agencies, which my hon. and learned Friend mentioned. We are fortunate in the south-west, as the South West of England Regional Development Agency has been keen to make its mark and has benefited from its chairman, board members and full-time staff. I am particularly grateful for its intervention in Dursley, where a major diesel manufacturer, Lister-Petter, was in considerable difficulties. I pay tribute to the RDA's strategic direction and willingness to get its hands dirty in the nitty-gritty issues of keeping companies going and sites available for manufacturing.

More than that, I pay tribute to the way in which the RDA brought on board not only the company, its work force and the trade unions but the local community in a groundbreaking attempt to consult widely on how we wanted the site to be redeveloped. The agency went to enormous lengths to lead that change and examine how to return industry to that site, which was mixed with housing in order to factor in some income and make the development as important as possible given the wider background of difficulty in manufacturing. Notwithstanding some of the Conservative party's comments about RDAs, I hope that it will reconsider its opposition to them. They are important, strategic and detailed organisations that can make an enormous difference.

The first of my two less positive points concerns the interpretation of state aid rules on manufacturing. I spoke about the subject in a recent debate in this Chamber, and I make no apology for returning to do so again. One of the worst aspects of the European Union is that it restricts the way in which companies can build relationships with the Government. We are prevented from intervening when it is appropriate by the simple fact that a competitor or European rival could complain that any intervention falls foul of the so-called state aid rules. I am sure that the state aid rules are written down, but they are subject to wide interpretation. The difficulty is that the system is negative in that it prevents one from intervening in the way in which one otherwise might, so one cannot test the waters because of the likelihood of being fined and hauled over the coals by the European Commission.

It is often alleged that other countries are far more liberal in their interpretation of state aid rules. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be robust in defending industries and companies, because manufacturing is the lifeblood of this country. Our attitude in that field can be contrasted with our willingness, on all occasions, to intervene in agriculture. As someone who represents farmers and spends much time talking to them and seeking to change the common agricultural policy, I suggest that we move some of the money from agriculture to industry, which would have benefits all round.

I am talking not about favouritism or bolstering companies that are clearly past their sell-by dates, but about investing in high-tech and in research and development to rebuild our industries from within. Some money could go in that direction rather than being spent entirely on agriculture. I say that as someone who, as I am sure hon. Members know, always advocates fairness to farmers and the food chain. Sometimes, however, subsidy levels in the food chain have been counter-productive.

I am afraid that my third point is very critical of one of the seven strands, which I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister knows about and which my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Dudley, North has already touched on: the role of the banking system. I am not here to criticise individual banks or to cast aspersions on everything that banks do, but when this Government were elected in 1997, I genuinely believed that the banking system was beginning to look more to the longer term. That was my experience in the Lister-Petter case. The banks involved were signed up to trying to stay on board over a period of time, including taking ownership of companies if that were required. It is a difference between us and the Germans that banks in Germany have always had shares in companies, to the extent that they have almost taken ownership of some. I see that as part of a genuine partnership between Government, companies and the banking system.

It is with some sadness that I have to say that my experience locally and nationally suggests that, although some banks seemed convinced in 1997 that a new relationship was required, that relationship does not yet really exist in practice. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will comment on how we are trying, by talking to those in the banking system in this country and—as one now has to—globally, to find ways of creating a brand new environment in which banks understand that they cannot invest in manufacturing for the short term. That must be for the long haul, but if it is done properly and partnerships are developed appropriately, rewards will be reaped. If we are looking at only short-term returns, manufacturing is, quite simply, doomed. We cannot do that. I hope that the Government have some good messages about how, at the individual and the wider environmental level, they are going to get to grips with ensuring that banks play their part, along with companies, the Government, employees, trade unions and local communities.

I have a quick rejoinder to my hon. and learned Friend, who rightly highlighted, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham), the roles of training and bringing skills into industry. We have to be sorry that we have lost so many skills as a result of the closure of so many important companies. We must ensure that we attract younger people, particularly as the generation of people who currently work in engineering begins to die out.

I strongly agree with my hon. and learned Friend that there is a need for work-based training. Through the work of the regional agency and business link in Gloucestershire, we have tried to encourage those on industrial estates to make available a training room with up-to-date equipment so that people can train during as well as outside work time, and so that they do not have to make the effort to attend college courses—notwithstanding the fact that many such courses are very good.

We all know that time is precious. Many trainees work for small and medium-sized enterprises and, because of the constraints of the company's operation, they cannot be allowed to disappear for parts of the day. Therefore, I would like training rooms on every industrial estate throughout the country where, with the support of employers and initiative from trade unions, more people can be given encouragement to upskill or build the skills that are sadly lacking. Such measures will

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give people the hope that they are working in the right area and ensure that we begin to join the circle so that manufacturing in this country can again be strong and receive the support that it deserves.

10.11 am

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Harrow, West): I congratulate my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Dudley, North (Ross Cranston) on securing the debate and on the way in which he introduced the topic. I apologise to my hon. Friend the Minister and the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for North-West Norfolk (Mr. Bellingham), because I may not be able to stay to hear the winding-up speeches.

Unlike my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Dudley, North and my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) and for Stroud (Mr. Drew), I do not come to the debate with any important parochial manufacturing interests to help to inspire my contribution. My constituency is not famous for its manufacturing industry, but I seek to lock into the Minister's brain the name Thales Acoustics. The company is not in my constituency but just outside it, in the constituency of the Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty). It is an example of a successful, modern and effective acoustics engineering and manufacturing business. When the Minister is in discussions about contracts with colleagues in the Ministry of Defence, particularly the Minister for Defence Procurement, Lord Bach, I ask him gently to press the case of Thales Acoustics.

My interest in taking part in the debate is to make a case for a potential area of manufacturing for British industry. Renewable and sustainable energy technologies offer considerable new opportunities for British manufacturers, particularly as we try to accelerate the process of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Britain is well known for its windy climate and, therefore, for the potential of wind energy. Many in the fledgling wind industry await with interest the energy White Paper that is to be published soon by the DTI. At present, there is just one major manufacturer in the UK of wind turbines—the Vestas plant in Scotland. For other renewable technologies, there was only a manufacturer of solar panels, Intersolar in Bridgend, south Wales, which I understand has recently gone into insolvency.

Many in the House will be well aware of the problems faced by those who seek to develop combined heat and power systems, given the impact of the new electricity trading arrangements and, more important, the rise in gas prices, which has effectively killed off many of the plans for CHP manufacturers to expand in the UK. That is why CHP manufacturers are looking to the White Paper to begin the process of restoring confidence and providing new opportunities in the manufacturing of those technologies.

It is fair to say that the DTI has not always been a friend to Britain's fledgling renewable energy industry. Until 1997, under the previous Conservative Government, it was notorious for being a friend of the nuclear industry and of the coal industry—when Baroness Thatcher was not trying to destroy it to accelerate the take-up of gas. The Department was certainly not a generous funder and supporter of the development of renewable energy. Since the Labour party came to power, however, there has been a shift in the Department's attitude to renewable energy, which was no doubt helped by our 10 per cent. target, based on 1990 levels, for the take-up of renewables by 2010, and by our manifesto target to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent.

I urge the Minister to take away from the debate the need to champion the case for more investment in capital grants for offshore wind power and solar panels to allow us to create the domestic market from which to win new export orders. I say that not only because of the needs of British manufacturing but because CO_2 emissions are rising in the UK. Accelerating the development of renewable industries in this country offers a win in terms of both British manufacturing and bringing down CO_2 emissions.

If the Minister shares my enthusiasm for the development of renewable energies, I hope that he will seek to discuss with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister the problems with planning applications, which thwart and delay the take-up of renewables in the UK and therefore limit the expansion of the manufacturing side of the industry. Some two thirds of planning applications for wind farms end in rejection or substantial delay. I know that the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is looking at that issue and is sympathetic to it, but I hope that my hon. Friend's considerable talents will be put to good use in making the case for the speedy reform of PPG22.

Although the National Assembly for Wales is an excellent institution, which is led extremely effectively by the Labour party in Wales, I hope that my hon. Friend is willing to persuade his officials to encourage a more positive attitude to wind farm applications from the civil servants who serve it. For some reason, Wales has suffered from a planning blight in which renewables applications have been turned down.

My hon. Friend may also be aware that the take-up of renewables in the UK, and thus the opportunity to develop the manufacturing potential of renewable technologies, has been in part frustrated by the objections of the Ministry of Defence to a number of wind farm sites. I do not condemn it for its objections—wind farms interfere with radar—but a solution needs to be found if we are to see an expansion in the take-up of manufacturing opportunities in renewables. Any further effort that can be put into resolving and speeding up the MOD's handling of its objections to wind farm applications will be important.

The need for sensible regulation of the manufacturing industry is a point that has been well made by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Dudley, North. If we are to see the take-up of manufacturing opportunities for renewables, the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets is an important source of regulation. With that in mind, the selection of a new chair and chief executive of Ofgem, which is beginning, is a particularly important process for the DTI. I ask my hon. Friend to remind other Ministers in the Department of the need to ensure that the person who is appointed is not the usual dry economist with no understanding of the needs of renewable technologies, but someone with a genuine sympathy for the manufacturing opportunities that renewables offer in the UK.

Mr. Drew: As I would expect, my hon. Friend is making an excellent speech in support of renewables. Does he agree that the two key points, for the promotion of renewables and the companies themselves, are the need to try to build the entrepreneurial spirit and the need to ensure that there is engineering expertise? That is why the background that he talked about is necessary; we need people to have both skills.

Mr. Thomas: My hon. Friend is right, and I want to consider some of the institutional mechanisms that can support the take-up of renewables and therefore the manufacturing potential of renewable energy technologies.

On the planning argument, I ask the Minister to offer to meet Opposition Front Benchers to encourage their party to adopt a more sympathetic attitude to renewable technologies. Conservative Members have often opposed wind farm applications in the House. I hope that the Minister will encourage them to dissociate themselves from that notorious flat-earther Bernard Ingham, who has led many a campaign to prevent wind farm applications from being accepted. I hope that the Minister will encourage the Liberal Democrats to be consistent in their attitude to renewable technologies. They say that they are always keen to support them, but whenever there is an application in a Liberal Democrat constituency, they are always willing to oppose it.

I hope also that the Minister will consider the institutional mechanisms. As I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud, I have long believed that we need a sustainable energy agency in the Government to help to make a case against enthusiasts and lobbyists for nuclear power and the coal and gas industries—not that I am against those things. Given the fledgling nature of the renewable and sustainable energy industry in the UK, we need such an agency to bring together the expertise in the Government and to provide one clear point of access for those who seek to make their case and to develop renewable energy options. There is a sense that regional development agencies are beginning to recognise the manufacturing potential of renewable technologies. I hope that when the Minister meets the heads of the regional development agencies, he will encourage them to look with a bit more enthusiasm at the potential in that area.

Mr. Edward O'Hara (in the Chair): Order. We have 37 minutes left. For reasons of equity and courtesy, it is desirable that Front-Bench spokesmen each consume no more than one third of that time.

10.24 am

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I shall honour your request, Mr. O'Hara.

I congratulate the hon. and learned Member for Dudley, North (Ross Cranston). The challenge in such debates is to say something new. This is the fifth or sixth debate that I have attended on manufacturing industry. However, the hon. and learned Gentleman is doing us a service. This is an important subject for the reasons that he explained. It is not just important at a parochial level for many constituencies; the manufacturing sector is still large in aggregate terms. We are talking about almost 20 per cent. of the national economy. It accounts for over half of trade and is important for productivity growth. Even though the themes and arguments are the same, it is important that we keep making them.

The key point is the pronounced long-term trend—it has been going on for half a century—of manufacturing industry slowly declining as a share of the national economy, regardless of which Government have been in power. Since 1979, the share has declined from 27 per cent. to 17 per cent. One can draw a line along a ruler to reflect that; there has been no marked deviation. That has been happening in the rest of the industrial world, but it has probably gone further and faster here than in other countries.

The most recent trend, however, is a little worrying. In the past five years, manufacturing industry has hardly grown at all. On average it has grown by 0.4 per cent. a year. The service sector has grown 10 times faster—by about 4 per cent. a year. The British economy is doing reasonably well, and growing at a rate of 2.5 per cent. It is stable, out-performing the rest of the western world and sustains a fair degree of buoyancy. However, it is almost entirely driven by the service sector. The manufacturing sector has been stagnating, and it is right to ask why.

Before dealing with that question, I want to make the point that it is unhelpful to draw a clear distinction between manufacturing and services and say that there is no connection between them. The contribution to the debate of the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) was useful in that regard; there is a connection. In my constituency, we have only one factory, which employs 75 people. There are others employed by "services", but that is misleading.

Over the past generation, many manufacturing companies which used to conduct design and marketing in-house or have their own IT consultancy branch have begun outsourcing such work. It is carried out by firms called service companies, but which are fully integrated with manufacturing. I often joke that Twickenham is one of the largest shipbuilding centres in Britain. Boats are not actually built there, but specialist IT companies in my constituency carry out all the design work for the Tyneside shipbuilding industry. There is a link between the service and the manufacturing economy, which we are in danger of overlooking.

Why has manufacturing apparently had uniquely difficult problems? They are not unique to manufacturing. The same sort of crisis has affected agriculture and traded services. As MPs in London know, a very sharp contraction is taking place in financial services, partly because of the problems of the stock exchange, but partly for the same reasons that manufacturing and agriculture have been affected. They are traded parts of the economy that are exposed to international competition. If there is a recession in the world economy, as there has been during the past year, it will hit those traded sectors more than others.

One factor makes the British manufacturing problem much worse than that of other countries, and it was mentioned by the hon. and learned Gentleman: the problems of the exchange rate. People often do not

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realise how damaging that has been. Manufacturers often produce a list of grievances about their difficulties, and the exchange rate is one of them. British manufacturing, agriculture and traded services have taken an enormous hit in recent years.

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, British manufacturing has lost about 30 per cent. of its competitiveness. In the jargon, the real, effective exchange rate, which is a measure of how one loses competitiveness because of exchange rate movements, stands at 30 per cent. The International Monetary Fund suggests that it is even 40 per cent. That is a staggering amount to lose. It is amazing that so many manufacturing industries keep going, make money and compete despite the enormous hit that they have taken.

That issue is central to the difficulties of manufacturing, particularly in recent years. As the hon. and learned Gentleman said—it is not a partisan point—it is difficult to deal with that. I do not pretend that there is a magic cure for the problem. We believe that if the Government declared their intention to lock in sterling to the currencies of Europe at a much lower and competitive rate, they would help the process to happen because the market would respond. I do not pretend that that is easy; we are not discussing a magic cure. The exchange rate is crucial to a definition of the problem.

What else can be done? The Government have produced a manufacturing strategy and many of its elements are sensible, so we can agree with them. It tends to emphasise macro-economic stability, training, infrastructure, attracting foreign investment and creating the right market framework—all of which are right and sensible and from which I doubt any of us would dissent. It is also important, not so much for what they say but for what they do not say, that the Government have not gone down the road of massive intervention and trying to rescue companies that are in difficulty or trying to bail out failing enterprises. That is right and an important development, although the Government do not advertise that. I have no quarrel with the basic framework of the manufacturing strategy, but I want to make two specific points.

First, the Government still have some manufacturing intervention. We still have the innovation budget, which amounts to around £1.4 billion. Some parts of that are well received and the small-industry element is popular with business, but how far are the Government evaluating the effectiveness of their own programmes? From time to time we hear reports that the Secretary of State has commissioned studies into how effective the programmes of the Department of Trade and Industry are in helping business and particularly industry. I am a bit sceptical about where some of the money goes and the results. Is there a point at which the Government will produce a self-critical evaluation of their own efforts in the DTI to help business? Which programmes are succeeding and which are not? How much of the money allocated reaches the front line and how effective is it? It would be useful in a non-partisan way to examine what the money is buying and how successful it is.

My second specific point concerns complaints about regulatory burdens and business taxes. Although such burdens and taxes are minor in their impact compared with the exchange rate, they have an effect. One of the particular problems for manufacturing industry is that if a new tax, national insurance surcharge or whatever is introduced, it cannot pass it on to customers—unlike the service sector which can pass it on to consumers. So, the problem is doubly difficult.

The one area in which the Government should think again about policy is the climate change levy, which has aroused enormous ire because it bears disproportionately on manufacturing industry. I fully understand the environmental reasons for it, but the same objectives could have been achieved in other ways—through a carbon tax, applied upstream to filter through the whole economy without bearing disproportionately on manufacturing. The Government have heard that many times from manufacturers and I hope that they will rethink the matter while retaining their environmental objectives.

In conclusion, where do we go from here? I want to be optimistic, but dark clouds are appearing over the world economy. The United States economy is poised on a knife-edge and things could go badly wrong, particularly if the prospective war goes badly wrong. Japan is in a serious state of deflation and the German economy is in serious difficulty. All that will have an impact on our manufacturing industry and the outlook is not particularly good. I fear that in a year the hon. and learned Member for Dudley, North might return with another debate on the same subject and we shall, unfortunately, be saying many of the same things.

10.33 am

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): I congratulate the hon. and learned Member for Dudley, North (Ross Cranston) on securing this debate because the matter is crucial to the constituencies of many hon. Members.

I should declare an interest: I am a non-executive director of a plastics manufacturing company. There is a strong manufacturing base in my constituency, especially in food processing and engineering, and several other manufacturers are based there.

Although the economy has done well in the past few years, the manufacturing base has been in decline compared with the service sector. I agree with the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) that we cannot be insulated from the global economy. There are some worrying trends. The service sector, which has been the driver behind the fall in unemployment, will come under pressure if consumer confidence starts to falter. That confidence has to a large extent been built on rising house prices, low interest rates and the ease with which consumers have been able to remortgage houses and spend the money on improvements to their homes and other things. I do not expect a hard landing, but if the economy gradually slows down, the weakness in manufacturing compared with the rest of the economy will be even more important, and it is vital that the Government do their best to arrest that decline.

The hon. and learned Member for Dudley, North talked about the structural trade deficit, about which the Engineering Employers Federation expressed concern when I met its representatives recently. They said that the recent trade figures were pretty deplorable—the worst for 300 years, I believe. That is very worrying, as there has also been a big increase in the number of days lost to strikes and a fall in the European productivity league and the inward investment figures, which have been extremely good for the last 15 years.

There is obviously a limit to what the DTI and the Treasury teams can do to insulate this country from the global economy, but they have taken various initiatives, which the Opposition support. The Government cannot control the increasing trend of sourcing manufactured products in low-cost economies in the far east and elsewhere, and they cannot do anything about the companies who are looking in that direction, but there are positive steps that they can take.

The hon. and learned Gentleman played down the damage done by red tape, bureaucracy and other burdens on business, which organisations in industry and business have told me is what worries them most. Taken individually, many of those burdens are not show-stoppers or deal-breakers, but the accumulated burden is starting to have an impact. The Government inherited an extremely vibrant supply-side economy with a very flexible labour market, which was the envy of the rest of Europe. In a number of years, we have moved much closer to the American model and away from European rigidity and inflexibility. However, rather than supporting what was going on because more companies wanted to invest in Britain as the No. 1 location in Europe, and bringing its regulations and burdens down to the British level, Brussels wanted our regulations to be increased in line with those in other European nations.

One regulation—the agency workers directive—will be of pivotal importance in its potential to damage the economy, and it sums up the attitude of Brussels. To be fair to the Minister, he is doing his best to oppose the directive and I congratulate him on his efforts in that respect. I invite him to give us an update and to say when the matter will next be discussed by the Council of Ministers. He has not been helped by his MEPs, who voted for the directive. I do not blame him, as he was not a Minister when the Government decided that they would re-adopt the social chapter without any provision for flexibility or opt-outs from directives that were clearly going to damage the United Kingdom economy. The Government's hands are therefore tied to some extent.

The hon. and learned Member for Dudley, North mentioned the Engineering Employers Federation, which is very concerned about the agency workers directive, as are the Federation of Small Businesses, the Institute of Directors, the CBI and many other organisations, including trade unions. When we talk of agency workers, people who are not conversant with that part of the market often think of gang labour in East Anglia—people who work on the land for very low wages and are exploited by ruthless agencies. That may be typical of a small part of the agency workers market, but the most important part of the sector is the often highly paid, highly motivated people who are comfortable with the flexibility and way of life. They may go from one job to another depending on the contracts that they can secure.

I have talked to several companies, including British Aerospace and IBM. Both those companies have a significant number of highly paid technicians whom various agencies have supplied. IBM made it clear to me that agency workers are an important part of its business, as they increase flexibility. Moreover, the agency workers do not want permanent contracts and the firm does not want to put them on to permanent contracts; nor are the trade unions agitating for them to do so. No one seems to be pushing in that direction except the Commission. It is extraordinary that several of our European counterparts do not understand how the UK labour market is different from their own. There are very few agencies in countries such as Denmark, Holland and Belgium, as they have few agency workers.

The directive will hit this country disproportionately. It will not suit anyone: not the agencies, employers or the employees. Confidential details about wages and other terms and conditions of employment will have to be made available to the agencies and agency workers, which will undermine confidence and the good working relationship between certain agency workers and the companies for which they have been working. There is no doubt that the directive will lead to a significant loss of jobs.

The directive will especially affect the interim management market, which is positively the top end of agency work. The interim management market is extremely vibrant. There are many retired chief executive officers, managing directors, people who may have lost their job as a finance director in their forties or fifties and others who may have retired early because they sold their business, who want to go on working and to put something back into business.

Those people can go to specialist agencies that can find them interim management positions, and take a temporary job in a "turnaround situation", or in a company where the key finance director or divisional manager is ill and the agency is providing a suitable replacement. The interim manager will then work for three, four, five or six months on a high salary. He does not want a permanent contract and the firm does not want to give him one. The directive could completely undermine this important sector, and it would be a disaster for British industry. I wish the Minister well in his attempts at least to water down that damaging directive, although we are not optimistic. It will be a grim day for British business if he fails.

To conclude, we support several of the Government's initiatives to help industry. I simply flag up some of the ones mentioned by the hon. and learned Member for Dudley, North. They secure all-party support. We also take a pretty favourable view of the Government's handling of the macro side of the economy. We know that their hands are often tied when it comes to regulating and controlling business, but we implore them to look at those areas where they are in the driving seat and where our domestic legislation gives them a significant say in what happens. We also urge them to fight as hard as they can for British business in Europe. We could be moving into far more turbulent times. There are parts of the global economy from which we will not be insulated and we must do our level best to help manufacturing and jobs in this country.

Mr. Edward O'Hara (in the Chair): The Minister, of course, may use all the available time.

10.45 am

The Minister for Employment Relations, Industry and the Regions (Alan Johnson): Thank you, Mr. O'Hara. I should like to say at the outset that I am genuinely pleased that my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Dudley, North (Ross Cranston) has raised this issue. As the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) said, we have been over the ground several times, but this is a serious time for manufacturers, and it is right that we debate it as fully as we can. This has been a very constructive debate, and it has lacked the Punch and Judy atmosphere that these debates sometimes have. If we are going to help British manufacturers we must concentrate on resolving the problems, rather than indulging in synthetic indignation, which we are all too good at manufacturing here.

My hon. and learned Friend's four Dudley informers put their finger on the main issues. The Government feel that we inadvertently gave the wrong message during our first term. We care about manufacturing, but we gave the impression to manufacturers themselves that we regarded it as the industry of the 20th century, not the 21st. We have tried hard to address that problem over the last 12 to 18 months. Of course manufacturing is important. It represents 60 per cent. of our exports, a fifth of our GDP, 4 million jobs directly and millions more indirectly. Let us not get this out of context: manufacturing is 16 per cent. of GDP in the USA and 18 per cent. in France. In Germany it is 22 per cent., which is higher, although not much. We should not run away with the feeling that manufacturing in this country is collapsing as a percentage of our GDP while it is holding up in other industrial countries.

Manufacturing matters. When I talk to manufacturers, I am amazed at how much they value Ministers and Members of Parliament repeating that phrase. We have probably said it to the point of exhaustion. That message has got across. So what are we going to do about it? Just over a year ago in Birmingham we met all the major manufacturers, the trade associations, the regional development agencies and the trade unions. We tried to thrash out a practical strategy, not a pouch of fairy dust, for manufacturing. It was the first such strategy in this country for 30 years.

To a large degree, this is boring stuff. It will not make front-page news. It is hard slog rather than quick fix. Nevertheless, we have identified the issues on which we need to concentrate and where the Government have a role. This is not a command economy, and we are not returning to the days of bailing out lame ducks, as they used to be called in the early '70s. There are areas where the Government obviously have a role.

My hon. and learned Friend was quite right to point out major issues of skills and best practice. He mentioned the problems in management. Sometimes manufacturers and business people feel insulted, thinking that we are being derogatory; we are not. We are saying not that this country does not produce good people, but that we have not paid enough attention to managerial skills in the past. We assumed that when people became managers they would acquire the appropriate skills on the job, so the correct training was not provided.

That is an important part of Professor Porter's review, which examined competitiveness with particular focus on managerial skills. The Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership said that 36 per cent. of managers are not fully proficient. The number of managers with NVQ-equivalent qualifications in managerial skills is tiny. We have not focused on the issue seriously enough and I am glad that my hon. and learned Friend highlighted it.

Regulation is another important issue. I am extraordinarily pleased that the hon. Member for North-West Norfolk (Mr. Bellingham) did not bang on about it. He banged on about the agency workers directive, and I will deal with that in a second. On regulation, the OECD said in its most recent report that we are in many ways a beacon. We set up the Better Regulation Task Force and other initiatives because we were concerned about the issue. As the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who is becoming a hero on our Benches, recently pointed out, the idea that all the problems of government relate to regulation is extraordinary. We should reflect carefully on where regulation is needed, weed out bad regulation and provide more sunset clauses so that it does not stay on the statute book any longer than necessary. The contribution of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Dudley, North was extremely thoughtful.

In my remaining time, I shall attempt to respond to the contributions before reading the script. My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) has long taken an interest in these matters and often plays a constructive role, sometimes behind the scenes, in assisting manufacturing industry in his constituency. He spoke about the importance of research and development, one of the seven strands of our manufacturing strategy, which is recognised by all major manufacturers and has been helped by the research and development tax credit.

My hon. Friend also referred to outsourcing, which needs to be tackled. With tariff barriers coming down and communications becoming much easier, the flow of companies into central Europe and other parts of the world is bound to happen. The move into central Europe is partly due to the efficient geographical location of countries such as Slovakia and the Czech Republic and partly to the low-wage, high-skill nature of the economies there. We cannot deal with those problems by pulling up the drawbridge and becoming a fortress UK economy.

My hon. Friend also mentioned textiles. No Government sat down with the textile industry and the trade unions to discuss problems in the sector until 1998, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt), now the Secretary of State, set up the textiles industry forum. Similarly, in the whole history of this maritime nation, the Government had never sat down with the shipbuilding industry and its work force to discuss problems until the recent establishment of the shipbuilding and ship repair forum. Problems will not necessarily diminish as a result, but the opportunity to debate how best to deal with them is useful.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South also mentioned the World Trade Organisation, which is an important issue, and Longbridge. It is right to note that we move on from problems and do not look back at them. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tyneside, North (Mr. Byers) was Secretary of State when we were urged to feed Longbridge to the asset strippers, and he held out until a company prepared to keep it as a going concern—Phoenix—moved in, saving thousands of jobs. Thanks to him, many people are still working, successfully producing cars at Longbridge.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) is right about the bucolic image of the Stroud valley. I was trying to think of a manufacturing version of "Cider with Rosie", but could not do so in the time available. I was pleased to hear what he said about the South West of England Regional Development Agency. Its recently retired chairman, Sir Michael Lickiss, was personally attacked in an Adjournment debate, which I thought was disgraceful, by two Members who turned out to know little about what the development agency was doing. My hon. Friend is right: the agency had to tackle the problems, including those in tourism, caused by foot and mouth disease, and the Eden project is a monument to the agency's interest and energy in the south-west. My hon. Friend also asked the hon. Member for North-West Norfolk to end his party's opposition to RDAs, and I will come to that in a second.

My hon. Friend made two less positive points. One was about state aid rules. Everywhere I go, I hear that the UK plays by the rules—it seems that people do not say "cricket" any more—whereas other countries bend the rules. I was in Denmark recently when its Government held the EU presidency, and the Danish are convinced that Denmark plays by the rules and every other country in the EU does not. Apart from the fact that it is a saloon bar discussion, we always ask manufacturers to give us one example of state aid rules being breached elsewhere so that we can pursue it, which we have done. This example has nothing to do with manufacturing, but Deutsche Post was found to have breached state aid rules recently and was fined heavily.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the banking system, and that issue is under review. We have set up regional venture capital funds to help, but I know that my hon. Friend's point was about banks' attitudes to failing companies. That goes a bit wider than manufacturing, but we are keen to work with other Departments to influence the situation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) cannot be here. I think that he has an exaggerated sense of my abilities. He asked me to speed up the Ministry of Defence, to ask the Liberal Democrats to be consistent, to encourage the Conservatives to have greater sympathy for renewables and not to appoint dry academics to positions in the regulator. That is all a bit beyond me, but I will try my best.

The hon. Member for Twickenham made several important points, in particular about the synergy between manufacturing and services. They are interlinked, and that point needs to be made more often. For every manufacturing job, between one and four jobs are created in the service sector, depending on which analysis we use. The synergy argument is not raised enough.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about business support, which the DTI is evaluating. That is a difficult process, and I have nothing but admiration for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for many reasons, but especially because she is asking stakeholders what they think about the DTI. I know that the hon. Gentleman wants to abolish the DTI, as I explained to my staff. I said, "If there's a Liberal Democrat Government, you're out of a job", and they were pleased to get that assurance of job security.

Nevertheless, we were brave in asking stakeholders what was wrong with the DTI. Again and again, they said that we have many good people doing lots of valuable work, but our business support system is too complex and much of the support that we offer is outdated. It may have been relevant in the mid-1970s, but not any more. We are examining that and looking to streamline the system into four or five portfolios, so that people understand where to go depending on which type of business support they want. We hope to announce at least the first tranche of change in the spring, although I realise that spring is loosely determined in political circles as any time between February and December.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the climate change levy, which is an important development for manufacturers. Announcements about that in the pre-Budget report will help, but the companies that are excluded from the integrated pollution prevention and control directive and cannot gain access to the 80 per cent. discount have a point. The Engineering Employers Federation produced a good document on that recently.

I am pleased that the hon. Member for North-West Norfolk spoke about the limit to what the DTI and the Treasury can do, although he placed too much emphasis on the agency workers directive. We are pleased and proud to have signed the social chapter. It was the right thing to do, and we should do nothing other than crow about workers in this country having basic, civilised standards. That is an important development. The point about not having opt-out from the directive is that we engage in debate. The directive is a problem: there should be a directive, but it should provide for a longer derogation period.

Finally, I urge the hon. Gentleman to talk to his party about its opposition to RDAs and its commitments to abolish the Small Business Service and to wipe out £300 million of business support. That would not help manufacturers.

Vibration White Finger

10.59 am

Liz Blackman (Erewash): I was extremely pleased to secure this debate and had sought it for quite some time. The subject is vibration white finger. That term is commonly recognised, but the correct term is hand-arm vibration syndrome, or HAVS.

I shall concentrate on what I consider to be the out-of-date nature of the prescribed list, PD A11; the prevalence of HAVS in occupations outside the prescribed list; new developments in assessment procedures; the differences in practices between the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department for Work and Pensions; aggregated disability; and, if I have time, health and safety practices.

The list of those in certain occupations and the use of certain related tools that creates entitlement to industrial injuries disablement benefit for HAVS was prescribed in 1985 and is very limited. It came about on the recommendation of the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council. The IIAC is an independent body that was set up to advise the DWP on matters relating to the industrial injuries scheme. It comprises representatives of the Confederation of British Industry and the TUC, and experts in occupational medicine and epidemiology. According to its website, the major part of its work is considering whether the list of prescribed diseases for which benefits should be given should be amended.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller), in early-day motion 160 in 1993-94, expressed concern that the prescribed list did not embrace certain victims of the disease who had

"indisputably contracted it as a result of their work".

He went on to

"urge the extension of the list to include all occupations which cause vibration white finger to correct this anomaly".

In 1995, the IIAC produced a report on HAVS for Parliament that recommended changes.

In a letter to the then Secretary of State for Social Security—the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley)—Professor Harrington, the then chair of the IIAC, made a number of pertinent points and recommendations, which I shall outline. Although the prescription covered vascular effects—blanching and numbness—it should also cover the well recognised neurological effects. At the 1986 Stockholm workshop held under the auspices of the International Commission on Occupational Health, conclusive evidence was presented that exposure to vibration causes neurological disturbances as well as blanching of the fingers. Science and medical knowledge of the condition had improved and should be reflected in the way in which the condition was covered in legislation.

The syndrome should be linked to a list of tools, or rigid material held against those tools, rather than to occupational exposures. That would recognise the fact that the use of a tool may not be confined to a particular industry. Current working practices make it more likely that a worker will be exposed to a range of tools than was previously the case, so identifying tools instead of occupations was a more realistic approach to prescription for this condition.

The IIAC recognised, however, that the administrative costs of the industrial injuries scheme could be increased, and a 14 per cent. disability threshold for payment of benefit might produce few additional payments. It also recognised that a small assessment of HAVS could be aggregated with another award to satisfy the 14 per cent. rule or to increase a current benefit payment for another industrial injury. The council pointed out, however, that recognition of the condition in the prescribed list and for the individual had important preventive implications for industry and employees.

On 31 January 1996, the Conservative Government rejected those recommendations in a written answer. They were

"not persuaded that the additional benefits to individuals would be sufficient to warrant the high administrative costs".

They were also concerned about

"the costs associated with developing a usable, repeatable and acceptable test for diagnosing the condition and assessing a person's disability."—[*Official Report*, 31 January 1996; Vol. 270, c. 823W.]

Nevertheless, the Government were confident that the council would continue to monitor scientific advances and literature on the condition and developments in diagnostic and assessment techniques, and would give careful consideration to further advice from the council. It has been seven years since the council's report was published, and six years since the Government's response. I would like to know whether there have been any advances.

I wrote to the DWP last year on behalf of a constituent who had spent his working life in the upholstery industry and suffers from HAVS as well as bilateral carpal tunnel syndrome, as evidenced by his consultant plastic and hand surgeon. I received the same response from the then Minister that I received in 1996. However, I think that further evidence, developments and contradictions have emerged since then, and I would like to draw them to the Minister's attention.

There is evidence that the prevalence of HAVS is significant in a greater number of occupations and tools than in the prescribed list. The Health and Safety Executive website presents detailed statistics on that. Additional areas affected include construction, manufacturing, agriculture and fishing, and people using industrial sewing machines, grinders and floor polishers.

A Medical Research Council survey commissioned by the HSE, and carried out in 1997–98, gave a national prevalence estimate of 301,000 sufferers from vibration white finger, of which 268,000 were male and 33,400 female. That survey indicated that many occupations outside the prescribed list were affected. Moreover, working practices have changed, particularly because of the development of the flexible job market. Many employees are therefore exposed to a variety of tools as they move from one job to another in related industries.

I became interested in the limitations of the prescribed list when I was contacted by a local union representative, who had been supporting another constituent of mine at a tribunal. There was no question but that the man concerned suffered from HAVS, caused by the vapour-blasting machine that he had used since 1976. Copies of the tribunal documents, which I studied carefully, detailed engineers' reports, and the medical reports clearly showed that that was the case. However, the appeal had to be withdrawn because the machine was not a hand-held rotary tool, as required under PD A11. That constituent became part of a study carried out by Dr. Ian Lawson into nine sufferers from HAVS who had used high-pressure hoses alone or with other tools. His study was published in *Occupational Medicine* in September 2001. He concluded:

> "In all cases this group presented with the disease when their use of high-pressure hoses became a significant or exclusive part of their job. These hoses fall outside PD A11."

The constituent whom I mentioned earlier who has HAVS has worked in the upholstery trade for 38 years, using a variety of compression tools: sanding tools, frame, staple and matting guns, and what he calls "the big gun" for putting in seat springs. When he first started work, the tools were bigger and heavier than they are today, although in one of his letters to me he writes, quite poignantly, that

> "with today's tools you still get the thumping in your hands from the power."

Clinically, there is general agreement that HAVS may have at least two separate components, the vascular and the neurological. The internationally agreed Stockholm classification, which includes neurological effects, is now the most widely used method of grading the disease. It is known that vibration can also cause damage to nerves, and that 20 to 25 per cent. of those who have HAVS experience only those neurological effects—altered sensation in the fingers such as tingling and numbness. Compensation to workers thus affected is now available in many countries, but not in the United Kingdom through industrial injuries disablement benefit.

I will now discuss the mismatch between the DTI and the DWP in their approach to the disease. There is a clash of medical opinion supported by two different legal decisions. The DTI miners health compensation scheme has a judicial underpinning. Compensation is based on agreements between claimants and acting solicitors and extensive tests. In the DWP scheme, which is set out in legislation, the claimant has to show a link between the disease and occupation, loss of faculty and 14 per cent. disability. There is a reliance on medical reports and discussion.

The miners compensation scheme is functioning well. Sensory testing, which was flagged up as a reason for not accepting the 1995 report, is already carried out to determine entitlement to compensation under that scheme. The DWP awards IIDB for HAVS only if a person's occupational background fits within the prescribed list and they have episodic blanching and/or circulatory or vascular effects. There is no test under the DWP for the neurological component because the factor is not recognised. Miners getting compensation cannot get IIDB for all those reasons.

In any event, the DTI uses a different vascular test from that used by the DWP, which causes duplication. To complicate matters further, the social security commissioners report recommendation states that in assessing disablement the Benefits Agency must take account of neurological as well as vascular damage.

Less than 14 per cent. of claims are given an assessment of disablement. The recommendation on aggregation in the 1995 report by the Medical Research Council still stands: it would make a difference to sufferers if compensation were aggregated with other industrial disease assessments or with existing industrial benefits. My constituent has carpal tunnel syndrome and has just had two operations. He received sick pay only when he was having his operations, and has to return to work on the same "thumping" machines, as he puts it.

I shall briefly touch on health and safety, which is the other side of the issue. In the study to which I have already referred, Dr. Lawson concludes that the ultimate goal for tool manufacturers, hygienists and engineers should be to reduce workplace vibration levels to meet national and international standards and guidelines, including HSE guidelines and EU directives. The HSE 1994 advisory booklet "Hand-Arm Vibration" recommends preventive measures where workers' exposure regularly exceeds the recommended level. To date, the proposals have not been adopted by regulation, which means that when inspectors investigate work sites with potential vibration problems they may only recommend specific corrective action.

The Medical Research Council's research working group is looking again at HAVS, and I gather that a further meeting is scheduled for next month. That work has been urged on by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham), who is so active in this field. The working group is looking at using information on a sufferer's work history to back up diagnosis. We hope that it will recommend that the DWP adopt the DTI scheme tests as a low-cost way to deal with those who come into the miners compensation scheme, although that would not address those who are outside the scheme. In any event, it is looking at a functional test of neurological damage for which the DTI already has a test.

Will the Minister undertake to look again at the issue? In particular, will he look at the evidence of the wide number of tools and occupations in which HAVS is significant? Will he consider the issue of aggregated disability in the light of international practice, the mismatch between DWP and DTI practices and the health and safety issues? Above all, will he look carefully and sympathetically at the council's recommendations?

11.14 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Malcolm Wicks): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr. O'Hara. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Liz Blackman) on securing the debate and on raising this important issue on behalf of her constituent. It is a wider constituency matter, too, and I acknowledge that Government Back Benchers have been interested in it for some while.

As my hon. Friend will be aware, our approach towards work and disability is focused on preventing injuries through health and safety action—she acknowledged the importance of prevention—and enabling people with health problems and disabilities to return to work through the help offered by Jobcentre Plus. However, the industrial injuries scheme, which dates back to the foundation of the post-war welfare state in 1948, is a vital part of the support that we offer to people who have become disabled as a result of an

[Malcolm Wicks]

accident at work or an industrial disease. That is a non-means-tested, tax-free, non-contributory benefit, payable even if the person continues in or returns to work. It is effectively a no-fault insurance scheme. In 2001–02, that benefit cost £775 million and there were 377,000 recipients.

Not everyone with vibration white finger, to use one description of the condition, has a prescribed disease for which industrial injuries disablement benefit is payable. Only the most severe forms of the condition are compensated through the industrial injuries scheme. In those cases, the condition is so advanced that it causes disablement in the sufferer, by comparison with someone else of the same age and sex. Hence the prescription of prescribed diseases A11 equates to a more advanced state of the disease.

As my hon. Friend rightly points out, PD A11 has been prescribed as an industrial disease in relation to specific occupations since 1985. As she acknowledged, the disease was reviewed by the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council in 1994. It recommended that the list of prescribed occupational exposures should be replaced with a list of tools and rigid materials held against such tools. It also recommended changes in the way in which the disease is diagnosed and assessed for benefit purposes. Careful consideration was, of course, given to those recommendations, but the then Conservative Government were not persuaded that the additional benefit to individuals would be sufficient to warrant the high administrative costs of implementing the recommendations.

My hon. Friend asked why some people with the disease pass assessments carried out by the DTI but are not awarded benefit. That is because, in compensation claims, the degree of disablement does not have to be as severe as that required under the strict qualifying criteria laid down in the industrial injuries scheme. It is not possible, therefore, to compare the two schemes directly.

My hon. Friend noted the apparent disparity between the tests used by the DWP to determine entitlement to industrial injuries disablement benefit and those used by the DTI to diagnose and assess the disablement caused by vibration white finger. The fact is that there is no simple, reliable and universally accepted test for vibration white finger. Diagnostic procedures must be viewed in the context of the high volume of applications to the industrial injuries scheme. Claims need to be resolved speedily and consistently.

Jeff Ennis (Barnsley, East and Mexborough): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Liz Blackman) on securing this important debate.

As I am sure the Minister is aware, my constituency has received the highest level of compensation for vibration white finger through the DTI in the country, because of its number of former miners. The difference between the approach of the two Departments causes difficulties. Miners go through two detailed and excruciating DTI medicals to qualify for compensation for VWF. When they go to see a doctor from the DWP, the assessment is usually very quick. Few questions are asked and the person's hands are looked at very briefly. The miners have difficulty understanding why some of them get benefit and others do not. Some of the decisions seem to me to be wrong. Will the Minister comment on that?

Malcolm Wicks: I certainly acknowledge that having two schemes appears perplexing at first sight, not least to those who are directly affected and to hon. Members. However, the two schemes are not the same; otherwise, they would be one. One is about compensation; the other is about possible entitlement to a regular weekly benefit, regardless of whether one is in work. The nature of the schemes is different. I acknowledge my hon. Friend's role in raising the issue. As he said, it is important to his constituents, and I recognise his interest in and conviction about the matter.

Having said that, because concerned Members of all parties continue to raise the matter, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Work felt that it would be appropriate to ask the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council to review it. It is the council's role to monitor developments in medical knowledge and improved diagnostic procedures, and to provide sound evidence-based recommendations to the Government. Medical knowledge has moved on and new industrial trends have appeared since the council last made recommendations. The council also advises on whether the extent of occupational cover needs revising in the light of changes to working practices.

The Government approached the council in March 2002 and asked it to carry out a review of prescribed disease A11. I understand that the council will meet on Thursday to discuss progress. Once we have seen its report, which we expect to be finalised this year, we shall consider what changes to the scheme would be appropriate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash raised the issue of employment activity, in which we are particularly interested. She may be aware that my Department is now the sponsoring Department for the Health and Safety Executive, which has published extensive guidance on hand-arm vibration syndrome. It has also mounted two campaigns on the hazards of vibration, most recently targeting the manufacturers of vibrating tools. My hon. Friend may be aware also of the vibration directive, which will further reinforce the HSE's action and set legal requirements for action at certain levels of exposure. That will come into force in 2005.

We continue to monitor and advise employers on good practice. We believe that we have the good will and support of industry—those who make the tools and those who use them.

My hon. Friend also touched on aggregated disability. Although the majority of assessments for vibration white finger are under the threshold of 14 per cent., as she said, benefits can be awarded if the disabled person has an assessment or assessments for other accidents or diseases and the aggregate amounts to 14 per cent. or more. I hope that that is some comfort to her.

I appreciate that it is difficult at first sight to understand the logic of two schemes, and I understand the difficulty that hon. Members have in communicating it to their constituents.

Liz Blackman: Before the Minister sits down—

Malcolm Wicks: I am not about to sit down. Let me finish, as I am enjoying the debate.

The schemes apparently assess the same disease. However, as I said earlier, they have somewhat different purposes. I hope that that helps to explain the logic of having two schemes.

Liz Blackman: Does the DWP accept in principle that the disease causes neurological effects? At present, the scheme does not. Will the Minister look favourably on reviewing the situation if and when the council decides on the functional tests of neurological damages, which it is now considering?

One problem is that the DTI and the DWP define the disease differently. The DWP must accept that there are neurological implications, as has been recognised internationally.

Mr. Edward O'Hara (in the Chair): Order. This is becoming a very long intervention.

Liz Blackman: I beg your pardon, Mr. O'Hara. I believe that the Minister gets my point.

Malcolm Wicks: I am advised that neurological effects are taken into account because of case law. However, if I feel that it would be useful to write to my hon. Friend on this or other points that she raised, I will do so.

Although the council will monitor the debate, I give the assurance that I shall send it a copy of the *Hansard* record so that it can take fully into account the issues raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Erewash and for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Jeff Ennis).

I conclude by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash for raising an issue of great importance to her constituents and to others, and by assuring her that the council's report, which is expected later this year, will be taken very seriously by the Government.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended until Two o'clock.

Brain Injury Rehabilitation Services

2 pm

Bob Russell (Colchester): First, I must thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), who originally secured this 90-minute slot for a debate, but had to give it up because it clashed with other business in the House that required his presence. There is some justice in his misfortune, for such a clash would not have occurred under the previous sitting arrangements, which he campaigned to change. Next I must thank whoever it was in the Speaker's Office who drew my name to fill the vacated space. That was appreciated not only by me but by the all-party acquired brain injuries group, which I have the honour of chairing.

The group takes the view that more needs to be done to improve brain injury rehabilitation services not only in the interests of the individuals who have suffered brain injuries through accidents at home, at work or at play, in road crashes or owing to medical causes, but in the interests of those who care for them, be they NHS workers, other health providers, the voluntary and charitable sector or families.

I should like to offer my personal appreciation as well as that of the all-party group to each and every person and organisation who individually and collectively seeks to improve matters for brain injury victims. In particular, I mention Headway, the leading UK charity dedicated to providing help, support and services to people affected by brain injury. It also gives much-needed support to families and carers. There are more than 100 Headway groups around the UK. My thanks also go to the United Kingdom Acquired Brain Injury Forum for its valuable contribution, to Rehab UK whose aim is to enhance the social and economic independence of people with disabilities, and to the Brain Injury Rehabilitation Trust, which is a division of the Disabilities Trust.

The seriousness of today's debate stems from the stark fact that every year around 1 million people attend accident and emergency departments with some form of traumatic brain injury. It is estimated that for every 100,000 of the population as many as 15 will receive a serious head injury, up to 20 a moderate head injury and up to 300 a mild head injury. It is estimated that about 120,000 people in the UK live with the long-term effects of a severe traumatic brain injury.

I should declare my personal interest in the general subject of brain injuries. This coming July marks the 25th anniversary of the death of my first daughter. She died as a result of head injuries that she sustained when she fell from wall bars during a gym lesson at school. She was seven years old. Regrettably, despite the efforts of her teacher, who had recently qualified as a first aider, the ambulance personnel and medical teams at Essex County hospital and Oldchurch hospital, Romford, she did not survive. I dread to think what her condition would have been if she had lived. It was my daughter Joanne's tragedy that caused my wife and me to do what we could to help survivors.

We know that medical science has made advances over the past 25 years. More people appear to be surviving as a result of better and earlier diagnosis and the improved treatment that follows. However, that has

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not been matched by advances in rehabilitation—something that the Health Committee set out in its excellent report on the subject in March 2001. It is most regrettable that progress on the Select Committee recommendations has not materialised. I hope that today's debate will contribute towards ensuring that the improvements, which are both necessary and obtainable, can be provided.

I recognise that better rehabilitation services for those with brain injuries will cost money, but greater investment from the outset will cost the public purse less in the long run, which I assume appeals to the Treasury. In addition, of course, it will greatly improve the quality of life of those who have suffered brain injury and their families, who so often have their own lives torn apart by what has happened to their loved one. Perhaps the Minister will give an assurance this afternoon that all the Health Committee's recommendations will be put into action. Those with brain injuries and all who are associated with them would welcome such a declaration.

Headway has told me that the Select Committee's report entitled "Head Injury: Rehabilitation" is a seminal document. Its recommendations define an ideal brain injury service. However, Mr. Graham Nickson, Headway's policy and campaigns manager, told me:

> "Whilst there were elements in the Government response (Command Paper 5226) which Headway welcomed, overall we were very disappointed at what we felt was a complacent approach.
>
> Given that it is nearly two years since the publication of the report, Headway feels that it would be an opportune moment to ask what progress has been made in meeting the standards recommended by the Health Select Committee."

Let us hope that there will be real progress. I know that other hon. Members hope to participate in the debate. No doubt they will discuss some of the Committee's recommendations.

I am grateful to Professor Lindsay McLellan, Professor of Rehabilitation Medicine at Southampton university and chairman of the UK Acquired Brain Injury Forum, for his professional thoughts. He tells me that unless the management structures of the national health service are reformed at the same time as the national service framework is developed, any new resources for meeting NSF standards may be spent in areas other than rehabilitation. The Government already face that issue in respect of the money that they have provided for cancer care services. Professor McLellan suggests that a senior manager in each NHS trust be given responsibility for brain injury rehabilitation services, thus ensuring that the budget is spent correctly and progress is made.

I am sure that the Minister will readily confirm that the NSF will lay down what her Department believes that health and social care services in England need to do for those who have brain injuries. Unfortunately, when it comes to rehabilitation, it is clear that insufficient is being done to honour the spirit and letter of the NSF.

There are no pharmacological treatments for brain injury, which is the poor relation in medical research, even though each year, as I have already pointed out, some 1 million people in this country will seek treatment for a head injury. Road crashes are the biggest cause of injury. I am sure that everyone will welcome the moves that are being made across the board to reduce the number of road accidents so that there is less pressure on health services. However, this debate is about people who already have head injuries.

The Health Committee reported:

> "Head injury is the foremost cause of death and disability in young people. In an age of increased motorisation and violence, head injury is a healthcare problem which is not going to go away. There is a growing population of head-injured people in this country, as improved medical techniques have led to many head-injured people now surviving their accident and living into old age, with a normal life expectancy."

The majority of brain injuries—40 to 50 per cent. of all cases—are sustained by young men aged between the ages of 15 and 29 who are involved in road crashes. Accidents at work and in the home account for 20 to 30 per cent., sports-related injuries 10 to 15 per cent., and violent assaults about 10 per cent. of brain injuries. Men are two to three times more likely to sustain a head injury than women.

Despite the widespread prevalence of brain injury, services to help and support the victims are woefully inadequate. The brain, with its 1 million million nerve cells, can be injured by illness, a physical blow to the head or internal neurological malfunction. Brain injuries can affect young and old, rich and poor, men and women and people from all cultures and ethnic backgrounds.

Greater importance must be attached to rehabilitation. Intensive rehabilitation must immediately follow acute care, which could last several weeks or many months. That should be followed by long-term rehabilitation. Given the importance of rehabilitation following brain injury, have the Government given serious consideration to the Health Committee's recommendation xix, which called for each NHS trust to identify a named manager with responsibility for rehabilitation services?

I would also draw the Minister's attention to recommendation xxi, which states:

> "We recommend that the Department of Health should help charitable organisations, where they are providing core services, to develop these services further."

I very much regret that the inadequate funding for rehabilitation is likely to get worse if the example of my local branch of Headway is typical. Many Headway groups are struggling financially just to survive, although they are providing a vital service for those with brain injuries and saving the state a fortune. Such groups need more resources, not fewer.

Colchester Headway has been led to believe that the Colchester primary care trust will not be renewing its annual grant. A shortfall of £15,000 in the current financial year has not been paid. It gets even worse for the financial year due to start in April. The ongoing grant, which would be about £56,000, is in doubt.

Colchester Headway says:

> "Should Colchester PCT decide to withdraw its support from Headway the repercussions will be immediate and very distressing for the people with brain injury and the families from the Colchester area who currently attend the day centre and receive our general support. The knock-on effect of this withdrawal, at a time when the world believes money is pouring into the Health Service, would not only be difficult for the public to understand, but would probably affect the viability of our organisation."

Will the Minister explain why money for rehabilitation for those with head injuries is being reduced? Perhaps my example is purely localised, and more financial support is being provided elsewhere. Either way, intervention by her in this funding crisis would be appreciated. Will the Minister point out to her Treasury colleagues the overall saving that will accrue to the public purse if proper resources are put into rehabilitation? Continuing the theme of joined-up government, I suggest that she involves the Department for Work and Pensions, from which I detect mixed messages.

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I hear what he is saying about Headway, which works so well in my locality. However, vocational rehabilitation can also be important to people who are making even greater recoveries from their injuries nowadays.

Bob Russell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that welcome comment, which I fully endorse.

Is the Minister aware of the views of Lord Morris of Manchester, the much-respected former Minister who did so much to help those with disabilities? In November, he attacked cuts in services to disabled people with acquired brain injuries, which are forcing the closure of centres specifically designed to help them. What is her response to that?

Rehab UK estimates that, for an average investment of £15,000, their 48-hour-a-week vocational rehabilitation programme saves the benefits system £300,000 over the lifetime of a person. The Brain Injury Rehabilitation Trust estimates that lifetime savings are in the range of £400,000 to £1 million per person, depending on the severity of the injury and the person's life expectancy. Those are huge savings for relatively little outlay.

The financial benefits are one thing. Of even greater importance is the improvement to quality of life for those with brain injuries and those who care for them.

2.14 pm

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): I congratulate the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) on securing the debate. I do so with some degree of jealousy, as I have been applying for a debate on this subject whenever my diary has permitted me since October 2001. I did not have an Adjournment debate in the House for the whole of last year. I wanted to initiate a debate not because I have been personally touched by a tragedy such as the one so movingly described by the hon. Gentleman—I am sure that he has our condolences—but because, as is often the case for Members of Parliament, people had come to my surgery in great distress about people who had received severe head injuries that were virtually, but not completely, terminal. They are people with very high dependency.

To give hon. Members the flavour of what I am talking about, I will mention the case of a young girl who was badly injured in a car accident. She was unable to speak, and her mother was in real distress. The young girl was placed in a home that had the duty to look after her. The subject of the debate that I wanted to secure was the role of family and friends in the care of those with severe head injuries. I hope that the Minister agrees that it is vital that family and friends are given a much clearer role in the care of such people.

In the case in question, the mother alleged that the home was not treating her daughter in the way that had been intended. Specifically, her mother said that the state was giving the home resources for physiotherapy that were not being applied to her daughter's physiotherapeutic needs. One tremendously important aspect of the debate is that the patients have no voice. They literally cannot talk or sign, and if they are in distress, the only voice that they have is that of those who are either good friends or family—the voices of those who love and cherish them.

The mother asked to see the physiotherapy that was being given, not least because she was more sensitive to her daughter's distress than someone who was new to her daughter's needs and forms of communication. She was denied that access and told effectively that she would be in the way; that the treatment was medical and would be carried out in a way that would not require her presence. The mother put a tissue in the wheelchair behind her daughter's back and one under her arm. Her daughter came back from an hour's "physiotherapy", and the two tissues were still there. That, of course, is an allegation and there may be a problem with a particular home. Indeed, extensive inquiries are being conducted into the home.

However, it is important that we do not focus on one home and say that it failed this young girl and did not respect her mother or family and friends. I submitted an extensive dossier to the Department of Health in October 2001 on that and related cases. In all of them the role of family and friends was marginalised, and patients were denied a voice. For example, if a family visiting a patient in room A went into room B to find out how another patient was doing and ask how their family were coping with the stress and pain of someone they loved being in such a sad state, they were told that they were a source of infection and were not allowed in room B. Fraternising between relatives was discouraged.

I understand that it is extremely difficult for the carers of people in a dreadful state to cope with the distress of the family. Some people do not have families to represent them; the only person who visits them may be someone who serendipitously calls into their room on their way to visit a relative or friend. However, unless there is a regime that integrates into their care those who have love and concern for them, patients' quality of life is even further reduced and family and friends are denied the capacity to endure the pain of the patient's suffering constructively.

This issue arose in the House yesterday and the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears), spoke eloquently on the matter. People have made representations to her about the over-medicalisation of thinking about people's needs. We must allow those with brain injuries to be given an effective voice, and allow those who take on that role to contribute to their care. It should be absolutely clear that to marginalise that voice and prevent people from receiving visits is a major infringement of human rights.

When it comes to the crunch, looking after those with severe brain injuries is not like "Footballers' Wives"—I have to confess that I have followed that programme

[Mr. Tony McWalter]

rather avidly. The football manager in that programme who was in intensive care had someone looking after him all the time. In reality, one does not expect such levels of care to be available. People who have severe brain injuries have problems, such as the fact that they are incontinent of faeces, which makes caring for them extremely difficult. It does not come over on television, but patients can suffer grave indignity in a situation that may generate infection unless there are people around who can act as their eyes and ears and attend properly to them, which is something that family and friends often do. They must be able to say that they believe that someone is in distress, and there must be someone to pay attention to that instead of telling them, "It's not your business. You shouldn't have been there anyway. We're the professionals and we know best."

We must find a way of factoring in a role for family and friends, and extend it so that the family can care for their relative at home if they have visited them in a nursing home for some time and believe that they could be better looked after, loved and more constantly attended to there. It is right that we do everything that we can to extend to those people the Government's current policies on looking after people at home.

Brain injury victims are not just patients. Most of the families have some form of communication with them, and a sense of whether or not they are comfortable, and whether they are at peace or in distress. The expertise of family and friends and their potential for caring are the most important considerations of the debate. It might mean that someone dies when they might otherwise have lived. I do not know, but I would prefer to die having been loved than to live a long time in a state of distress.

2.26 pm

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Like the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter), I have long taken an interest in the subject of brain injury. I am a founder member of the all-party group on brain injury; the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell), who secured the debate, is now chairman of that group, on which I congratulate him. I am also co-chairman of the all-party group on disability. Most significantly, I might be alone among those contributing to today's debate in having had the misfortune to suffer a serious head injury, from which, fortunately, I made a good recovery. I will go into the reasons for that later. My interest in the subject is therefore profound and of long standing.

I intend to highlight three of the key issues that we should address in the short time available to us today, and I hope that the Government will take them up. Before I do so, it might be worth emphasising some of the background information without, I hope, replicating what has already been said. I can do no better than to quote from the Health Committee's 2001 report, to which hon. Members have referred. The report states:

> "Head injury is the foremost cause of death and disability in young people. In an age of increased motorisation and violence, head injury is a healthcare problem which is not going to go away. There is a growing population of head-injured people in this country, as improved medical techniques have led to many head-injured people now surviving their accident and living into old age, with a normal life expectancy."

That observation raises several points, the first of which is that head injury is a significant and growing problem, especially among some sections of the population such as young men, who are more at risk from head injury than any other group.

The second point is that the problem is under-recognised. Head injury is not the most glamorous of issues. Headway does a fine and important job, but it is not a charity that springs to the minds of those who are not interested in the subject when they list the charities that they know best. That may be because the wider population does not find some of the images associated with head injury comfortable. It is not a glamorous or sexy subject for many people until they come up against it because they, a member of their family, or someone they know happens to suffer head injury, and they are forced to deal with the realities associated with it.

The third point made by the Health Committee is that the problem is becoming more serious because of the impact on the need for ongoing rehabilitative provision of people living longer. In the past, a significant proportion of people suffering major head injuries might not have survived the initial trauma, but that is no longer the case and effective treatment at the traumatic stage often confers a normal life expectancy.

It is important to set out the terms of the debate and to clarify for those less familiar with the subject how brain injuries are classified. Brain injuries are usually divided into three categories—mild, moderate or severe—and the ongoing effects of the injury are often a result of the speed at which treatment is provided. If people receive the good-quality medical treatment that they need quickly, leaving them unconscious for a shorter time, they are likely to make a better recovery. If the loss of consciousness and responsiveness continues much longer, it is more likely to result in long-term effects.

What are the effects of head injury? They are many and varied—and can be invisible. Many of the impacts cannot be recognised at first sight. They include short-term memory loss, concentration and sensory problems such as loss of taste and smell, lack of motivation, inappropriate behaviour, dramatic mood swings, changes in personality, emotional instability, problems with comprehension, loss of organisational and planning skills as well as physical problems such as lack of balance and co-ordination. Many of those symptoms would not necessarily be apparent on meeting a head-injured person. They are not always apparent even to carers or colleagues at work—certainly not employers—if head-injured patients return to their old jobs.

Suffering from several conditions but showing no obvious physical sign of injury poses massive difficulties to the person concerned. The invisibility of their disabilities often prevents them from gaining the consideration or treatment that they warrant and deserve.

Mr. McWalter *rose—*

Mr. Hayes: I am happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I cannot hope to match his comprehensive knowledge of popular culture, so I hope that he will not challenge me on that.

Mr. McWalter: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the people who know the injured best are the family, and that giving the family's representations more credence might go some way towards dealing with the problem?

Mr. Hayes: Yes, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and I intend to amplify that point. The family often has to pick up the pieces, and it is vital to ensure that family members are well informed and able to anticipate what they will have to deal with. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his informed and heartfelt contribution to the debate.

Let me summarise three main points. First, the Government must recognise head injury or brain injury—the subject of today's debate, which amounts to the more traumatic effects of head injury resulting from a blow or knock to the head—as a distinct condition. We have already mentioned car accidents and other injuries, and I suffered head injuries as a result of a motor vehicle accident, but, if you will allow me an aside, Mr. Benton, I well remember meeting in hospital a postman who had suffered a similar injury, but with much worse effects, from slipping on the ice and banging his head on the pavement. The risks of head injury are many and varied and the extent of the resulting damage does not necessarily reflect the drama of the incident that caused the injury. I hope that the chap involved in that accident made a good recovery, but the journey for him and his family was long and difficult.

Recognition of brain injury as a distinct condition means applying the appropriate services. In that respect, it is important to highlight an earlier point: the sooner someone is treated appropriately, the better is their chance of recovery. There is a useful comment on precisely that subject in the Health Committee's report, which states:

> "We recommend that Health Improvement Plans and Community Care Plans have a section for planning services which will include the rehabilitative services needed by those with complex neurological conditions such as head injury. We recommend that the Government makes explicit the level at which responsibility for planning different levels of rehabilitation for head injury should be located...We recommend that the Government spells out clearly what steps it will take to improve the situation in the provision of rehabilitation services for head-injured people, and that it instigates plans for action which will come into place long before 2005."

The report is about making initial treatment speedy and appropriate, while ensuring that it is matched by the rehabilitative treatment that needs to follow—a point that the Select Committee was anxious to emphasise. Recognition of brain injury as a distinct condition is a prerequisite for ensuring that we get all our ducks in a row for both initial treatment and rehabilitation.

My second point concerns the co-ordination of services between different agencies. Addressing brain injury is often a multi-agency task. We have already heard about health services, but many other organisations such as the Department for Work and Pensions, social services, local authorities, the charitable sector, the private sector and a range of other central and local government departments have a role, particularly in the rehabilitative aspects of the problems.

Frankly, the level of communication at the moment ranges from poor to very poor. It is not good enough to say that we are getting there and making the right moves. We need to put in place some dramatic measures on exchanging information and communication between agencies, and we need to be able to give head-injured people and their families a guarantee that there will not be duplication or contradiction in the information with which they are provided and the type of treatment that they receive. Up and down the country, the picture is patchy, as I am sure the Minister knows, and those involved with head injuries will confirm that view.

My third point brings me back to the intervention by the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead. We need to work in a more thorough way on the provision of information, and the understanding and comprehension of the problems associated with head injury. That applies first to the people affected and their carers, which is the hon. Gentleman's point. Those dealing with someone who is head injured face extraordinary challenges, not least possible changes in personality—the head-injured person may become like someone one does not know.

The wife of a head-injured man told me that her husband's memory of their life together had virtually been extinguished, although he could remember his childhood, his family and various other things. In cognitive terms, he could have passed many of the tests that might reasonably have been set for him, but his memory of their life together was almost a blank. Imagine the impact that such memory loss has on any relationship, be it between husband and wife, mother and child, or siblings. Head injury is extraordinarily dramatic for not only the person concerned, but their loved ones. If we are going to give people the support they need to help them to play their part in the recovery of the head injured, we need to let them know the issues with which they may have to deal and to cope. Greater information for carers who are immediately affected is fundamental.

The second challenge is to make information available to the wider public. At the beginning of my contribution, I said that head injury is a forgotten—one might even call it hidden—disability. We have to be much more ambitious in our plans for making the wider public aware of the problem. I know that many of those responsibilities will fall to charities and pressure groups involved in the sector. They do a very good job, and I pay tribute to Headway, which the hon. Member for Colchester mentioned. The organisation does so much good work, not only through Headway Houses in its direct caring role, but through its advocacy role of making people aware of its concerns and advancing its cause. Having said that, Headway needs help. It must work in partnership with Government if head injuries are to become the subject of general knowledge, understanding and concern.

I shall not take much more time, because other hon. Members want to contribute and I know that the Minister wants to reply paying full attention to all the points raised and, no doubt, making many new announcements of what the Government are going to do to address these pressing issues. The hon. Member for Colchester—I almost called him my hon. Friend, but I would never want to apply that description to any Liberal Democrat—mentioned the Government's response to the Health Committee report. His description was very polite, but I will be less so. I think that the Government's response so far ranges from inadequate to pitiful.

I say that not for my own or for party-political purposes, but because it is what most people involved with head injuries say. Most people involved in the

[Mr. Hayes]

sector are unhappy with the speed and quality of the Government response. There is room for improvement and I live in hope—although not expectation—that things will improve. It would be less than generous not to expect the Minister, who is diligent and responsible and takes such matters seriously, to listen to today's comments. I hope that she will respond immediately and then in a more considered way, so that we can make progress in this vital field.

Mr. Joe Benton (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, can I remind hon. Members that this debate lasts for only an hour and a half? On such an important subject, I want to ensure that the Opposition spokesman and the Minister have adequate time to reply. I do not want to impose time limits, but I remind hon. Members to keep their remarks as brief as possible. It is important that everybody has the opportunity to speak.

2.42 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I shall be brief, because I want to ensure that other colleagues have a chance to contribute. I should like to address three issues on which I hope the Minister can give some answers. I come to the debate with an interest in neurology, which I have developed in this House during the past five or six years, and as the vice-chair of the all-party group on disability. I have also been prompted by constituents who suffer from brain injuries.

My first point is on data and the adequacy of the epidemiological research conducted in this country to enable the Department of Health and national health service organisations properly to understand the scale and scope of the challenge. According to the Health Committee's report, the most up-to-date data are more than 10 years old. The Minister who gave evidence to the Committee accepted that there were real difficulties with the figures, with data collection and with the diagnosis of head injuries.

The second recommendation of the Health Committee's report urged the Government to address that serious deficiency in their ability properly to put in place services that match need. Without accurate figures, how can the NHS plan services that meet the real needs of people who have suffered traumatic brain injury and subsequent disability? Back in June 2001, the BMA was prompted to suggest a system of health and injury surveillance in this country and internationally. It said that

> "the systematic collection, analysis, interpretation and timely dissemination of health care data"

would play a vital part in

> "the planning, implementation and evaluation of public health programmes."

I hope that the Minister can tell us whether such a surveillance system is in Ministers' minds and whether it will become a practical, working reality any time soon.

The second, and related, issue concerns the national service framework, which was announced by the Secretary of State in February 2001. The NSF is meant to address long-term medical conditions. During the Health Committee's deliberations, the then Minister for Public Health, the hon. Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), said that the NSF may be used

> "to assess the data currently collected, and to look at what improvements might be made or what research might be needed."

I hope that the Minister can tell us that the early work that is being undertaken in relation to the NSF includes ensuring that the basic evidence base on which services are to be built has been properly established and is robust. There is some question about whether that is currently the case.

Subsequent to the NSF, there was the scoping study in November 2001. I acknowledge that that study, which was published on the internet, identified a need for epidemiological research and a disability needs analysis. That was more than a year ago. Will the Minister tell us whether the work has been commissioned and is in the pipeline?

The NSF is a welcome initiative, but many are concerned about it because, in a way, the current system has successes, saving seven in 10 of those who suffer brain injuries. However, it leaves them in limbo, because it does not adequately provide for their long-term care, support and rehabilitation. We save people's lives, but we do not allow them to go on and live those lives. The NSF faces the challenge of enabling people to live their lives after such a traumatic experience.

In 1996, the social services inspectorate carried out an interesting piece of work that considered the work being done in the national health service. It found that one of the major gaps in service provision was long-term rehabilitation. That remains true. Will the Minister tell us how far the Government have got in implementing the recommendations of the Health Committee and the social services inspectorate on improving services?

The last of my three points relates to specialist commissioning, which is an important part of the overall picture of the provisions of services for people with brain injuries. There are relatively few severely brain-injured people in each primary care trust area, so proper provision of rehabilitation requires co-ordination across several primary care trusts. That raises questions about the arrangements for specialist commissioning. Before Christmas, I tabled several written questions on that subject. I have had one or two answers to those questions, but several still await a reply.

I asked the Secretary of State:

> "what the process and timetable is for completion of the review into commissioning specialised services;"—

which include neuroscience and neurosurgery—and

> "how the views of patients will be taken into account, and when he will announce the outcome."

I was told:

> "A summary of the responses will be placed in the Library in December and guidance will be issued in the new year."—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2002; Vol. 395, c. 144W.]

I checked with Library staff today and they confirmed that the responses to the consultation have not yet been put in the Library. Will the Minister tell us what the process is, what the timetable is, and when we will get clear announcements about how we intend to safeguard services that will need to be commissioned by a number of PCTs in the near future? Several patient organisations are concerned that there is a degree of uncertainty about the commissioning of those services.

I end by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) on securing this important debate, which is not just about medical care, but about building in the rights, roles and concerns of carers and ensuring that we reflect the needs of patients, who should be treated first and foremost as people.

2.49 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden): I shall be as brief as possible. I hope that hon. Members will excuse me if I am not as fluent as I can be, but I shall be chucking out parts of my speech as I go because I realise how important it is that hon. Members want to contribute to the debate.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) on securing the debate and I declare an interest in that I am a member of the Select Committee on Health. I was a member of the same Committee in the last Parliament. The Committee produced a report on head injuries that contained 28 well scrutinised and practical recommendations, which would have moved brain injury care and rehabilitation into the 21st century and ensured that the type of NHS services that brain injury sufferers and their families have a right to expect were provided. Sadly, judging by the Department of Health's response to that report and by conversations that I have had with Peter McCabe, who is the chief executive of Headway, the Brain Injury Association, as well as my constituent and friend, it appears that the DOH does not yet give brain injury the focus that it deserves.

The brain is the most precious part of the human body. It consists of highly specialised tissue and is far more complex than the 21st century's supercomputers. Due to that awe-inspiring complexity, even the slightest damage can have extreme consequences. The brain can be damaged in a variety of ways, and depending on the areas damaged and the severity of the damage, it can prove to be anything from relatively harmless to fatal.

As has been said, each year about 1 million people attend hospital as a result of head injury. Having been concussed after a motorbike accident as a teenager and cared for at St. George's hospital in Tooting, I have been one of those people, although I do not wish to overplay my injuries. Many other hon. Members have talked about injuries that members of their family or they themselves have suffered. Some people might say that I have needed my head examining ever since the accident, but I got off lightly. My life could have been different, and I might not have been standing here today. Happily, I am. Sadly, many are not so lucky and are left to pick up whatever pieces they can while coping with severe, ongoing problems.

On average, every year in constituencies such as mine, between 15 and 20 people suffer a severe head injury, 23 to 30 suffer a moderate head injury, and between 375 and 450 sustain a mild injury. Most people recover and return to their normal state or something close to it, but a number of individuals and families have to live with the consequences for a long time.

Brain damage can have various causes, be they genetic, a blow to the head, a blood shortage, a blood clot or cancerous tumours. However, the most common reason, which applies in 58 per cent. of cases, is a road traffic accident, as in my case. Other categories include accidents at home and at work, sporting and recreational injuries, and assaults, which include gun crime and domestic violence. There is also the deplorable violence against children, as in shaken baby syndrome.

The more severe the injury, the worse the damage to the brain and the longer it takes to recover, which is why rehabilitation services are vital. Even a minor head injury can leave someone with dizziness, memory problems, poor concentration, tiredness or depression. The vast majority of people recover in a few weeks or months, as I did, but it is important to give people time to recover and not to expect them to cope instantly with demanding situations or to accuse them of malingering.

Thousands of brain injury victims face the difficulty of getting back to work or finding new work. In 1998, it was estimated that 60 per cent. of people with brain injuries had failed to find work after discharge from hospital. It is estimated that nine out of 10 people with brain injuries suffer psychological difficulties. Three quarters have some intellectual impairment, and 44 per cent. have lasting pain and headaches. The cost to the taxpayer is estimated to be £266 million a year, and in cases of severe and lasting difficulty, the cost will mount to many times that in coming years. Emotional and behavioural problems are the most difficult for individuals and their families to cope with.

The Government announced in early 2001 that they would develop a national service framework for long-term medical conditions with a neurological focus, including brain and spinal injury. They later announced, in June 2002, that brain injury would have its own chapter. The NSF is due to be published in 2004 for implementation in 2005. I welcome the Government's intention to set up national standards for long-term conditions such as brain injury. As a Member of Parliament, I am acutely aware of the length of time that it takes to produce NSFs. The recent one on diabetes is a prime example, causing frustration to interest groups and disappointment when it was eventually published.

I am sure that the hope of the groups and individuals who are concerned about brain injury is that, with the NSF in place, there should be an improvement in the quality of services for people surviving a brain injury and in the support offered to their carers. If that is not the case, I hope that the Commission for Health Improvement will enforce the standards set out in the NSF. The net result would be that sufferers and their supporters knew more about the models that the local health and social care providers should follow and the standards that they should achieve. They would have a new reassurance.

I am concerned that the planning process to establish any health or social care services must be based on robust data to ensure that decisions regarding the shape of the service, the likely level of demand, staff training needs, capital investment and all other relevant factors are based on reality, not impression. The epidemiological data that describe the number of people who have sustained a traumatic brain injury, often quoted by the Department of Health, are based on research work carried out in 1991 by McMillan and Greenwood.

[Siobhain McDonagh]

Last October, with Peter McCabe of Headway, I met the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), to discuss the Government's response to the Health Committee inquiry into rehabilitation services following a head injury. I draw the Minister's attention to the Select Committee's second recommendation:

> "We recommend that the DoH finds ways of improving the methods of data collection on incidence, prevalence and severity of head injury and subsequent disability, as a matter of urgency."

If the Government are still using that data, will the Minister indicate whether they will look favourably on bids for funding for such research?

When considering research proposals, it is necessary to learn the lessons of the Warwick study, which was commissioned by the Department of Health to examine the effectiveness of rehabilitation and used as a basis of good practice to the NHS. When the Department of Health gave evidence to the Health Committee, it accepted that there were problems with the Warwick study and undertook that if another were created, it would be designed differently. That is welcome, as the Warwick study was used as evidence that rehabilitation does not work, and I hope that the Minister agrees that any future research needs to collect data in a systematic way that is consistent and reliable and allows comparison.

2.57 pm

Dr. Doug Naysmith (Bristol, North-West): I understand that if we are brief and confine our remarks to three minutes, all Members will be able to take part in the debate, so I will rattle through my speech.

I want first to congratulate the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) on securing the debate. He is a first-class officer of our all-party group on brain injury, and today's debate emphasises that. I want also to pay tribute to the Headway group in Bristol and Mrs. Rita Rees in particular for their pioneering work, which began many years ago and continues still.

I want to draw attention in a slightly different way to an aspect of today's subject: the clear requirement for more research, which has already been partially covered in the remarks of the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow). The excellent Health Committee report of 2001, which has been much mentioned in the debate, drew attention to that in two of its recommendations. That is not self-praise, as although I am now a member of the Committee, I was not on it when it produced the report, unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh).

The Committee's recommendation ii asked the Department of Health as a matter of urgency to find new ways of improving methods of data collection on the incidence, prevalence and severity of head injury. The Committee wanted that information to be more readily available, mostly in the context of better treatment planning, and that, I think, is what the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam was emphasising. However, the epidemiology of traumatic head injury is important too, and there is an underlying need for better information to be more readily available.

It has already been pointed out that much of the information that is currently used is up to 10 years old and based on research done for the Department in 1991. I know that in their response to the Health Committee report the Government have accepted that there are problems with the data, but I am not aware that much has been done to improve the situation, as a few Members have pointed out.

In the context of epidemiology, it is important that brain injury can be easily and robustly identified, particularly following traumatic situations such as car accidents when brain injury may go unnoticed and undiagnosed because of other multiple physical injuries. That can result in patients being placed inappropriately, for example, on orthopaedic wards where staff may have little training in the management of brain injury. I look forward to the Minister telling us whether her Department is, somewhat belatedly, about to put the matter right by commissioning more research in that area.

The Health Committee's other proposal to which I want to draw attention is its recommendation xi, which states:

> "We recommend that the DoH allocates more of the R&D budget to research into traumatic brain injury rehabilitation".

It was correct then and it remains correct.

I want to make two related points. First, as an ex-medical scientist, I know how difficult it is to interest not only most scientists but research funders, never mind media people, in areas where there will not be major breakthroughs. Everyone likes to be associated with research that is looking for the magic bullet, an anti-cancer drug, a new anti-viral agent or a wonder drug to stop tissue rejection. It is much harder to fund research into the small advances that make life better for people with degenerative diseases and improve the rehabilitation process following trauma.

Secondly, on the importance of steady, small improvements in treatments, I want to urge the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and those who influence its programme of projects to ensure that it carries out more assessments of whole treatments. I am an unashamed admirer of NICE and possibly its best supporter in the House, but I sometimes feel that it is pressurised into spending too much time on new technologies and wonder drugs when it should be looking at more mundane treatments that could bring benefits to many somewhat neglected patients.

I am grateful for having had the chance to contribute to this important debate and look forward to hearing the Minister commit the Government to an adequate level of research in this area, both epidemiological and pathological.

3.2 pm

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): May I use my three minutes to pay tribute to the work of the Royal hospital for neuro-disability in my constituency which, among other things, has set up the first brain injury rehabilitation unit for those in a vegetative state, the first unit for cognitive retraining of brain-injured people with cognitive impairment and the first unit for those with a combination of physical and behavioural disorders? During the past months it has placed great emphasis on research and education in the setting up of the new institute of complex neural disability led by Dr. Keith Andrews. He is my mentor and gave evidence to the Health Committee. That institute will enable many brain-injured people, and their families, professionals and carers, to gain access to up-to-date information.

I want to draw the Chamber's attention to the excellent documentary "Coma: Locked In", on BBC2 on 17 December, which followed the treatment of Joanne Douglas from Ayrshire who came down to the Royal hospital for rehabilitation. Joanne's mother, Jeanette Douglas, said after the programme:

> "Joanne is much better now. I'd really like the programme to give hope to people who find themselves in that situation. It's important to know that there are other people with similar experiences and to know that there is somewhere to go for help. I want other people to know the Royal Hospital for Neuro-disability is there."

During my last minute, I want to make five quick points about the Royal hospital and my knowledge of its work. First, the hospital is not part of the NHS but is a national charity. Any extension of its work, including the units that I described and the institute, must be financed by donations. I was pleased that the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), found time to visit the hospital in September. That was the first visit by a Minister during the 100-odd years the hospital has been open. It is good news that the hospital is now on the NHS radar screen. Many of the specialist hospitals and institutions in that area are independent charities, and we must work out a way forward that enables the co-funding to take place. At the moment, with increased salaries—rightly—being paid to doctors and nurses, many of those hospitals are being squeezed.

Secondly, to pick up on a point made by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow), we need to ensure better diagnosis. I draw the Minister's attention to the work being done at the Royal hospital on SMART, which stands for sensory modality assessment and rehabilitation techniques. That has been worked out over a 10-year period using the occupational therapy staff, and has led to patients' potential for recovery and interaction with their environment being greatly enhanced.

Thirdly, other Members have said that the Royal College of Surgeons report clearly shows that funds invested in neurosurgery save on long-term costs. I pay tribute to the investment that is going into the relocation of the Atkinson-Morley hospital, which will be co-located with St. George's hospital in Tooting. I would like to see more neuro-surgical centres.

Fourthly, it is very important, as Dr. Keith Andrews has said, that there should be champions in PCTs and area PCTs. Dr. Andrews is the chair of the neuro-rehabilitation sub-group of the specialist commissioning group that provides a specialist resource to all London PCTs. That group leads the way, and was suggested by the Select Committee report. There should be champions on a regional level, not simply within each PCT, because many of the most serious brain injuries are uncommon.

Fifthly, brain awareness week begins on 11 March. As many hon. Members have said, we welcome the national service framework, but there are many actions that can be taken now that would make a significant difference. I hope that the Minister will take those up, and not wait for the national service framework to be fleshed out in detail.

3.6 pm

Jim Knight (South Dorset): I shall make three quick points. I congratulate the hon. Members for Colchester (Bob Russell) and for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), who is currently speaking elsewhere, on securing the debate.

I have been asked to speak by Headway Dorset, which does a fantastic job in my constituency in caring for people with acquired brain injury. I am told that it is unique in receiving NHS funding for rehabilitation. That is working well, and I commend that to the Minister as a practice that could be extended elsewhere.

There is particular interest in the subject in my constituency because of the furore over our search-and-rescue helicopter moving from Portland to Lea-on-Solent, increasing its response time by 30 minutes. The move would increase the problems that may arise from cliff-top accidents and cerebral bends. Someone with cerebral bends was picked up by the helicopter this year, and the case was only dealt with when the helicopter reached the decompression unit at Poole. There is no doubt that in that case, as in many others, an extra 30 minutes would have increased the cost to the NHS considerably.

Finally, has the Department looked at some of the work done in the United States on care pathways for acquired brain injury? People there are examining not only the care pathway, but the whole pathway from incident to rehabilitation. That work is focusing on the fact that if one can decrease the time to treatment, one reduces the effects of the injury and the amount of rehabilitation that is required.

In some cases, paramedics, who in this country have to go straight to accident and emergency, are trained to monitor patients. They have a direct link to neurosurgeons and can make an assessment there and then as to whether it is better to go straight to the neurosurgeon rather than to accident and emergency. In some cases in this country, one may find that a leg is fixed while brain trauma is allowed to continue, making the whole injury much more severe. I would be grateful if the Minister could examine that work and see whether it could be extended to this country. I welcome the recommendations of the Select Committee and look forward to the Minister's response.

3.9 pm

David Cairns (Greenock and Inverclyde): I have just one point. When my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions announced the pathways to work programme in November last year, I asked him whether the new specialist advisers who would be helping people on incapacity benefit into work would have specialist knowledge and training in the important area of head and brain injuries. He assured me that that would be the case.

If that is to be the case—we certainly hope so—very close working will be required between the Department of Health and the Department for Work and Pensions, as well as between the DWP and the Scottish Executive, who have responsibility for health matters in Scotland. I do not expect the Minister to reply now, but will she

[David Cairns]

ensure that, on the pilot schemes, the DWP works as closely with Malcolm Chisholm and the Scottish Ministers as it does with her?

Finally, in my constituency, 39 per cent. of adults of working age, or two in five, are economically inactive. That means that they are neither in work nor looking for work. I urge the Minister to do all that she can to ensure that one of the six pilot schemes is located in Inverclyde.

3.10 pm

Mrs. Patsy Calton (Cheadle): In common with others, I shall attempt to gabble my way through my speech. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) on securing the debate. We offer him our sympathy on the loss of his daughter and our admiration for his determination to initiate the debate.

As many hon. Members have said, head injury is the foremost cause of death and disability in young people. It affects young men disproportionately. My indirect experience was to be present at a road traffic accident in which a young student from the school at which I taught was injured, and had to have rehabilitation afterwards, and at a swimming pool accident, in which someone dived into the shallow end. Obviously, that caused massive trauma for the individual and the family. Many people have made the point that family and carers need a great deal of assistance. I ask the Minister to ensure that they are able to obtain at an early stage the information that they so clearly need.

As I was doing research for the debate, it occurred to me that there are massive links between head injury and other long-term conditions. I understand that a debate tomorrow will consider long-term conditions in the round. There is a great deal of linkage between the effects that all long-term conditions have on carers and families, and the way in which the health service, social care and other agencies work together.

The numbers of people affected have been mentioned, and it has been said that working with figures that are based on projections that are 10 years out of date is not really good enough. Clearly, the Select Committee's recommendations need to be put into practice. However, I make an additional point. The hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) said that head injury is not a sexy condition, unlike others such as cancer and heart attack. It is worth bearing it in mind that breast cancer affects about 39,000 people a year, whereas head injury affects 176,000 people a year—four and a half times as many—yet we seem to pay rather less attention to it.

Road traffic accidents account for nearly half of head injuries; accidents at work and at home make up 20 to 30 per cent. of cases; sports-related injuries account for 10 to 15 per cent. and violent assaults 10 per cent. I do not believe that anyone so far has mentioned the part that prevention can play. Clearly, it would be an improvement if we were to prevent the accidents from happening in the first place.

Ninety per cent. of people with head injuries suffer psychological impairment, 75 per cent. suffer intellectual impairment and 44 per cent. suffer pain and headaches. This huge problem has effectively been forgotten by most people, including me. We need better data collection. I add my voice to those of the many people who have called for the Select Committee's second recommendation to be implemented.

People who are trying to get back to work or to meet their needs through the disability living allowance should be dealt with by people who are aware of their condition. Disability living allowance staff need training to recognise the problem. As I said in the debate on autism last week, Connexions staff also need to recognise the condition when they are dealing with young people.

Acute rehabilitation services and most community rehabilitation services are run by the NHS. Specialist services for cognitive and behavioural problems tend to be in the private sector, and are too expensive for many people to access. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester paid tribute to the charities that are working in the area, but charitable groups are struggling.

I have received information from Headway, the Disabilities Trust and Rehab UK. They all make the point that the reorganisation into PCTs and the new health care arrangements mean that the PCTs find other things on which to spend their money, partly because there are too many claims on that money. If we are not careful, that money will not end up where we think it should. Given the numbers that we discussed earlier, it is important that people receive proper rehabilitation.

In the extensive briefing that I received from Headway, for which I am grateful, the point is made that a life worth saving must be a life worth living. I do not know whether Headway is the first to express the point in that way, but it is important. Rehabilitation frees up acute beds, gives people a greater chance of returning to work and reduces the cost of long-term care. As my hon. Friend said, Rehab UK estimates that if a person has access to the 48-week course costing £8,000 to £10,000, there will be a saving of £300,000 per person in disability benefits. We are spending money at the wrong end of the service.

According to Headway, despite the numbers of people concerned, services are woefully inadequate. The growing population of head-injured people presents society with problems that did not exist when medical treatment was not so advanced. Leonard Cheshire estimates that, after acute care in hospital, 70 per cent. of residential placements are inappropriate. As other hon. Members have said, head-injured people need specialist tertiary diagnosis. They need neuropsychiatric diagnosis and should not be counted as mentally ill although, sadly, some of them become mentally ill as a result of their inability to access the services that they need.

The national service framework has been mentioned. That has been promised for a long time, and the scoping event held on 12 November 2001 was extensive. We expect to see the NSF published in 2004 for implementation in 2005.

I see, Mr. Benton, that I am overrunning my time. I shall conclude by saying that many valuable points have been made in the debate.

3.18 pm

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): This debate may prove to have been something of a landmark in demonstrating an enhanced parliamentary focus on an area of great public importance which has not previously received adequate attention. The hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) deserves our thanks for introducing the subject, as do many other contributors who have drawn on their personal experience and commitment in the area. There is an understanding that things are not as good as they should be, and an overwhelming determination to make things work better.

I shall focus on two main themes. The first of those, on what may be termed the professional level, is that the Department needs a greater understanding of what we are facing. Many important figures were given earlier in the debate, and I will add one of my own: every year, half a million children under 16 present at accident and emergency with head injuries, and that is in addition to those suffering from various potentially threatening diseases in the same medical area. It is a huge and growing problem. It is not just a matter of counting heads, but of the Department's ability to identify a condition. As was noted earlier, conditions are sometimes latent or eccentric and may reappear later, with damaging consequences for individuals and their families.

The Department should also reflect carefully on the cost-effectiveness of various treatments. Traditionally, it relied on the Warwick study, but some advisers outside the Department questioned the viability of the calculations and asked whether rehabilitation is worth while. The British Society for Rehabilitation Medicine, for example, took a different view.

American experience should also be taken into account in two main respects. First, strong evidence from American studies shows that early and intense intervention is highly cost-effective and will speed the process of healing and rehabilitation. Secondly, the Americans proved remarkably successful at getting people who have suffered traumatic brain injury back into work. It is not always possible to make people economically active, but it happens much more frequently in America than in this country. Rehab UK published statistics showing that many sufferers in this country are unable to find useful work after rehabilitation.

There is a dynamic pattern to recovery. When people have a serious accident, they may need immediate acute care to save their life. Subsequently, they need further medical care, but the position is dynamic, as new needs—social, economic and educational—develop. We must sort out the different pathways. Recommendation xvi was the most important of all those specified in the excellent Health Committee report.

The present problem is that the path towards a final outcome is strewn with barriers at every turn, and there seems to be a gaping chasm in NHS support for medical care. There is no formal responsibility or duty for vocational rehabilitation and all the follow-through provision from social and employment services. Only rarely do we see good practice; for example, in Aylesbury, where a community rehabilitation team can take people back and forth to the world outside. More typically, the pattern is of unplanned transmission, readmission or emergency therapy after a crisis incident, wasted effort and missed opportunity.

I twice visited an NHS rehabilitation centre at Northwick Park hospital and saw patients having contractures remedied, which is the medical equivalent of rework. I also noticed rehabilitation beds lying empty because the funding had been siphoned off elsewhere in the hospital, which suggests that all is not well.

The Minister should note, though without relish, that her colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions are also at fault. When Rehab UK wrote to me on 22 November, it pointed out that the

> "lack of support from statutory agencies is creating severe funding problems which are likely to impact the rehabilitation services we are able to offer".

The letter was headed "Urgent Crisis". The Minister for Work replied ahead of his counterpart in health—some consolation. He acknowledged that helping people with brain injuries made good sense not only for the individuals helped, but for the public finances in the longer term. Somewhat chillingly, however, he insisted that it had to be

> "balanced against other priorities for public spending".

Securing rehabilitation is an expensive process, but it often proves much less expensive than doing nothing or continuing with the present muddled pathways to care.

The Health Committee set the tone two years ago and we now have to wait for the national service framework. We must ensure that it is not characterised by a further wait and inaction, but becomes a genuine long-term framework for change in a sector where we are all committed to securing much better provision than we have at present.

3.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Hazel Blears): In the six minutes that remain I shall try to reply to as many hon. Members as I can. If I do not get to some points I will follow them up in writing. We have seen the Chamber at its best this afternoon. Hon. Members have brought a range of personal and constituency experience to the debate as well as some specialised knowledge from members of the Health Committee. This is a landmark occasion. It is an opportunity to raise the profile of head injury in the Department and with all our partners.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) on securing the debate and on the way in which he presented it, including the extremely personal incident in his life. I should like to reassure all hon. Members that the Department has no intention of being complacent about the Health Committee's recommendations. It carried out an excellent inquiry and made a series of recommendations. All that information is being fed into the external reference group of the national service framework. Those recommendations were very important in developing the Department's work.

The hon. Gentleman and others raised the issue of support for voluntary organisations. There is a section 64 grant for Headway, which will increase its funding over the next three years by £97,000. That is evidence of the Government's commitment to try to support voluntary and charitable organisations. My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) made the important point that much of the ground-breaking work has been done in the independent and charitable sector. We have to find better ways for the NHS to incorporate that funding, not simply with grants, but with more deep-rooted partnership working.

[Ms Hazel Blears]

As for joined-up responses by the Government, I can assure hon. Members that the Treasury is indeed on board. It recognises that prevention work in the longer term saves money to the NHS and to the Government. I would draw hon. Members' attention to the job retention and rehabilitation pilots that are being carried out by the Department of Health and the Department for Work and Pensions, funded by a generous £12 million from the Treasury. A further £4.7 million was agreed in August last year. There will be a series of pilots. I note the plea from my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns) for one of those pilots to be in his area. There will be one in Glasgow, although I know that that is not in his area. It is important that we work closely with the Scottish Executive in developing those issues as they relate to both our nations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) presented a moving case in his constituency and emphasised the central role of users, carers and their families in developing these services. Users and carers are at the heart of the national service framework groups. They know whether the services are working well, what needs to be done and what should be done in a different way. We feed the views of patients and the carers into everything we do in the NHS. It is a key consideration.

I have met people with serious brain injuries in my constituency. It is often difficult for them and their families to adjust to the changes that have occurred. People's characters can change completely after a head injury. They will have different qualities and different ways of approaching situations. That applies just as importantly to their employment opportunities. I have met people who did one type of job before their head injury yet after it, although they still have many skills, they do a completely different kind of job.

The hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) described a moving personal experience. He is right to say that head injuries have been an under-recognised problem. I hope that the debate will go some way towards increasing awareness. We are developing the NSF for long-term conditions as a whole, but with a particular focus on head injuries and neurological problems, precisely because it is recognised that services have been patchy across the country. The NSF and the NICE guideline should help to address that.

Several hon. Members raised the important issue of data. I am fully seized of that. Our data at the moment depend on accident and emergency departments and various consultants making different classifications. These are complex problems and I will certainly undertake to discuss with my colleague the Minister of State whether we can strengthen the evidence base there.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), in a passionate and practical speech, raised, on the Health Committee report, the importance of ensuring that we have a proper focus on the matter. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) mentioned data, the national service framework, the scoping study and trying to ensure that specialist commissioning is in place. I can reassure him that specialist commissioning will be extended for another year, so that we can ensure that the consortium of PCTs has time to develop, to maximise their special commissioning qualities. We recognise that that is important not only in this field but in others.

Derbyshire Dales District Council

3.30 pm

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): There are several reasons why I wish to raise this debate today. I hope that by the end of it, the Minister will be able to reassure a great number of my constituents and me that they have not been treated unfairly by the Government. Certainly, the view in Derbyshire Dales at the moment is that 5 December, the day on which the Government—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Joe Benton (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but will members of the public leave the Chamber quietly, please?

Mr. McLoughlin: As I was saying, 5 December brought a bitter blow to Derbyshire Dales. On that day, the Government announced the grants that they will make to district councils to provide services such as leisure, sheltered housing, environmental services, refuse collection and many others. They announced that Derbyshire Dales district council will receive an increase, on the Government's figures, of only 3 per cent., compared with a 12.5 per cent. increase for every other district and borough council in Derbyshire. I believe that that shows that Derbyshire Dales district has been very unfairly treated. Of course, that increase was not really 3 per cent., because there was a bit of double-counting, not dissimilar to what we have come to expect from the Government.

My constituency covers approximately 90 per cent. of Derbyshire Dales district and 30 per cent. of Amber Valley borough council. The other 10 per cent. of the Derbyshire Dales area is represented by the hon. Member for High Peak (Mr. Levitt). The leader of the council, Lewis Rose, wrote to the hon. Gentleman and me, saying:

> "I am sure you will appreciate that these proposals leave us in an impossible position. The amount that the Government thinks we should spend at is higher than we do spend at. The average Band D for non metropolitan Districts is 180 pounds yet we are at 140 pounds. The real increase in our Grant Settlement year to year is not the safety net of 3 per cent. but a mere 1.6 per cent . . . We do have many problems, which we need to tackle. Our working in partnership with High Peak Borough and our joint LSP"—

local strategic partnership—

> "arrangements demonstrate we have much in common and similar problems to solve, yet we are now on the back foot and they at least have a more equitable settlement.
>
> On top of all this all Authorities face as you know wage increases of 5.6 per cent. next year with the recent settlement and the extra National Insurance payments. It is not difficult to see that without a fairer settlement this Council will be left behind in Derbyshire through no fault of its own and unable to participate fully and properly in the valuable partnerships such as the one I have already mentioned, which will bring benefit to those parts of the Dales which require all our efforts.
>
> The Council is faced with a large increase in Council Tax (which appears to be the rationale behind the settlement to bring us up to the level of Band D elsewhere) or finding the money from increased fees and charges and balances. These last two options will only partly solve the problem, so unless you and others can bring about a change in the Settlement, we are faced with a large hike in Council Tax due to lack of proper funding in the Settlement. I am not sure why we have been singled out in Derbyshire for this treatment and we appear to fare a lot worse than many of our rural bench mark colleagues".

That is why there is a lack of understanding about why Derbyshire Dales district council has been badly treated under the settlement. During the four years when Derbyshire Dales was controlled by Labour and Liberal coalition, the council tax for band D increased by 46.7 per cent. In the three years so far of Conservative control, the council tax has increased by 14.19 per cent. That shows a council that is determined to do everything possible to keep the burden on its council tax payers to a low minimum. However, it now finds that its work over the years to keep the council tax down is undermined by one fell swoop of the Government.

The cash increase this year for Derbyshire Dales district council is £52,000, which is an increase of 1.6 per cent. rather than the 3 per cent. that the Government claim. Of that £52,000, some £19,000 must be paid to the Peak District national park—there is no discretion for the council. West Derbyshire is a beautiful constituency, and we get many visitors each year. The Peak district, which covers a large part of the Derbyshire dales, is estimated to get 20 million-plus visitors each year. It is an area of outstanding beauty, but that does not mean that it does not have problems. Indeed, that number of tourists sometimes brings problems as well.

I hope that the Minister will say that she is willing to examine the case for Derbyshire Dales district council. Unless the Government reverse their decision, we will be looking at a council tax rise for band D properties of about 23 per cent. That is an unacceptable increase, as the council leader has said. If it comes about, it will be a result not of what the district council has done but of Government policy.

Derbyshire Dales is a large rural council that borders many different constituencies and district councils. Will the Minister tell me why the people in Sudbury in Derbyshire Dales will get an increase of £1.91 while the people down the road in Foston in South Derbyshire district council get an increase of £7.07 per person? Why will the people of Matlock get an increase of £1.91 while the people in Chesterfield get an increase from Government funding of £8.71? Why will the people of Tansley get an increase of £1.91 while the people of Lea in Amber Valley borough council get an increase from the Government of £7.50 and the people in Ashover in North East Derbyshire district council get £6.78?

Will the Minister tell me why people in Bakewell in Derbyshire Dales will get an increase of £1.91 while the people in Buxton in High Peak borough council get an increase of £7.88 per head? Why will people in Ashbourne get an increase of £1.91 while the people down the road in Mayfield in East Staffordshire borough council get an increase of £5.39? Why will people in Longford get an increase of £1.91 while the people in Church Broughton, just down the road, get an increase of £7.07? Why will the people in Earl Sterndale get an increase of £1.91 while the people in King Sterndale, which is literally just down the road but in the High Peak borough council, get an increase of £7.88 per head?

All those figures are the increases that different councils in Derbyshire and neighbouring East Staffordshire will see in Government funding. However,

[Mr. McLoughlin]

in Derbyshire Dales, the funding increase per head is a mere £1.91. It is a huge difference, even if one looks at the Government's figures.

The actual increases this year are as follows: Amber Valley £696,000; Bolsover £492,000; Chesterfield £635,000; Erewash £648,000; High Peak £565,000; North East Derbyshire £528,000; and South Derbyshire £472,000. However, the increase for Derbyshire Dales is only £52,000, and £19,000 of that has automatically to be paid to the Peak District national park.

There has always been a great mystique about local government funding. The Government assured us that they would make it simpler but they have not done so. I await with interest the Minister's explanation of why the Government have treated the people of Derbyshire Dales so badly. The variations in the figures are dramatic. For example, the figure for every person in Matlock is £1.91; in Chesterfield it is £8.71; in Tansley it is £1.91, but in Lea, which is just a mile away in Amber Valley, it is £7.50; in Bakewell it is £1.91, but in Buxton £7.88. I do not understand it, and neither will the people of Derbyshire Dales. I hope that the Minister can explain it today.

The district council has asked for a meeting with Ministers to discuss the matter and I hope that that meeting can be arranged. If not, perhaps the Minister herself or one of her colleagues will come to Derbyshire Dales to explain why it has fared so badly in this settlement.

3.41 pm

The Minister for Social Exclusion and Deputy Minister for Women (Mrs. Barbara Roche): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) on securing the debate, which gives us the opportunity to discuss the provisional local government settlement for Derbyshire Dales district council in the coming year.

The matter is also of considerable interest to other hon. Members' constituencies and local authorities. We are considering the comments received during consultation on the proposals that were announced in the House on 5 December. The hon. Gentleman mentioned meetings and representations; he will be aware that many local authorities came to see Ministers before the deadline for consultation, which has now ended. I assure him that all the representations that were made to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister before the end of the consultation will be considered in detail, as he would expect.

Many local authorities, including Derbyshire Dales, have made representations on the settlement. Many hon. Members, too, have made representations to us on behalf of local authorities in their constituencies. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Mr. Levitt) wrote on the issue of funding for Derbyshire Dales and the hon. Member for West Derbyshire was kind enough to refer to that in his remarks.

We will carefully consider all the comments made on the proposals before we take final decisions. We expect to be able to announce the final settlement early in February. I shall certainly make some detailed comments about what it means for Derbyshire Dales, but I think that it will help if I put the overall framework in context, as the hon. Gentleman invited me to do.

Our proposals for the funding of local government revenue expenditure provide for an overall increase in Government grant including grants for specific initiatives of £3.8 billion—an 8 per cent. increase at a time when inflation is below 3 per cent. In the light of the overall grant increase, we have also been able to set floors and ceilings, which will ensure that every authority in England receives an above-inflation grant increase, and Derbyshire Dales will certainly benefit from that guarantee.

Derbyshire Dales district council will no doubt be pleased by that, although I know from what the hon. Gentleman has said that it is not the happiest of local authorities. However, it will we hope be pleased to learn that we intend to keep the system of guaranteeing a certain level of grant for the foreseeable future. We do not believe, though, that it is appropriate to set the level of that guarantee for future years.

Mr. McLoughlin: That is where one problem arises, and it has taken some digging to establish the position on it. The Minister has referred to a figure of 3 per cent. This morning, I spoke to the chief executive of Derbyshire Dales, who told me that its increase is 1.6 per cent. in actual terms because the cash increase is £52,000. I have mentioned the fact that money has to go straight to the Peak District national park. Why do we continue with the fallacy of giving different figures? It is either a 1.6 per cent. increase on last year's figure, which it is, or it is a 3 per cent. increase, which the Government say that it is. Floors and ceilings offer no comfort when the Government say one thing but the actual figures do something else.

Mrs. Roche: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but he has got to look at the current formula, under which all districts receive at least a 3 per cent. increase on a like-for-like basis. He also has to take into account the transfers of responsibility that have taken place. Derbyshire Dales, for example, will receive a far higher grant from the Department for Work and Pensions for council tax and housing benefit administration, which must be included in the calculation.

Mr. McLoughlin: I know that the details were slipped out in a parliamentary answer on Friday and I happen to have them with me. The truth is that while Derbyshire Dales got an increase in its grant from the DWP, so did every other authority in Derbyshire. We did not get a higher than average increase, so we are still in the same position as every other authority in the county. I have sat on a Government Bench in my time and was warned that the increase in the DWP grant would be thrown in as a diversionary tactic; it does not alter the figures.

Mrs. Roche: Anyone who knows me knows that I would never go in for diversionary tactics. If the hon. Gentleman gives me a little time to make my case, I will deal with the exact position of Derbyshire Dales. We do not believe it appropriate to set the level of the guarantee for future years. That is because factors such as data can vary considerably each year, which makes firm decisions on the levels of the floors and ceilings very difficult.

The provisional settlement is generally good news for shire district councils. The average increase in general for those authorities is 7.6 per cent., and we have also been able to set a ceiling of 12.5 per cent. Our proposals are also good news overall for those authorities such as Derbyshire Dales with education and social services responsibilities. The county council receives a grant increase of 7.9 per cent., which is near the very top of the increases for county councils in England. I certainly hope that that settlement will bring considerable benefits to the hon. Gentleman's constituents.

If the hon. Gentleman is saying that other districts in Derbyshire have done better in the provisional settlement, he should take into account that only the two most deprived Derbyshire districts, Chesterfield and Bolsover, receive a greater formula spending share per head, with the others receiving similar or lower levels than Derbyshire Dales.

I will talk in some detail about Derbyshire Dales and how we calculated the formula there, but before I do so, I will comment briefly on the formula grant review. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we had a series of debates on the Floor of the House that reflected the wide range of views on the formula grant review. I hope that he will agree—I know that he is a fair man—that my colleagues in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister have tried to consult all hon. Members as comprehensively as possible. It was a challenging task. We announced that we would introduce a grant distribution system for local authorities that would be fairer and more transparent, as the old standard spending assessment system was outdated. There was a widespread belief among local authorities of all political persuasions that change was needed.

In a year, the Department has held meetings of a technical group, complex discussions with local government and detailed meetings with other Departments. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we carefully considered all the responses that we received.

The result is a grant distribution system that is less complex and easier to understand. It also removes outdated and inadequate indicators. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the environmental, protective and cultural services—the EPCS block—is the main driver of resources for shire district councils such as Derbyshire Dales. There was a widespread belief that that was a main area for reform. The new system is based on a basic level of funding, with top-ups for various factors such as deprivation, high labour costs and sparsity.

The hon. Gentleman made specific points about the changes that have affected Derbyshire Dales district council. The authority has not received a greater grant increase for several main reasons. It has done fairly well on the relative need side of the equation, with an increase in formula spending share of 11.3 per cent. on a like-for-like basis. The figure was not higher for several reasons—the main one being a 2.9 per cent. fall in the population as recorded by the 2001 census, to which the leader of the local authority referred in correspondence.

The Government must rely on the best and most robust data available at the time. If the local authority has questions about the census data, I urge it and the hon. Gentleman to take up the matter with representatives of the Office for National Statistics, who I am sure will listen carefully to any representations made to them. I understand that several local authorities are considering doing so, and we will listen to anything that they have to say.

Derbyshire Dales has also been adversely affected by the removal of the overnight visitors indicator, to which the hon. Gentleman referred. I understand his point about visitors. One can make a plausible argument that visitors impose some additional costs on authorities, but spending patterns suggest that they also bring in revenue, especially through car parking. That may not be the case for every authority, but there is no evidence that overnight visitors impose a significant net burden on councils.

Derbyshire Dales has also been affected by the changes that we have made to take account of deprivation and sparsity. Some of those changes have been favourable to the local authority; others have not. We have removed certain housing indicators, and the long-term limiting illness indicator, because those measures were badly out of date and no longer held to be plausibly linked to councils' costs. I repeat that all the measures were extensively discussed and canvassed with local authorities.

As part of the general reduction of top-ups in the environmental, protective and cultural services block, and to enhance the basic amount for all authorities, we made changes to the factors affecting sparsity and deprivation. Most sparse areas, including Derbyshire Dales, have gained from the reduction in deprivation and density top-ups.

Formula spending share is only part of the equation that drives grant. We deduct from the assessed relative need the amount that authorities would receive from council tax if they charged at the same rate.

The national assumed council tax has been referred to by the hon. Gentleman and in correspondence. That is a notional figure used solely to distribute grant; it is not a target or a prediction. We have set it at broadly the same levels that councils charged in 2002–03, with a small increase for inflation. With the new formula, we have emphasised that, rather than pretending that we can say how much councils should spend or what their council tax should be, we are focusing on how we divide up grant—the real money—between them.

The hon. Gentleman asked why Derbyshire Dales had done so poorly on grant compared to the formula spending share. There are probably two main reasons. The first is the move towards greater resource equalisation. He will know that that is not a new concept; it also existed under the former system. Again, there was some concern among local authorities of all political persuasions about the way in which it had operated in the past.

In the provisional settlement, there was an increase in the EPCS block for districts of more than £1.2 billion. However, that is not real money; the extra is from an increase in the assumed council tax to a more realistic level. As a high tax-base authority—Derbyshire Dales is well above the national average and is the highest tax-base authority in Derbyshire—Derbyshire Dales' contribution to the extra council tax is relatively high.

Mr. McLoughlin: The Minister says—I think that I have got this right—that the council should move its council tax to "a more realistic level". Is she saying that

[Mr. McLoughlin]

it should increase it more than every other district in Derbyshire because it has so much less money from the Government than every other district in Derbyshire?

Mrs. Roche: No, that is not what I am saying at all. The level of council tax is not a matter for Ministers or even Members of Parliament; it is a matter for the local authority. I was talking about the move to greater resource equalisation and pointing out that Derbyshire Dales is a high tax-base authority. That is one of the considerations to which the new formula works.

The second reason is that we have a new system of apportioning assumed council tax levels, and hence grant, between the authorities in an area. We have used our judgment to determine the fairest allocation. In comparison with the former system, that has tended to favour shire counties in shire areas rather than the districts, although the effect on taxpayers in an area is marginal.

The changes that we have made are the result of considerable consultation with experts and those with an interest. We consulted widely and at length over the summer on a range of options for the new grant distribution system. We have tried to make the new system understandable. I do not deny that the hon. Gentleman is right to say that any system of local government finance is complex by its very nature, but we have tried to make it as transparent as possible through a system of basic entitlements and top-ups for certain factors. We have guaranteed that every local authority receives an above-inflation grant; that is unprecedented. Derbyshire county council has had a good provisional settlement, with benefits for all residents—

Mr. Joe Benton (in the Chair): Order.

Hyndburn and Rossendale

4 pm

Mr. Greg Pope (Hyndburn): I am delighted to have the opportunity to raise issues that are very important not only to my constituents, but to people across east Lancashire. That is why I am particularly pleased to see my hon. Friends the Members for Rossendale and Darwen (Janet Anderson) and for Pendle (Mr. Prentice). The issues that affect people in Accrington equally affect people in Nelson, Colne and the villages and towns of Rossendale.

Those areas were the birthplace of the industrial revolution. They built their prosperity on coal, engineering and textiles, which are industries that have been in decline for about 70 years. There was a time when people could leave school, go to work in a mill or factory and confidently expect to work there for their entire lives until they retired. Round the corner from my office in Accrington, there is a factory that, at its peak, employed 8,000 people. The factory closed a long time ago and the site has now been regenerated and changed to provide offices, shops and restaurants. Even today, after many years of decline in the traditional industries, in my constituency and across east Lancashire about twice as many people as the national average work in manufacturing. About one third of people in my constituency work in manufacturing compared with a national average of about 15 per cent.

However, manufacturing is incredibly vulnerable and fragile. Hardly a day goes by without my reading in the local papers of manufacturing jobs disappearing in east Lancashire. There are a variety of reasons for that. Traditional manufacturing is typified by old-fashioned enterprises, often working in unsuitable converted Victorian cotton mills. It is often low tech, low skill and low paid. Essentially we are making a low-tech product at an uncompetitive price compared with, say, eastern Europe. Only a couple of years ago, Leoni Wiring Systems Ltd., a large company in my constituency that made wiring for the automotive industry, shipped out its operations to eastern Europe simply because the labour rate was uncompetitive. That resulted in the loss of 500 jobs.

The question is not whether we should change the economic base in east Lancashire, because it will change anyway, but how we manage the change effectively and ensure that there is an economic future for my constituents and other people in east Lancashire. There are a couple of initiatives that I want the Government to support. First, there is the Centre for Environmental Research and Technology Transfer, which I have been involved with for a while and support. In this context, it makes sense to see east Lancashire as a city, rather than as five separate boroughs with different interests. It is essentially a city with five boroughs, but it does not have a university. I am not making a case for another undergraduate institution in east Lancashire. There are already 10 excellent universities in the north-west and two of them are in Lancashire; we do not necessarily need another situated in the east of the county.

However, we want the kind of university research facility that brings with it high-tech spin offs and well paid, highly skilled jobs. That is what the CERTT initiative would provide and that is precisely the kind of thing that would give us an economic future and would provide a hook for attracting other high-tech industries. It would give an added value to our economic base. When that project seeks support from a Government Department, I hope that it receives it.

Secondly, there is the site at junction 6 of the M65, which is on the boundary between Blackburn with Darwen council and Hyndburn and which is the only one of 25 strategic sites identified by the North West Development Agency that is in east Lancashire. Early purchase of that site would provide some real employment opportunities in the east Lancashire region. It would be the focal point for the gateway employment development zone. We have already secured £7 million from the European regional development fund, and it would be helpful if the Government could give it their support. I have already said that east Lancashire was the birthplace of the industrial revolution. If it is not to be its graveyard, we need a helping hand from the Government. We want an entrepreneurial approach, and we want to work with partners in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

The big issue that I want to address this afternoon, and the largest one concerning regeneration facing my constituents and people across east Lancashire, is housing. In my constituency, the housing situation is nothing short of appalling. As someone who has been a Member of Parliament for 10 years, I am absolutely ashamed of the condition of streets in my constituency. A quarter of all properties are unfit for people to live in, which means that more than 9,000 families live in unfit accommodation. To put that in context, the English average is 7 per cent.

Half the houses in my constituency were built before the first world war. The appalling truth is that the houses in which the Accrington pals—those sacrificed on the Somme—grew up are still occupied today by many of my constituents. Somewhere between 2,500 and 3,000 houses are abandoned. People cannot sell them.

As a diversion, some of the housing prices in east Lancashire are utterly amazing. I know the Minister's constituency because when my daughter was a university student she was an elector in Hornsey and Wood Green, so I have some idea of house prices in that area. In Hyndburn and other towns across east Lancashire it is really common for houses to sell for less than £20,000. Houses go for less than £10,000, £5,000 or are given away.

Houses cannot be sold; people walk away from them because they are unsellable. That leads to other problems. One needs only one abandoned house in a terrace for the entire terrace to end up in a difficult situation in the housing market. The housing market has collapsed; we need to provide a platform in the housing market on which house prices can be built. In some neighbourhoods in Accrington a fifth of all houses are empty. That causes massive problems.

Unscrupulous landlords can buy up properties incredibly cheaply in such areas, and can house young people, or those with drink or drug problems. That creates a huge problem of antisocial behaviour. When one meets the decent people who live in those neighbourhoods, one realises that the sick joke is that the problem is funded by housing benefit. Decent people whose lives are made a misery and who cannot sell their houses are funding through their taxes the perpetrators of antisocial behaviour. We will clearly have to get a grip on that problem.

We have a multiplicity of problems: abandoned and unfit houses, houses that cannot be sold, people trapped in negative equity and antisocial behaviour. Many of my constituents are forced to live in that cycle of dereliction and despair. At the beginning of my speech, I said that it makes sense to consider east Lancashire as a whole—as a city. When one considers it as a single entity of half a million people, rather than a collection of large towns, small towns and villages, it becomes apparent that there are more than 100,000 houses in east Lancashire that are either unfit for habitation or are in disrepair. Five of the nation's 30 worst wards for housing are in east Lancashire. Accrington Central ward is in the top 1 per cent. of all wards in England in Wales.

Where do we go from here? First, let me say to my hon. Friend the Minister that I am delighted that east Lancashire has been designated one of the nine pathfinder areas. The programme offers us a real opportunity, which we shall take as best we can.

I wish to pay tribute to my noble Friend, Lord Falconer of Thoroton. In his time as a Housing Minister, he accepted my invitation to come and look at the housing crisis in east Lancashire. In my experience, he was the first Minister who fully understood the nature of the problems faced by so many of my constituents. I believe that he was the first person to point out that Ministers often attend to problems in inner cities—that is understandable and fair—and that the local authorities of cities such as London and others were getting resources from central Government to replace the housing that replaced the terraces, whereas in east Lancashire we had not even managed to replace the terraces.

There are historical reasons for that. For example, urban district councils were too small in the 1950s and 1960s to tackle the problem. I do not mean any disrespect to local authorities in east Lancashire, but the fact is that the borough councils of Rossendale, Hyndburn, Burnley, Pendle and even Blackburn with Darwen, which is a larger unitary council, are just not big enough to cope with the scale of the problem. Perhaps Ministers will bear that in mind when next there is a local government review, which is much needed for east Lancashire local authorities.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen will refer to this later, but I hope that the Minister will confirm this afternoon that parts of Rossendale will be included in the pathfinder project. They were originally left out. I hope that the excellent campaign that was run by my hon. Friend and to which I gave some support has been successful.

I cannot stress enough my final point, which is that we must move quickly and symbolically. We must take action very swiftly indeed. For the people who are trapped in the terrible housing conditions that I have described, the end to the misery cannot come soon enough. People are becoming incredibly disillusioned and alienated from the political process.

I have mentioned before—I make no apology for repeating it—a lady in Accrington who I spoke to during the last general election. I asked her to vote for me, the Labour candidate. She said that she would not

[Mr. Greg Pope]

vote for anyone because of the slum conditions in which she had to live, through no fault of her own. She felt that she had been let down by a previous Conservative council, a Labour council, a Tory Government, a Labour Government and me. Frankly, if I lived in her house, I would not vote for me either. It is a disgrace.

We must start giving people some hope—there is so much despair. They have been told for much too long that help is on the way, but it has not come. I know that it takes time to make a difference, that it is difficult compulsorily to purchase properties, to go through the legal procedures, to determine prices and so on, but I just wanted to share with the Minister the frustration experienced by many decent people.

A widowed lady came to my advice surgery a couple of weeks ago. She has lived in a house in Accrington since the end of the second world war. She told me that the area used to be a really nice part of town and much sought after. It is now like a war zone.

People look to us to offer a helping hand. They look to me as their Member of Parliament but, more than that, they look to the Government to help them. The pathfinder initiative is very welcome, and I am sure that it will make a huge difference. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transform the lives of thousands of my constituents and tens of thousands of people in east Lancashire. I know that we have the support of my hon. Friend the Minister and the Government in making such a transformation a reality.

4.14 pm

Janet Anderson (Rossendale and Darwen): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Mr. Pope) on securing this debate on a very important issue for east Lancashire. I thank him for all the support and assistance that he gives me. We each represent parts of Rossendale—I represent a large part of the Rossendale valley, but the Haslingden part falls within my hon. Friend's constituency—and I like to think that we work very well as a team. I am entirely at one with him on the need—should a reorganisation of local government take place—for an east Lancashire authority. As he said, we work together as an entity.

Alongside six other local authorities, Rossendale is a key member of the East Lancashire partnership. That sub-regional partnership recognises the value of joined-up thinking and working in tackling the major regeneration problems and challenges that it faces. That approach acknowledges not only that we in east Lancashire share a legacy of urban problems stemming from the historic evolution of the built form of our towns, as my hon. Friend illustrated, but that many regeneration issues transcend local boundaries and local markets. The approach also chimes with the messages that come consistently from national Government and the regional development agencies about the necessity of addressing the challenges of urban regeneration at strategic level via sub-regional delivery mechanisms. I believe that we in east Lancashire are following that guidance very closely.

My hon. Friend referred to the housing problems in east Lancashire. I shall touch on the problems in Rossendale itself. There are more than 29,000 households in Rossendale. More than half—nearly 54 per cent.—occupy properties within council tax band A. That presents particular problems of which my hon. Friend the Minister is aware. Some 11,950 properties are terraced properties, which represent about half our total stock, and the vast majority of those were built before 1919. Some 2,234 properties are classified as statutorily unfit, and the proportion of those classified as such rises to 15.1 per cent. in the Bacup area of my constituency. If there is one reason why I hope the Minister will consider formally acknowledging Rossendale as a pathfinder authority in the housing renewal project, it is the conditions in the Bacup and Stacksteads part of my constituency. The unfitness rate of pre-1919 houses is 17.7 per cent. Overall, 4,622 properties are classified as unsatisfactory by way of unfitness or being in poor repair.

I underline what my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn said about the housing problems we face. Friends often visit us in our constituencies and they are astonished to see how cheap our housing is, and how in some areas of east Lancashire people literally cannot give the houses away. The problem of poor stock condition can be found throughout Lancashire, but it is especially problematic in the local authorities in the east of the county—Blackburn, Burnley, Hyndburn, Pendle and Rossendale—because all contain huge swathes of pre-1919 terraced housing constructed to house workers in the cotton mills.

Some 62 per cent. of wards in Rossendale are in the worst quartile nationally for poor private sector housing. That is an important point, because if there is one thing that marks Rossendale out, it is that we have serious pockets of deprivation surrounded by areas of relative affluence. That means that, all too often in the past, we have missed out on various pots of funding.

I shall be brief because my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) wants to make a contribution, but I just want to tell the Minister that one reason why I think there has been a reluctance to include Rossendale as a pathfinder authority is the damning Audit Commission report that identified the council as a failing council. As a result, when my Labour colleagues took control of the council in May, they were faced with an uphill task—a very difficult challenge indeed. My colleague the leader of the council has sent a brief note to all members of the council informing them that the referral monitoring group of the Audit Commission met on Tuesday last week and decided not to recall a meeting of commissioners to consider a referral to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, because it believes that the new council is making progress and doing an excellent job of turning things round. On that basis, I hope that the Minister can confirm that Rossendale is to be included as a pathfinder authority.

4.19 pm

The Minister for Social Exclusion and Deputy Minister for Women (Mrs. Barbara Roche): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Mr. Pope) on securing a debate on this extremely important issue. If I may say so, I thought that he articulated his case very well. He rightly drew a distinction between the different housing problems in this country. In constituencies such as mine the problems are very high house prices and a lack of affordable accommodation; in other areas, the issues are such as he outlined. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Janet Anderson), who has championed the issue. It is good, too, to have my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) here.

It is right to say that regeneration in Hyndburn and Rossendale is broadly illustrative of the situation across east Lancashire. Many towns are characterised by high proportions of aged terraced housing in poor condition, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn referred. The physical effects of the decline in traditional manufacturing industries add to that problem, resulting in some very poor-quality urban environments. I take his point about the effect when one house in a terrace is abandoned.

Although there are many facets to regeneration, I think that housing presents the single biggest issue. More than 60 per cent. of housing stock in east Lancashire was built before 1919, and at 22 per cent. of all dwellings, the overall level of unfitness is more than twice the national average. I want to be absolutely honest about the fact that we know that problem is getting worse. Available mainstream resources are insufficient to meet the identified repair costs. My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn was right to say that people want and deserve better. It is vital that we are committed to regenerating communities and to delivering high-quality public services. Housing is an essential element of that.

The East Lancashire partnership strategy, which was launched almost three years ago, is about to be revised and updated alongside the regional economic strategy. It sets out a vision for east Lancashire in 2020 and identifies the significant challenges for the sub-region in tackling a low-skill, low-wage economy with the attendant problems of poor health, poor housing and crime. We need to put housing issues in that overall context. The strategy envisages a new integrated rapid transport scheme along the lines of those in metropolitan passenger transport authority areas, and an expansion of cultural and sporting activity and higher education opportunities, as my hon. Friend mentioned. However, it is clear that the No. 1 priority is to tackle the acute housing problem.

In Hyndburn, neighbourhood renewal fund projects are already achieving success. For example, a scheme to provide advice to the over-75s on claiming benefits has resulted in enhanced benefits. Several things are happening in the region and sub-region that we believe will considerably help the region in the long term.

In the remaining minutes, I shall return to housing, the single biggest issue in east Lancashire. In April 2002, in response to research funded by the Housing Corporation and local authorities, the Government announced a new radical approach to combating low demand: the housing market restructuring fund. That contains various innovations, including the establishment of nine pathfinder projects across the country. My hon. Friends have referred to those projects, which are made up of local stakeholders such as Hyndburn borough council. The pathfinders operate with a sub-regional remit and are charged with developing and delivering an overarching strategy to bring the supply and the demand for housing back into balance. That is not an easy thing to do, and it requires that approach.

Nine months is a short period for action to turn around decades of under-investment in mainly private housing stock, but we are pleased that much has already been achieved in east Lancashire. A board has been established, drawn from local and regional organisations, and the pathfinder has already moved to convert the money into tangible outcomes that residents will recognise as making a difference to the housing market. A programme of interventions worth £900,000 has been agreed and designed to meet residents' concerns about crime, environment, appearance and demolition, and that will include projects in Hyndburn. We recognise that even with further contributions from the Housing Corporation and the regional development agency, that sum is insufficient for the task facing the pathfinder. That is why we look forward to the Deputy Prime Minister's announcement in the next few weeks, after which I hope all pathfinders will have a clear indication of the resources that they will receive in the next three years.

However, I have one announcement that I can make today which I hope will be of great interest to my hon. Friends. I know of the great campaigning work that my hon. Friends the Members for Rossendale and Darwen and for Hyndburn have done on the pathfinder, and I am delighted to tell the Chamber that it has been decided that Rossendale should now be included in the pathfinder project. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] The announcement has been brought about by a tremendous amount of campaigning and lobbying in which my hon. Friends have played an important part. Initially, the pathfinder was designed to incorporate the four local authorities of Hyndburn, Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, and Pendle. We will issue a press notice to announce the decision at the conclusion of today's debate and write to the local authority and pathfinder today.

That is good news for the people of Rossendale, particularly those in Bacup and Stacksteads, who have suffered from the problems of low-demand housing for some time, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen mentioned. There is an opportunity to transform their neighbourhoods for the better. The Government are making that possible: the challenge is to Rossendale borough council and the east Lancashire pathfinder to deliver. I was delighted to hear the good report about the local authority that my hon. Friend delivered, and we will start negotiations immediately with the local authority and the pathfinder about the precise intervention area.

[Mrs. Barbara Roche]

As I said at the outset, we are dealing with serious and long-term problems. Everyone would agree that there are no quick fixes. We are already providing substantial funding for regeneration and neighbourhood renewal, and we are looking for ways of doing more. Additional funding alone is far from sufficient, and it is our firm conviction that local solutions are needed to local problems. In the past, regeneration has failed because it has been a solution imposed either at local authority level, or from Westminster or Whitehall. To regenerate many of our neighbourhoods, we need regeneration to come from local people, and many people are working locally and nationally to come up with sustainable and affordable solutions.

We know that there is a great deal of urgency about getting this right, and we are absolutely committed to doing so. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn again on securing the debate and on ensuring that the issue was given the important airing that it needed.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Four o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 22 January 2003

[MR. JOHN MCWILLIAM *in the Chair*]

King Edward VII Hospital, Midhurst

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Jim Murphy.]*

9.30 am

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): The first point that I want to make to the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Hazel Blears), about the impending closure of the King Edward VII hospital is that the campaign to try to save the hospital enjoys cross-party support, as can be seen by the fact that Liberal Democrat and Conservative Members are present for the debate. I have also received many messages from Labour Members and a huge amount of support from people throughout the country. The issue is neither purely local nor party political, but it is extremely grave.

I shall read out one of the several hundred letters that I have received from consultants and general practitioners who practise in the area. It states:

> "I am a Chichester GP. Closing King Edward VII will cost lives. Here's why."

The doctor points out that the Portsmouth machines for radiotherapy are not all in good shape:

> "One will be closed from April . . . Without the one at KE7, they will have 50% reduction in capacity. Waiting times for radiotherapy for breast and other cancers are currently 12 weeks at Portsmouth. They will double or more in April if KE7 closes."

He notes that the standard waiting time for radiotherapy is four weeks. The letter continues:

> "So West Sussex and Hampshire patients will be terribly at risk, waiting perhaps 6 months to start treatment instead of 4 weeks. Survival at 5 years is related to time of starting treatment.
>
> Apparently the bosses at the Strategic Health Authority are saying that the closure will not affect waiting times. They say that existing facilities can absorb the load without increasing delays. They must be wrong.
>
> The public will not hear about this"—

well, they are hearing about it now—

> "Why? Because the consultants that work in the Portsmouth department have been told they cannot speak to the press. That is terrible.
>
> I work in the Orthopaedic department at St Richards, assessing patients before they have their long-awaited hip or knee replacements. I know that the department cannot do more operations per week. There are too many blocks—time available in theatre being the biggest . . . without the previous use of KE7 for elective orthopaedic surgery, waits are bound to go up—they are already currently around 1 year."

I have received hundreds of similar letters.

The King Edward VII will close in three days. Only the national health service can save it. The immediate cause of the hospital's difficulties is the sharp decline in the work given to it by the NHS. It is extraordinary that a hospital of such quality, with spare capacity to provide crucial cardiac, cancer and orthopaedic procedures can be faced with closure at a time when the NHS is desperate to find places to treat patients. The hospital needs to address some issues for the future, but one point is clear, if the hospital closes in the next few weeks, it will be because the NHS turned off the blood supply.

In the House last week, the Minister said that the NHS was in the business of increasing capacity, not reducing it. The opposite seems about to happen. That will be incomprehensible to my constituents and to those in neighbouring constituencies, many of whose MPs are in the Chamber today to add their support to the campaign to save the hospital.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): I have a long association with the county of Sussex. My mother worked in the King Edward VII hospital for many years. My father died there. I know the premises well and I urge the Minister to visit the hospital before the proposed closure and save it. It is set in the rolling Sussex countryside and has wonderful rehabilitation facilities.

Furthermore, is my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) aware that, last summer, a friend and I had to queue for five hours for treatment in the accident and emergency department at St. Richard's? It is well known in West Sussex that that hospital is overloaded.

Mr. Tyrie: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend's comments. His points are well taken. St. Richard's does a very good job, but it is under enormous strain.

If the NHS closes the King Edward VII, it will be seen to have made a colossal blunder. A sign of the concern about the closure is the fact that 75,000 people signed a petition that was put together in less than a fortnight. Could many issues in British politics at present generate such a response?

In the past few weeks, there has been a miasma of claim and counter-claim in the local, regional and, to some degree, national press about the reason for the closure, so I want to get some basic facts straight. First, is the King Edward VII a private or an NHS hospital? The answer is neither. It is a unique, independent, non-profit-making charitable foundation.

The hospital has a 125-bed capacity and can treat 400 cardiac, 2,000 radiotherapy and 3,000 hip and knee patients per year. It has been treating large numbers of NHS patients since the NHS was created. Since 1948, well over a third of its income and nearly half its patients have been from the NHS. That has been broadly true for the past 10 years, too. No distinction is made between public and private patients in respect of their medical care. The gap between the amount of NHS funding coming to the hospital and the number of patients makes it clear that the charity subsidises NHS work. The Minister frowns, but if she has concerns about that point I shall be happy to give way.

Furthermore, the NHS has benefited from the huge groundswell of local good will for the hospital, which has enabled it to mobilise enormous funds in charitable giving for the benefit of both the public and private sectors. During the past eight years, £10 million has been raised, providing a magnetic resonance imaging scanner, a linear accelerator for radiotherapy and other facilities.

[Mr. Tyrie]

In that respect, King Edward VII is a prototype for what I thought the Government meant by foundation hospitals: hospitals that work closely with, and in, their local communities. Last year, the Secretary of State said that foundation hospitals would be

> "modelled on co-operative societies and mutual organisations."

That is what King Edward VII is.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): Can my hon. Friend confirm that some of the excellent new state-of-the-art facilities at the hospital, especially the radiotherapy units for cancer care, were paid for by the hospital itself, from its own cash flow and voluntary donations? At present, people with cancer have to wait for up to 14 weeks after their diagnosis to start radiotherapy. If the hospital closes, those waiting lists will go up and people will die needlessly.

Mr. Tyrie: I agree with my right hon. Friend. Indeed, several of the hundreds of letters that I have received from clinicians and doctors far and wide made the same point. People will die if the hospital closes.

A second area of dispute in the press about the hospital relates to the reasons for its financial difficulties. At present, the hospital has expenditure of about £20 million per annum and income of £17 million. Most of that deficit has opened up in the past couple of years and the lion's share of the accumulated deficit of £8 million is attributable to the gap between those figures. The number of private patients and the income for private work increased slightly in the same period.

Why has the gap between income and expenditure opened up? The answer is unambiguous: the sharp reduction in NHS business. The number of patients being treated has gone down drastically and the amount of cash coming in has also decreased. Since I became MP for the area a little more than five years ago, I have been worried about the hospital's vulnerability to NHS strategic planning. In 1999, I warned that the hospital's long-term future could be jeopardised if the NHS turned off the tap. That is exactly what has happened: contracts have been withdrawn almost without warning.

The NHS line on the hospital's financial problems is that the hospital has been mismanaged. An official spokesman for the NHS described King Edward VII as "a failed hospital". That claim does not bear serious scrutiny. In an immediate sense, the hospital is failing largely because the NHS has ensured that it does so. That is why the official spokesman's description of the hospital as a failure sticks in the gullet of every member of its staff, from receptionists to surgeons.

For a failed hospital, the King Edward VII has done pretty well. In the past five years, it has treated 30,000 in-patients and 90,000 out-patients. Its output measures and survival rates for cardiac care are well above those of nearby NHS hospitals, even after adjusting for differences in case mix. In all major areas of care, it is at least as good as the NHS. Readmission rates for unsuccessful procedures are lower than those in the NHS and, above all, staff retention rates are high, which shows that it is a happy place in which to work, with very high morale. That is also reflected in the quality of care.

The King Edward VII is a wonderful place. As a charitable institution, the hospital is a not-for-profit organisation, so one would not expect it to have a large surplus. In any case, if running a deficit is a definition of failure, many NHS hospitals are failures, too.

It is true that the hospital, like many—public and private—must deal with some longer-term issues. It was doing that and, as the liquidator pointed out, it had a good chance of success. It would probably have succeeded if the NHS had not pulled the plug. Some NHS managers have suggested that poor management and nothing else is to blame. Whether or not that is true of the King Edward VII, it is certainly true of much health care in the NHS, which has one or two severe management problems of its own to sort out, as the Secretary of State and others have frequently pointed out.

The Surrey and Sussex strategic health authority has an accumulated deficit of £60 million. Which part of the NHS planning process allowed that to happen, with all the related managerial stresses and the shocking implications for waiting times for my constituents? It is deeply regrettable that the NHS primary care trusts, especially the Western Sussex PCT, and the Sussex and Surrey strategic health authority have reacted to the closure by suggesting that their role in it was peripheral—that it was nothing to do with them. A more thorough and frank explanation of the financial constraints that led them to those contracting decisions would have been much better.

Any reasonable assessment of the accounts—I have taken a look at them—will show that the lion's share of the shortfall that triggered the financial crisis and led to the appointment of a provisional liquidator was a consequence of the loss of NHS business. The hospital made repeated attempts to engage the strategic health authorities, PCTs and trust hospitals in discussions but it was largely ignored.

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): Some of the hospital staff live in Worthing and we also have a number of NHS patients who have benefited from the hospital. The Government cannot walk away from the issue; they set up the constraints and created chaos in the NHS due to the continual reorganisation of the past five years—tomorrow, they will be advertising for a chairman of the strategic health authority. It is not capacity, cash or the commissioning system that is at fault, but the Government. The problem is in the hands of the Government; it requires action and they should treat it as important.

Mr. Tyrie: I agree with my hon. Friend. There is a drive towards decentralisation—at least that is the current rhetoric—but in fact much of the responsibility for such issues and the authority to deal with them still lies with the Department of Health.

Another allegation is that the hospital lost business because its charges were too high. However, a detailed examination of prices shows that that is not true. If the Minister has been given figures, I warn her that many of them do not bear careful scrutiny. The Western Sussex trust has put out some highly contentious figures—on the cost of cardiac treatment, for example. Some of the more bizarre claims that the trust has put into the press about the relationship between the PCT and the hospital are not true either. I do not want to delay the debate by going into detail, but I shall refer to one claim about cardiac care. On 14 January, the PCT issued a press release which stated:

> "The PCT had recently negotiated a three year agreement with KEVII for cardiac surgery."

A reasonable man might have concluded that a three-year deal had been struck—very good news. However, when I examined the matter in detail I found that no such deal had been struck. Some discussions had taken place, but there was no financial support for a three-year deal for cardiac surgery.

I have also been told privately by PCT management on two occasions that the quality of care in cardiac surgery is lower at King Edward VII than at Southampton. I was surprised to hear that, so I took the trouble to obtain the British Cardiac Society's peer review of the hospital, conducted about a year ago. Unless the Minister challenges me, I shall not go into the detail of the review, but it concludes that the overall level of cardiac care in the hospital is excellent and is higher than in the NHS alternatives available, including Southampton.

The Minister should be wary of taking at face value some of the highly controversial public and private briefing that she has probably been receiving. If she takes a careful look at it and asks some penetrating questions, she will find that things are not quite as they appear.

Of course, no one suggests that life is easy for the PCTs or the STHAs affected. They have been constrained in the amount of business that they can send to the hospital, as my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) pointed out. They have not been given sufficient funds to enable them to take people off waiting lists. Locally, the waiting time for cardiology and cardiac surgery is 12 weeks; for radiotherapy, it is up to 12 weeks and rising; and for orthopaedics, it is 15 months. That compares with national targets published by the Government that the maximum waiting time for elective surgery should fall from 18 to six months by 2005.

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire): I am listening carefully to my hon. Friend who is making an excellent speech in defence of a superb local hospital. Is not one of the problems that the local area receives only 83 or 84 per cent. of the average health spending per person nationally? It is not an area in which it is cheap to live or to employ people, so we need significantly more funding. That might help to save the hospital.

Mr. Tyrie: My right hon. Friend describes a double whammy. First, money has been moved away from the south to other parts of the country. Part of the reason that more hospitals in the north of England have higher star ratings is that they are not under such intense strain as hospitals in the south, as several of the Government's advisers on that issue have recently pointed out. Secondly, costs in the south are much higher than they are in the north. The hospitals are squeezed from both sides.

The targets set for NHS hospitals locally would have been difficult to achieve in any case, but they will be impossible if the King Edward VII is closed. Waiting times will rise further. The claim that things could be otherwise, as the STHA suggests, is ludicrous.

That brings me back to one of my earlier points: at the very time when massive capacity constraints throughout the NHS are leaving patients untreated, the King Edward VII hospital is to be closed. Has the NHS done all that it should have done to keep the hospital's capacity on stream? Regrettably, I think not, although it seems that at one minute to midnight something may be stirring.

What can the Minister do to help? First, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick) suggested, she could visit the hospital—before Friday—and see for herself. It is only an hour from her Department by train and it would take her less than three hours to do the journey and see everything that she needs to see. She could then make up her own mind.

Secondly, the Minister could take a look at the huge raft of schemes, some of which are run centrally, that enable the distribution of discretionary finance to help PCTs. For example, can something be done through the access initiative scheme for orthopaedics? Can end-year flexibility be used to bring money forward from the next financial year?

Thirdly, will the Minister bring an end to the absurdity that forces my constituents to be taken abroad for treatment at huge cost when they could be treated up the road at the King Edward VII at less expense to the taxpayer? I have heard grotesque stories about people being lined up to get on coaches to be treated in France after expensive pre-operative investigations at the Nuffield hospital—at £1,000 a throw—for treatment that will cost even more than at the King Edward VII once the travel costs are included. That is absurd and will require considerable justification. The budget is ring-fenced. Will the Minister consider what could be done about the ring-fencing?

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight): Does my hon. Friend agree with Dr. Mark Connaughton, the heart specialist at St. Mary's hospital, Newport, who points out that when a patient is treated outside this country, responsibility for their long-term care falls back on the NHS, whereas it would remain the responsibility of the King Edward VII if they were treated there?

Mr. Tyrie: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. It leads me to reflect more generally that NHS planners have not taken into account the fact that if the hospital closes, the NHS will have responsibility not only for its current NHS patients but for a fair number of its private patients because they may not immediately be able to find alternative care elsewhere, or may decide not to do so.

I was setting out a list of things that the Minister could do. Fourthly, she could bring forward an announcement that the Department will have to make about the need for more cash for Hampshire because the county will face a crisis when it is stripped of the doctors and support staff who will go to the Gulf as part of the contingency planning for a possible Gulf war. There will be an acute shortage in some Hampshire hospitals; Portsmouth will be hit especially hard.

[Mr. Tyrie]

I hope that the Minister will announce that she will release some funds. After all, we are not talking about new money—it will have to be released in any case, as everyone knows—and it will help enormously. The extra capacity in the King Edward VII is already needed, but it will be vital in the event of action, or even preparation for action, in the Gulf.

Fifthly, will the Minister examine carefully the waiting time targets that have been set and consider whether they could be delivered even before the closure of the King Edward VII? Is there a cat in hell's chance of delivering them after it closes? Any reasonable appraisal would conclude that keeping the hospital going for the next year would be extremely important to the NHS in delivering those waiting-time targets and, as I have just suggested, it would cost the NHS little or no extra money. The money would have to be found in any case.

As the Minister knows, the hospital has just offered to carry out 300 cardiac procedures, 2,500 elective surgery procedures, 420 radiotherapy procedures and 1,000 investigative cardiology procedures. All are being offered at the NHS's own reference prices for the coming year—the marker prices that it considers right for work put out to the private sector. Throughout the south, people are waiting desperately for treatment for those conditions. The deal that is being offered could save the hospital and do something to plug that gap.

Ministers have repeatedly said that capacity not cash is the real constraint. They now have an opportunity to demonstrate that. I urge the Minister to encourage acceptance of the deal. I do not urge her to interfere but merely to pick up the phone and say to her senior management team, "Use some common sense."

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. John McWilliam (in the Chair): Order. A large number of hon. Members want to speak, so may I ask them to be as brief as possible?

9.53 am

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire): I shall be extremely brief, Mr. McWilliam.

The long-term problem in our health system is not the quality of its staff, who are superb, nor is it the quality of our hospitals, which are often superb—in the case of the King Edward VII, my constituents have been writing to me in their hundreds to tell me how superb it is. The long-term problem in the national health service is capacity. I am not alone in saying that, the Minister has said it, too.

Closing such an excellent hospital will astonish and anger my constituents, and it ought to astonish and anger the Minister. I ask her to listen very carefully indeed to what is being said in the letters that she has been receiving from my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie). I endorse everything that he said.

If the hon. Lady does not take the action to which my hon. Friend referred, she risks being part of the problem, even though she is an extremely hard-working and effective Minister. The NHS runs the risk of being seen as remote from the people of this country. The Minister should make it plain that we need to deliver on the health system and that means providing this local hospital—King Edward VII—for our constituents. I hope that she will listen to what my hon. Friend said.

9.55 am

Sue Doughty (Guildford): I shall concentrate on how the closure will affect the Royal Surrey county hospital in Guildford. I shall not repeat what has already been said. Instead, I shall set out some of the good things that the management and clinical staff at Guildford have told me about the high quality of care, especially in orthopaedics, at the King Edward VII hospital. When a health care professional says, "If I had to have my hip done, that is where I would want to go", things do not get much better than that.

Some staff work at both Guildford and the King Edward VII, so there is continuity of patient care and a close working relationship. I understand that about 400 orthopaedic cases were expected to be undertaken at the King Edward VII next year. A certain amount of general surgery takes place. Less cardiac surgery is undertaken because there are facilities for that elsewhere. The closure of the King Edward VII will have a bearing on the Royal Surrey county hospital, especially in terms of radiotheraphy.

If the King Edward VII closes, Guildford will take more cases. Is that feasible? Royal Surrey county hospital is a good hospital. It has excellent staff who work desperately hard to try to meet targets. A huge effort is involved. Like everyone else in the south-east, we have massive problems involving national pay scales and a hugely expensive cost of living. These factors work against staff retention. As a result, we are continually investing in recruiting. However, we get there.

The closure of the King Edward VII will have an impact. Local private hospitals are already running near to capacity. In Guildford, fortunately, some people are better off than others and will not wait, or they club together to buy treatment for family members. As a result, we do not have a large amount of spare capacity, even though several private hospitals are immediately local to us.

I was pleased to hear that the strategic health authority is talking to the liquidators to ascertain what can be done. We would want any action taken that would delay or avoid closure to be explored in every way possible. As I have said, closure will have a huge impact.

On cancer care, the closure of the King Edward VII will have an impact on Guildford's performance and its ability to treat many people in Guildford and the surrounding area. I am speaking not only of my constituents but of all people who use the hospital. First, Guildford is unhappy that it takes seven weeks to get somebody into radiotherapy. That period is substantially longer in Portsmouth, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) will have something to say about the problems in Portsmouth, where the waiting time is about 17 weeks. It should be understood that those patients will be coming to Guildford. That will extend waiting times.

When I spoke to specialists, I was told that the strategic health authority is considering commissioning more linear accelerators. I asked the hospital whether, if that happened, and the hospital was closed tomorrow, patients would receive treatment. Two linear accelerators are already in commission to deal with the existing work-load, but not the work-load that would accrue as a result of closure of the King Edward VII. Even if orders are in place, that does not solve the problem. If the hospital is closed tomorrow and orders are placed, how long will it take to bring a system on stream? The reality is that it takes about a year. It takes about six months to build a room and to put things in place. The technical commissioning takes a further six months. Technicians undertake detailed and wonderful work to make the equipment work as well as possible.

Ownership has its own costs. The Minister will be aware that it costs about £30,000 a year to keep software up to date and to ensure that the various pieces of technology continue talking to one another if we are to make use of all the brilliant things that the machines can do. Cost of ownership is a factor.

The Minister might suggest that we could run longer hours at the Royal Surrey county hospital. That is something that I have explored. The cost of running longer hours is greater than that of buying more linear accelerators because of the additional costs involved. As the Government and the Minister for Health have regularly reminded the House, linear accelerators need radiographers. There must be that match. Radiographers are like hens' teeth.

It has been argued that if we closed the King Edward VII, a number of staff would be available elsewhere. The reality is that if we ran more linear accelerators to fill the gap, that would take a year, and the available staff would no longer be available. Secondly, available staff who are now at the King Edward VII would not come to Guildford. They live on the south coast and they cannot afford to live in Guildford. We would not get the radiographers or other technical teams.

Our concerns are not only the concerns that have been strongly expressed already. I urge the Government not to let the hospital close on Friday. It should be bought outright, but the Government should consider all the models and all the what-ifs. What will happen to health service provision as a whole in the south-east if the hospital is allowed to close? What will happen to patient care and the high quality of orthopaedic treatment? We are aware of the misery of people waiting for replacement hips, for example. What will happen to those waiting lists? Where will patients go? Where will they get the same high level of aftercare that patients get at the Royal Surrey county hospital when they are sent to Midhurst? When farming out surgery to other hospitals, physical proximity is so important, especially when there are complications.

I add my plea to the Minister to consider a buy-out. An interim rescue package should certainly be considered, until all the questions that we ask today can be answered satisfactorily within the localities that we represent.

10.2 am

Mr. Michael Mates (East Hampshire): I, too, shall be brief. There has not been such an outcry in Hampshire about health since the Government closed Lord Mayor Treloar's hospital in Alton. That hospital was doing excellent work, but in their centralising zeal the Government decided that it was no longer needed. The hospital concentrated exclusively on elective orthopaedic surgery. That is one of the areas where waiting lists in my part of the world are longer than those for anything else.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie), the King Edward VII hospital is doing a marvellous job. This is at a time when the Queen Alexandra hospital in Portsmouth—one of the hospitals graded as failing—was almost coming to a halt on orthopaedic surgery. Disaster was nearly upon us when the situation was saved, to an extent, by the fact that the hospital at Haslar became available. That is where all the orthopaedic surgery is being undertaken now. That has taken place at great expense. As I have said, Lord Mayor Treloar's hospital was closed. It was then found that there was an orthopaedic disaster. That was solved in some nick-of-time way by transferring orthopaedic work to Haslar, at great cost. It seems that the national health service will go through exactly the same process again.

I do not want to talk about all the other excellent specialties because most of our constituents find that the shoe is pinching most when it comes to orthopaedics. They are waiting 15, 18 and 21 months for orthopaedic surgery. Now, we are to reduce capacity. The question is whether we give up capacity now to introduce the reorganisation that the Government say that they want. My argument—it is a simple one—is that we should get capacity right first, reduce waiting lists and ensure that people can get their orthopaedic surgery and cardiac surgery right. If the Minister wants then to reorganise the health service to make it more efficient, that is fine. However, at present it is stretched at every point. To reduce capacity now is nothing short of criminal.

10.4 am

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): We used to hear about joined-up government bringing Departments together. We do not hear so much about it now because I think that we are not getting it. We are debating matters where it is necessary to have joined-up government. The Minister cannot sit back and say that the issue is not directly her responsibility—that the hospital is not directly within the national health service because it is not controlled by the NHS. We need to take an overall approach.

In central southern England, we have serious health sector problems. For example, there are money problems. The Portsmouth hospital trust is running at a deficit, and the plan by which the chief executive has awarded a franchise to the hospital does not tackle where the money will come from to rectify the situation. We face a capacity problem. It is not possible to lose any facilities within the NHS or within allied health services without that leading to serious damage to local residents.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) did not refer to the fact that he is supported this morning by 14 Members from the area that is concerned. Nearly all of those representing central southern England are present to express their profound concern that the Government have not so far taken action in joined-up government to rectify the possible loss of the superb facilities at the King Edward VII hospital.

[Mr. Peter Viggers]

I shall quote from a constituent who wrote to me a couple of days ago. He has had surgery at the King Edward VII hospital on five occasions. He writes:

> "It is beyond belief that this excellent hospital, which has served both NHS and private patients for many years, should be allowed to close. Meanwhile the Portsmouth area is saddled with a zero-rated establishment where ambulances have to wait for hours outside the hospital entrance because beds cannot be found for emergency cases."

The loss of any hospital facilities in our area will worsen a situation that I have already described as dire. I plead with the Minister to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester and respond to his requests.

10.6 am

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I congratulate the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) on initiating the debate. I support much of what he said and in particular, his five questions to the Minister. It is vital that those questions are answered. He invited the Minister to visit the King Edward VII hospital. If she sees the facilities that are there, there is a real possibility that even at this late stage she will be minded to do all that is in her power to keep the hospital open.

Hon. Members have talked about the King Edward VII as a local hospital. In fact, it goes way beyond that, as is made clear by the presence of so many hon. Members this morning. I believe that we are all speaking up for the people who would like to be present this morning. I refer to those who have been fortunate enough to be treated at the hospital and to consultants who have been prevented from taking part in the debate. One or two of them have been courageous enough to take on their bosses and to speak out on behalf of their patients, and how right they were to do so. I am sure that many other people have spoken to those present about their fears of what will happen.

The record speaks for itself. The hon. Member for Chichester spoke of being cautious about costings. Indeed, those bear close examination. They are far from the costings that have been reflected by some who have tried to do down the King Edward VII hospital on that basis. Costings must be balanced against the care that is provided, along with skill and treatment.

I have received about 20 or 30 letters in the past week or so from constituents who have been treated at the King Edward VII hospital. I shall mention two. Mr Damen lives in the heart of Portsmouth. He writes:

> "I believe I have to complain to you about the proposed closure of the K. E. VII hospital. What on earth are they trying to do—bring the whole national health service to a standstill? I was treated there . . . a short time ago and found it to be a superb hospital with staff and nursing to match."

He writes that he went there

> "because the Q.A. couldn't cope with the work load. Yesterday I had to take my wife—

this was to another hospital that was out of area—

> "because Q.A."—

that is in Portsmouth—

> "was full up".

Apparently it was unable to deal with her problems.

I have a letter from another constituent, Mrs. Edwards, who knows the hospital well. She talks about the shameful way in which the issue has degenerated into the threat of imminent closure of a facility that so many have used.

The figures speak for themselves. Nearly 30,000 patients in the NHS have been treated at the hospital in the past 10 years. It has planned for what it can do in future. In the current year alone, more than 1,000 seriously ill patients have been offered care. I come from Portsmouth and I know the position only too well. We are facing a crisis because we failed as a hospital, despite the best efforts of the staff and management. Despite having had three chief executives in two years, we have a failing hospital. It is being held together now by the support of the Ministry of Defence staff who are working there. Many of them will leave, if they have not already done so, during the next few weeks. That is a serious problem and I have written to the Secretary of State about it. I have yet to receive assurances from the Secretaries of State for Health and for Defence about their proposals for filling the gaps.

It is unacceptable to wait 16 weeks for radiotherapy in any circumstances. To remove the facility will mean that my constituents and other people living in the Greater Portsmouth area will wait even longer. It is unacceptable that more has not been done. We should not be having the debate three days before closure. The hospital is far too important to the health service generally in the area. When the Minister replies, I hope that she will set out a well thought-out solution that will be a guarantee for my constituents and for many thousands of others who will not benefit if the hospital closes. If she is not to save the hospital, they will need to know where they will be treated. They will need to know also how long it will be before they are treated.

10.10 am

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I, too, congratulate my hon. friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) on securing the debate, albeit at the last hour. The representation in Westminster Hall makes it clear that the issue is important for the hundred of thousands of citizens that hon. Members present represent. It is also, I suggest, an important test for the Government. Candidly, are they in earnest and are they to be trusted in organising and working with the voluntary sector to make available the capacity that is necessary to reduce waiting lists and to deliver national health service care?

I greatly respect the Minister's competence and integrity. However, I urge her independently to examine the data. It is apparent to several of us that behind the scenes many in the NHS have seen the failure of the HCA International deal as being quite convenient in leading to the closure of the King Edward VII hospital, and in terms of longer-term plans and views about it. For example, we were told that it cost 38 per cent. more to have cardiac care at that hospital than at Southampton. The figures are matters of fact—£8,153 and £9,485. That is 16 per cent. more for the operation. The Minister will find how the spin was placed. The King Edward VII kept people in slightly longer, with the health authority's approval. That resulted in increased costs, which were presented as the cost of the treatment.

I urge the Minister to look for herself and to test the data. This is something more than just a terrible thing that has suddenly happened. My hon. Friend told the story in pretty full detail but some points should be stressed. There is a capacity issue. There is major scope for primary care trusts to use the King Edward VII facilities to reduce waiting lists. The Minister knows—we have been in correspondence for the past year—that the waiting list for radiotherapy is serious. It is approaching 14 weeks. Southampton has a one-year wait for diagnostic cardiac catheter investigation. The waiting list for coronary artery bypass grafts is causing significant and unnecessary mortality. Brighton is at capacity. As the Minister will know, it has been sending patients to the King Edward VII because of that. There is generally about a three-week wait at Portsmouth. With the possibility of war in Iraq, the immediate situation will become serious in Hampshire.

The King Edward VII hospital could perform 400 to 500 open heart operations a year. It could undertake 600 to 700 anaplastics and 1,000 diagnostic cardiac catheters. It is not often pointed out that it is the centre of the crucial Macmillan unit, which looks after many older people and others who are suffering from cancer.

It is crucial to buy time to investigate how the hospital's future could be resolved. The Minister will be aware that various proposals have been presented in the past few days. It is clear that they cannot be assessed by the liquidator within three days. Local MPs, doctors, councillors and, indeed, the entire community, have pointed out to the powers in the NHS in the area that time can be bought. The work can be done. Waiting lists are long and, candidly, if those involved stood back, the stories told would be believed. We hear about intentions behind the scenes. The local community would not forgive the NHS for many years.

There is the power at least to buy time to ascertain whether arrangements can be made to save the hospital in the long term. Those arrangements may be radical. They may involve turning the existing building into a nursing home. We are drastically short of beds in that sector. A smaller purpose-built hospital could be constructed. It is clear that there is a need for the capacity that has been provided.

Again, I ask the Minister carefully to check the claims that have been made by the NHS in the area about the ability to make up capacity. The advice of those in the other hospitals is that the claims do not stand up to examination. As I outlined, waiting lists are already higher by far than in other parts of the country. The hospital treats 30,000 patients a year, 12,500 of whom are NHS patients. It is not only an NHS issue—if the facility is lost, many private patients are likely to put on the NHS. That will increase costs and usage, as many doctors in my part of the world have said.

The King Edward VII hospital has been a voluntary sector partnership, it has been almost a prototype for much of what the Government are thinking about. It worked extremely well until two years ago. There have been management problems and we are all aware of many issues, but the crucial issue to affect finances has been reduced NHS usage. I think that some of that was deliberate. There should have been negotiations on price and other matters.

We are interested not in debating the past, but in getting the data right. We desperately urge the Minister to give the hospital sufficient time to work out a solution. If the hospital goes in three days' time, the Minister will not be forgiven.

10.17 am

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) on securing the debate. This is *likely to be the most important* day in the 54-year history of King Edward VII hospital.

The hospital is in my hon. Friend's constituency, but its importance spreads way beyond the bounds of Midhurst and Chichester to all parts of West Sussex and parts of Hampshire and Surrey. It is a vital hospital for many of my constituents. Over the years, it has treated many thousands of people from the Bognor Regis area for cancer, heart problems, back complaints and orthopaedic surgery.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) said, about 12,500 national health service patients a year are treated at the hospital. It has always been an NHS provider. About half its patients come from the NHS. Hundred of my constituents who have written to me on the issue are astonished that at a time when the NHS is short of capacity, a hospital that has capacity in cardiac, cancer, orthopaedic and ophthalmic procedures could be closed.

National health service spokesmen say that the costs of the KE VII are too high. However, the hospital says that it will charge the prevailing NHS rates for any secure bulk contracts. NHS spokesmen hint at quality issues, but they provide no evidence other than citing the current NHS orthodoxy that only very large-scale hospitals provide the throughput of patients that is sufficient to provide quality. That is not the experience of my constituents who have been patients at Midhurst.

The very reason for the volume of anger at the proposed closure—it is an anger that has surprised many—is that the hospital provides a higher quality of medical care than that people have experienced at other NHS hospitals. It is not only the fact that it is tiny and intimate that elicits that response; it is the medical care itself that is the key factor behind many people's support for Midhurst.

On Friday, a friend of mine in Bognor Regis told me of her experience of the hospital. Ten years ago she found a lump, she went to her GP who said that because it was causing pain it could not possibly be malignant. She insisted on being referred to a consultant and because she had BUPA cover, she went to the King Edward VII. Tests there proved that the lump was malignant and she was treated straight away. Ten years later, another lump was discovered. She went back to her consultant at Midhurst, who took five biopsy samples—four from the lump itself and one from the area adjacent to it. Normal NHS procedure, I understand, is to take biopsies just from the lump. None of the four samples taken from the lump proved malignant, but the sample taken next to the lump was malignant and she was then treated. Had my friend not gone to the King Edward VII 10 years ago and again more recently, she would not be alive now.

[Mr. Nick Gibb]

I have received a huge number of letters from constituents with similar stories to tell, pointing out that the quality of clinical care is higher at the King Edward VII than at other hospitals. When I hear intimations from NHS civil servants that there are quality issues at the King Edward VII, I do not believe them. When that is coupled with their claims about costs, with which my *hon.* Friend the Member for Chichester successfully dealt, I come to the conclusion that I cannot trust anything that is said by the NHS on the issue. I urge the Minister to take the same approach.

Officials are far from being infallible. As a Minister, it is always tempting to take the advice of officials, particularly in such a technically difficult area as health care, but officials do get things wrong, especially with regard to the NHS. For example, the Tomlinson report published in 1992 called for a reduction in hospital capacity in London. The report concluded:

> "There is likely to be a significant fall in the requirement for inpatient beds in the inner London hospitals . . . Closures and mergers will be necessary."

Last Monday, I went round the newly acquired London Heart hospital. I also toured the 20-storey new-build hospital in the Euston road, and a new hospital is being built at Barts. So NHS advice now is to increase capacity in London.

Advice has changed. When I put that to the director of policy and planning at the Department of Health, he said that the advice 10 years ago was probably wrong, but that civil servants have moved on. The NHS has its fads, which are in vogue and then go out of vogue again. The current fad in the NHS is "large is beautiful"—the belief that a certain minimum but large number of patients being treated at a particular hospital is needed for it to be regarded as being of a sufficient standard. There is obviously some truth in that. The experience gained by performing 1,000 bypass operations a year must be better than the experience from just five. But is the experience from 400 operations a year so much worse than the experience from 800? Surely there are diminishing returns to clinical excellence as the numbers increase to very high figures. Clearly, there is a balance to be struck.

The public believe that in addition to the large general hospitals, there should also be some smaller, friendlier hospitals that can give more tailored care and attention to patients. In a debate such as this, where the public view is clear, but contradicts the view of the health professionals, whose views should prevail in a democracy? I believe that in this case, the public view should prevail, particularly where the costs and comparisons are far from clear and there is no evidence of a diminution in quality as a result of the smaller scale.

I shall quote from a couple of letters from constituents, as other hon. Members have done. One constituent from Aldwick in Bognor Regis wrote:

> "I did the Ambulance Car Service for approximately five years when I retired in the 80s and know only too well how the NHS patients travelling to King Edward VII for treatment felt about this particular hospital. Every one of them expressed views that they were in safe hands compared with other hospitals, and were consequently uplifted by this knowledge."

Another constituent from Bognor wrote:

> "Many, many people have had the facilities of this hospital made available to them . . . The Macmillan Unit has cared for many cancer patients , giving peace and constant 1st class service to the terminally ill patients".

Finally, a letter from a constituent in Shripney, Bognor Regis stated:

> "Unfortunately, in June 1999, I was diagnosed as having acute prostate cancer. This entailed daily radiotherapy treatment for a period of seven weeks and it was carried out at the King Edward VII hospital. During this very traumatic time I received wonderful care and attention from the staff of a dedicated unit where emphasis was upon accuracy and careful attention to detail. Without any shadow of doubt I would not have been here to write to you today had it not been for the excellence and efficiency of the specialist doctors and radiography staff at the King Edward VII hospital."

I urge the Minister to read the letters that she is receiving on the matter, to take her own counsel, talk to the hospital administration, and not, like so many of her predecessors, to fall into the trap of following officials' advice at great political cost, only to find five years down the line that that advice has proved to be wrong.

10.25 am

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight): I shall not detain the Chamber for long. Hon. Members can read for themselves comments I made in my Adjournment debate last week. I am sure that the Minister has done so. I welcome her to her place. I know that she is an honest and decent Minister, and she has helped me with constituency matters in the past. It was noticeable that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy), was unable to complete his speech last week in the Adjournment debate. When I asked what he had intended to say, I was told by the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears), in a written answer that she would reply to me as soon as possible.

The most dangerous aspect of the entire debate is the reasons given for the withdrawal of contracts from the King Edward VII hospital. Some have been withdrawn on costs grounds, and they have been dealt with by my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight). Some have been withdrawn on throughput grounds, which have been described by my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb). Some have been withdrawn on the basis of slithy imputations about quality issues, which hospital administrators are not willing to put on the record. If officials have something to say, let them say it in public, rather than make such imputations, which support the decisions that they have taken, but which they are not prepared to put on the record.

There has been a somersault in the Government's approach to the private sector over the past six years. I understand that. When the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) was Secretary of State for Health he had a different approach to the private sector from that which the Government now take, and I welcome their change on that. However, I must point out that the heart doctor in my constituency, who is an NHS professional, is clear that no problem would stop a doctor referring patients to the King Edward VII.

I have spoken to my strategic health authority chairman on the matter. He warned me that Ministers were taking a hard line: it is not up to the NHS to bail out a failing private hospital. That is the line that he has been given by the Department of Health. I do not know what idiot behind the scenes dreamed up that line, but it is a singularly inappropriate response to a hospital that has given 54 years of wonderful service to the national health service.

There are three areas with which the hospital deals: cardiac care, for which, I am pleased to say, some new arrangements are in place, but people have to wait more than six months to go to Brighton, which is causing bed blocking in my hospital, St. Mary's; radiography, for which there is no plan in place to deal with the relevant patients if the King Edward VII closes—one of my constituents had to wait 16 weeks for radiography at Southampton; and finally, orthopaedics, for which the local hospital thinks it can find the extra capacity, but it will be hit when 20 per cent. of the staff at Portsmouth go to war. The case is clear—the Minister must act, and act swiftly.

10.28 am

Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): My constituents are devastated by the possible threat of the closure of the the King Edward VII. For almost 19 years, the most dedicated and committed staff at King Edward VII have provided a quality of care second to none. It is not just a matter of clinical issues; it is a matter of the values and ethos associated with the hospital, which are hard to replicate elsewhere. In an area where there is a shortage of staff, miraculously and wonderfully the King Edward VII recruits, retains and provides a resource for the national health service locally.

Local general practitioners are already under enormous pressure because the waiting times are some of the worst in the country. For far too long, we have had a huge proportion waiting more than a year. As the Minister knows well, we are caught in a pincer. The cost of living is so high, but because local people are healthy they are deemed not to be worthy of financial support for health care delivery. It is unacceptable that there should be so much public squalor amid private affluence. However, that is a separate debate, which the Minister and I have had on many occasions.

The King Edward VII has sought to follow the Government's agenda. It has tried to achieve a creative partnership. A much-loved, long-standing voluntary hospital has developed a partnership with HCA International in the commercial sector. It is not only local people who are devastated and deeply distressed and who are sending letters in a volume that I have not known for many years—the wider health community is watching. The Government said that they believed in partnerships, and that they had no hostility towards the independent and the commercial sector. If it emerges that it is impossible for an independent provider to form such a partnership—an innovative solution—many will take to heart that example and think that the additional effort and cost of arranging contracts with the NHS is too difficult. When push comes to shove, the whole relationship will implode.

The last time the Minister came to my constituency, she did so to turn the sod for the much sought-after Farnham community hospital. I have every confidence that somehow the Minister will be the bearer of good news to us today. I very much hope so.

Mr. McWilliam (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the winding-up speeches, I congratulate all the. Members who have taken part in the debate this morning. I think it is some kind of record.

10.31 am

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): All of us owe a debt of gratitude to the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) for securing the debate and for the open, cross-party, cross-constituency and cross-county way in which he has pursued the issue. As has been said, he and the cause have been rewarded by the turnout today—14 right hon. and hon. Members from the area who are concerned about their hospital. That shows Adjournment debates and Westminster Hall at their best.

The Government have claimed that it is not part of the job of the NHS or the taxpayer through the NHS to subsidise, as they put it, a private or charitable or voluntary hospital by paying above the rate that can be obtained in the NHS, elsewhere in the private or voluntary sectors or abroad. In that narrow sense, on principle, the Government are correct, but I very much doubt that that is what pertains in the present case. If it does pertain, the Government must present evidence that it would effectively be a subsidy if non-value-for-money services for NHS contracts continued to be placed at the hospital.

It is very much the job of the NHS to safeguard capacity where it is needed. It is clear from what has been said and from all the evidence we see around us that capacity is needed in the NHS, and that such capacity is needed locally. If the hospital closes, the doctors and nurses will not necessarily transfer into NHS employment in the area, so it is unlikely that any capacity could be saved, despite the fact that there may be staff shortages that limit capacity in the area. There must be a fit. As my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Sue Doughty) said, if there is no fit, people will simply leave the NHS or leave the area. That would be a disaster, especially given the threat of the loss of staff to troop deployment or war in the Iraq theatre.

It would be sensible for the NHS to find the means to acquire the hospital as an NHS hospital, with a view to using its entire capacity for NHS patients. Arguably, some private work could remain, equivalent to NHS pay beds, although there is a separate debate to be had about that. Given that capacity is so short in the NHS, that would seem a sensible investment to preserve capacity, even before one considers the need to preserve existing services. As the Minister knows, the NHS acquired the London Heart hospital in that way. Indeed, that was one of the early announcements that she made in her post. That was about 12 months ago, and the National Audit Office published a positive report on the finances, so the model exists.

The key question is whether the strategic health authority has the ability and the means to acquire the hospital, or whether it requires central Government

[Dr. Evan Harris]

approval. One hon. Member suggested that the Government could not interfere in the matter. It would be an historic moment for this Government if they did not seek to interfere in local issues, especially strategic issues.

I should like to see the hospital used to increase NHS capacity, which is a top priority. I have heard that the hospital may need extensive structural repair, mainly to its roof, but that would surely be cheaper than the cost of a new-build diagnostic and treatment centre. Such a "cold" hospital is exactly the sort of facility whose growth the Government want to promote. It is curious that the NHS has allegedly chosen not to make a long-term commitment to send work to the hospital. Such a commitment was said to be required by HCA International in seeking to buy it. The NHS decision may be due to a shortage of revenue, such that the commissioners cannot commit to buying capacity outside the NHS in the medium to long term. Unfortunately, in the pursuit of short-term targets, health economies in the NHS tend to look no further ahead than the next quarter. That is a problem when we are trying to create partnerships with the private sector.

If there is a quality problem—that seems unlikely, given the testimony that we have heard—the NHS should be open about those concerns, rather than allowing them to be raised by rumours, which are impossible to check out. If the problem is one of throughput, we need to think more widely than length of bed stay. It is known that the shorter the bed stay, the greater the possibility of readmission acutely, which would create pressures elsewhere. If local purchasers are buying capacity outside the area or even abroad, they might argue that the prices offered by the King Edward VII are not competitive. The Government have always claimed that treatment abroad compares favourably with private sector contract prices, although that says more about private sector prices for spot contacts than about the cost of overseas treatments.

If local purchasers are buying capacity elsewhere, the Government may be right to say that there should not be long-term subsidy for non-value-for-money prices, but I do not think that that is the case in this instance. I fear that, because of their fragmentation, the small purchasers involved in the modern NHS—primary care trusts—fail to see the strategic effect of withdrawing contracts. The strategic health authority and central Government have a role to play. The Government should start publishing the prices that are obtained by the NHS abroad and in the private sector, rather than hiding behind the cloak of commercial confidentiality; otherwise people will not understand why contracts are being placed where they are being placed.

Peter Bottomley: Hon. Members on all sides will welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments. Will he add that West Sussex and West Surrey—two of the three health authorities with the longest waiting times in the country—are not the place to start running an experiment?

Dr. Harris: Quite so. I entirely agree.

It has been alleged that the NHS has deliberately manoeuvred the hospital into non-viability by withholding a commitment to long-term contracts, even where they would be value for money, in order to place the NHS in a position to buy the hospital cheaply. That would be unfair practice, and if there is any evidence of that it needs to be provided and the Minister needs to give assurances. There is a case for the Audit Commission to investigate how the present situation has come about, as it may well happen elsewhere. We need action from the Government, but in the short term, and certainly before Friday, we need answers.

10.38 am

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I shall be brief, in order to give the Minister time to respond to many of the points that have been made. First, we should put on record our congratulations and thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie), not just for bringing the issue to the Chamber today and raising it in the House but for the active part that he has played in the campaign with the local community and the health professionals to make sure that the issue is decided at the highest level. I speak today wearing two hats—as a shadow Health Minister and as a West Sussex MP whose constituents will be greatly affected by the decision if the worst comes to the worst for the King Edward VII.

Many of my colleagues have made pertinent points, which I shall not repeat in detail. My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester dispelled some of the myths about costing and quality issues at the King Edward VII. I hope that the Minister has taken them on board. The situation is dire, and the debate could not have been more timely. This time next week, the hospital may no longer be looking after patients—one of the largest independent charity hospitals in the country may have been closed.

We should think not only about the 70,000 in-patients the hospital has looked after in the past 10 years, and the 180,000 out-patients it has treated, half of whom were NHS patients, but about the 90,000 in-patients it could look after in the next 10 years, the 180,000 out-patients and the 2,000 radiotherapy patients per year it is capable, willing and eager to handle in the crucial years ahead. We should consider the 422 happy, dedicated and professional staff who work in the hospital, as I saw for myself when I visited the week before last.

More than 50 per cent. of the hospital's patients in most years have been NHS patients, whom it has treated in real partnership with no barriers. It is a model of the way in which private, not-for-profit and NHS providers can work together in harmony for the good of patients, which is the ultimate aim. All that will be lost in that hospital's centenary year, after the 100 years during which it provided an excellent service to the people of Sussex, Hampshire, Surrey and beyond.

I shall make four quick points. First, if it ain't bust, don't fix it. The hospital is not bust. We heard today that the quality of the care offered there is second to none. It is doing a good job. It is not a failing hospital. It is not an NHS hospital that has just been awarded zero-star status, which would be cause for concern. If it has not been doing a good job, why has the NHS awarded it so many contracts in the past and, by all accounts, received 100 per cent. satisfaction?

The King Edward VII is a not-for-profit hospital. It has not produced surpluses because it has reinvested all its money in state-of-the-art equipment so that it can continue to offer its patients the best treatment and service which are not available in other parts of the country or the county. That equipment has been made available to NHS patients without any of the investment or depreciation costs that the NHS would have had to take into account if it were NHS equipment. That contrasts with other local hospitals, which have benefited from large increases in investment in the NHS, which we all know about. They have also benefited from a share of the £93 million from the new opportunities fund, which has paid for much of the cancer equipment in NHS hospitals. Obviously, that has not happened at the King Edward VII. The ParseNet scores for quality of care at the King Edward VII show that it is second to none.

Secondly, it would be against Government policy if the hospital went down the tubes. We need a multiplicity of providers. The Government acknowledge that in their policy. We have serious problems with capacity. The Government have negotiated a concordat with the private sector. We wish that well; it is the way things will be in the future. There is a good example in Scotland, where the Scottish Assembly recently negotiated a £4 million initiative to clear the backlog of people waiting for hip and knee operations. All the spare orthopaedic capacity in the private sector has been booked over the next six months at discounted rates, and 500 patients who have been waiting up to a year will benefit from that arrangement. Why can we not make a similar arrangement with the King Edward VII and other hospitals?

My third point relates to patients being sent overseas. It is absurd and obscene that my constituents and those of many of my hon. Friends present today are sent off to Germany and France—and if anything goes wrong, the residual liability will come back to the UK, as my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) pointed out—at a cost that we do not know, because our repeated requests have failed to produce the costings. The same patients could have been sent up the road to the King Edward VII and treated quickly.

The fourth point concerns the waiting list impact. Most people seem to think that there will not be an impact on other hospitals. Of course there will. There is no more depressing sight than cardiac equipment, angioplasty machines and linear machines lying idle for more than half the week, when our constituents queue for weeks, months and years to gain access to that treatment. King Edward VII radiotherapy referrals are usually seen within two weeks. That contrasts with the Queen Alexandra hospital in Portsmouth, where the wait is currently 10 to 12 weeks, and we have heard from other sources about waits of 14 weeks. We know that there are problems with the machines at that hospital and waiting times will get worse in future. That is a zero-star hospital which was rated as under-achieving for two-week cancer waits, under-achieving on cancelled operations and under-achieving on financial management.

The Brighton hospital, at the other end of Sussex, has long waits for the radiotherapy department and 20 per cent. vacancies for radiographers. As my colleagues have argued, people will die if those desperately needed facilities are not available in a few weeks or months. In orthopaedics, which as we all know is especially crucial in Sussex because of the elderly population, at the Southampton, Portsmouth and Royal Surrey hospitals, there are typically 372-day waits—more then 12 months—for a hip replacement, and 443-day waits for knee replacements. Those patients could be seen within weeks at the King Edward VII.

Those hospitals are improving and they are doing a good job in difficult circumstances, but they need help, and they need it now. That help will not be there next week unless the Minister does something today. The impact on capacity elsewhere in the area will be immense. We are told that capacity will improve by 2005 with the extra investment in Southampton, but we need that capacity now. Is it not absurd to build new capacity at large cost, some years hence, which could be much more expensive than supporting the existing capacity? This really is an urgent case.

We are not looking for a handout. This is not about a handout or bailing out a private hospital. We are not even looking for investment. All that we want is for contracts to continue as they have done. All that the King Edward VII hospital wants to do is to continue to offer operations and conduct the business that it is there to do, for private and NHS patients. That is all it is asking for. If the recent offer that has just been placed on the table, which does not involve comparative costs with the NHS—in fact, those comparative costs are very similar in normal circumstances—involves doing the work at the NHS reference cost, there can be no question about cost, just as there is no question about the quality of the service offered.

In these final minutes of the eleventh hour, the Minister has the power to intervene. It is in her interests to do so, and it is also in the interests of the NHS, the King Edward VII hospital, all its staff and the patients it serves. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester said, this will be a win-win situation if she will just take the simple step of giving the hospital a breathing space so that it can continue for the benefit of its patients. This is basic common sense, and I hope that the Minister will continue to show today the characteristic common sense that she has shown in the past.

10.46 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Hazel Blears): The strength of feeling on this matter is illustrated by the number of hon. Members in the Chamber today, and they have made some interesting and passionate contributions to the debate. Clearly the hospital is held in great regard in the community, and I would like to thank the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) for securing the debate because it gives me a chance to put my response on the record and to answer most of the questions put by hon. Members. I shall certainly do my best to do so.

There has been a lot of misinformation and speculation in the media and the community over the last few weeks as a result of the events that have occurred at the hospital, and I want to try to give the community some reassurance about the future of its health services, because that, for me, is the important matter in this debate. Clearly, we need to ensure that high-quality services are available for NHS patients, wherever they live, and I am concerned that there is a great deal of wild speculation in the press at the moment. We must try to get this issue into perspective.

[Ms Hazel Blears]

The hon. Member for Chichester set out the history of the hospital. It is a charitable hospital—neither an NHS facility nor a private facility. It is in that third sector that the hon. Gentleman rightly suggests the Government want to promote and to work with to develop more interesting and innovative partnerships. It employs 420 staff and currently has 41 patients, although it has the capacity to treat 150. It is not owned by the NHS, but we should recognise that it has a long history of good partnership working with the NHS. NHS patients have traditionally made up about 30 per cent. of the hospital's income, not 50 per cent., as has been suggested. A substantial proportion of its patients are NHS patients, none the less.

Until fairly recently, the hospital has provided routine surgery, cardiology treatment, cardiothoracic surgery and radiotherapy and oncology care to a mix of private and NHS patients. The Macmillan centre at the hospital has been mentioned, and it has clearly been of great value in providing terminal and palliative care to patients. There are 10 primary care trusts in West Sussex, Hampshire, the Isle of Wight and Surrey that regularly send patients to the hospital, spending a total of between £4.5million and just over £6 million at the hospital each year over the last five years.

I have had a look at the figures: in 2000–2001, those trusts spent £4.85 million; the year before that, they spent £5 million. This year, up to December, the hospital has received £3.35 million from the NHS, which—if the expenditure had carried on, and if we had not got into the difficulties that we have—would have been the equivalent to an annual figure of £4.5 million. That is comparable to the expenditure in 1999–2000 and in 2000–2001. There has not, therefore, been a huge slashing of NHS funding. I want to put it on the record that the NHS is perfectly prepared to continue with that level of funding to the hospital. Last year, there was a different order of funding—I think it was £6.3 million. One of the main reasons for that was that last year there was a much higher level of waiting list initiative projects right across the NHS—not just in that region—but, in terms of the underlying funding, there has been no huge slashing of NHS contracts. The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) said that the NHS was closing this facility. The NHS is not closing this facility; it is not an NHS facility. We are perfectly prepared to carry on with the current level of funding and we are actively engaged in discussions with the hospital almost as I speak.

Mr. Tyrie: I suggested to the Minister that it might be advisable for her not to quote figures that she had been given by her officials without having checked them extremely carefully. It is not correct to say that NHS contract levels are broadly similar, in cash terms, to the levels of previous years. I have the figures in front of me. As early as 1998–99, the hospital had contracts to the value of almost £6.3 million. If we look at the run of the last five years, health cost inflation must of course be taken into account. Any reasonable assessment of the contracts over the last five years before the current year would show a fall of about one third in the level of contracts going to this hospital, resulting directly in the shortfall of cash that it has at its disposal. That is also the conclusion of the provisional liquidator.

Ms Blears: The hon. Gentleman and I can trade figures—he has the figures for the last five years, as do I—but the point I want to make is that there has been a variation in funding for this hospital over the last five years. In the year following the year that he has just cited, the funding was down to £4.85 million. So, we can trade those figures, but it is important to recognise that in April last year the management team at the hospital advised the Isle of Wight PCT that costs were to rise by about 20 per cent. That was a significant event, and, on that basis, the Isle of Wight PCT reviewed its cardiac requirements and decided to cancel its contract with the hospital because the costs were going up by that amount. It decided to commission those services from an alternative service provider.

All Members will recognise that it is the responsibility of the NHS, through the primary care trusts and the strategic health authority, to ensure that we get best value from the investment of public money. In April last year, the King Edward VII hospital told one of its main purchasers that it was going to put up its costs by 20 per cent. A decision was therefore made by that purchaser. We are trying to devolve power to the local communities that have the information on the ground, and this one decided that it could purchase care for its NHS patients from an alternative service provider. That is how we have arrived at the situation we are in today.

For the last three years, the hospital's expenditure has exceeded its income, and that remains the position, so this is not simply a matter of what has happened in relation to the NHS contracts. This has been a long-standing issue. All hon. Members will know that the hospital recently held discussions with HCA International, a large American health care provider, but they did not produce a positive outcome. Nevertheless, NHS officials at strategic health authority level and the director of health and social care of the southern region are now engaged in discussions with the liquidator, to see what steps can be taken to secure provision for NHS patients. Clearly, those negotiations are commercially sensitive. I understand that, as late as last night, the hospital put forward new proposals, and they will be considered extremely seriously by the NHS because we are determined to ensure that we can provide good continuity of care and increased capacity.

I am on record as saying many times that the NHS is facing not a financial difficulty but a capacity difficulty, and that is quite true. We are increasing capacity, as the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) acknowledged when he went on a visit with the Public Accounts Committee to look at the heart hospital and the other new hospitals being built in London. We are undertaking the biggest hospital building programme ever seen in this country and making the biggest investment in the NHS since 1950. Most primary care trusts are getting a real-terms increase of 30 per cent. over the next three years, so capacity is increasing and we are determined to have those negotiations and to ensure that we do not lose out on capacity. That must be balanced, however, with getting a good financial deal for the public investment that we are making.

I referred a moment ago to the heart hospital. The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) said that the National Audit Office had said that project represented a good deal in terms of spending public money. We are getting a good facility and increasing capacity. At every stage, I am committed to our spending public money in a way that will get a good return for the patients whom we all represent.

Mr. Oaten: The Minister has confirmed that negotiations were taking place up until last night. Given the short time scales involved, will she give a commitment today that the NHS will put in place a package of temporary funding, so that the King Edward VII hospital does not have to close next week and there can be more time for those discussions to continue, rather than working to the time scale that means that the hospital will close next week?

Ms Blears: Officials and the Department are actively engaged in those discussions, but we are not able to give the simple guarantee that was requested of us at the meeting just before Christmas, which was that we should pick up the bill, whatever the cost. We are not in a position to do that, and I do not think that any responsible Members would expect us to do it. I can, however, give the hon. Gentleman the reassurance that we are actively engaged in those discussions.

I want briefly to respond to the points made by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight). I was a little surprised by his contribution. He raised concerns about the figures. He knows how important it is to get value for money, but he is on record as saying that he thinks we could cut NHS expenditure by 20 per cent. That is an important point to make, and I am very surprised that the hon. Gentleman made the comments that he did. I think that he would acknowledge that it is important to get the very best value out of public expenditure.

Tim Loughton: I want to put the record straight. At no point has my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs commented to any extent on any cuts in NHS spending, so let us get that clear. If the Minister is so concerned about value for money—a subject on which we all agree—and if there are no quality issues involved, what possible justification can there be, when the hospital has yesterday made this winter sale offer of a large quantity of much-needed contracts at the NHS reference price, for the Minister's turning it down? For whose benefit would she do that?

Ms Blears: As I have just said, I think that the offer was put on the table last night. The Department of Health and the strategic health authority have been in discussions with the hospital since before Christmas. The offer will obviously need to be examined properly. Hon. Members have urged me not to take figures at face value, and to drill down and find out exactly what they will mean for the NHS. That is exactly what we will do, to ensure that we get best value.

The right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Virginia Bottomley) talked about the dreadful waiting times in her constituency, and I acknowledge that they are still far too long. I have to say, however, that they were much longer under her stewardship, when, in many cases, people were waiting up to 30 months for heart care.

Virginia Bottomley: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Blears: No, I have only two minutes left.

The right hon. Lady also made the point about funding this area on the basis of need. We have had discussions about trying to tackle health inequality and ensuring that the formulae are accurate. I understand the stresses and strains that exist in the south of the country, in terms of high living costs, wages and the need to recruit and retain staff. That is a significant issue for us, but we must balance it with targeting our funds towards the areas of greatest need, where health inequalities still scar the country and are of great concern to the Government. The right hon. Lady made a better point about partnership, and, as I have said, the Government are anxious to pursue that issue, both with the independent sector and the not-for-profit sector, which the King Edward VII hospital is in.

Mr. Tyrie: The Minister has descended into making spurious and, in some respects, cheap party political points. Will she, in the final few seconds available to her, address the question whether, if the hospital is able to offer a deal at the marker prices—the reference prices—that the NHS itself thinks are correct and good value for money, and if there are no quality issues at stake, there should, in principle, be a deal to be struck?

Ms Blears: I have tried to emphasise that the Government are committed to increasing capacity and to providing good services for NHS patients. We will examine with rigour whatever proposals are put forward to us, to ensure that we get the best deal for the people who fund the NHS—the taxpayers—and the people who use it. It is this Government who will provide good stewardship of the NHS and who have decided to put in massive investment to ensure that the services can grow and that we get capacity into the system. We are absolutely determined not to let down the people of these communities who rely on these important services, but it is also right that we should take a rigorous approach to ensuring that we get the very best value from the investment that we make.

Del Monte Factory, Methwold

11 am

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): I am extremely grateful to have the chance to raise in the Chamber the matter of 316 job losses at the Del Monte factory in Methwold, a village in my constituency of some 800 people. I am also very grateful to the Minister for the trouble he has already taken to understand the issues, and their impact on a highly rural area. The facts are as follows: last June to July, following the receivership of Albert Fisher Foods at King's Lynn, the food processing plant at Methwold was acquired, along with its fellow plants in Wisbech and York, by Del Monte. These plants had formerly been part of the Albert Fisher chilled food division. The Methwold plant produces prepared salads for supermarkets.

As hon. Members can imagine, there had been enormous anxiety about the future of the plant during the uncertainty surrounding the Albert Fisher receivership. It is a huge employer in an area of very small businesses with very small employment patterns. With 555 people employed there, the plant was clearly of great importance to employees and suppliers alike. The whole community breathed a collective sigh of relief when Del Monte—on taking over the three plants, including the one at Methwold—made optimistic statements about the plant's future, the excellence of the work force, and the prospects for the plant.

I should make it clear that I and everyone else in a community whose prosperity depends on the fortunes of the agriculture sector understand that it is impossible for any company to give cast-iron guarantees about its future. Competition is intense in this sector, and retailers are ruthless in their demands, in the interests of their customers. This is the world in which we now live. Despite those harsh realities, which everyone concerned understands, it was a shattering blow to the local community when, on 16 December—one week before Christmas—the work force at Methwold were told by the management that there were likely to be some 300 redundancies. According to a letter sent to each employee, dated 16 December, the situation had arisen because

> "the company has lost the Sainsbury's business and this has depleted demand on the plant by 60%. As a result, the company is operating at a significant loss, which is jeopardising the entire operation. Action is therefore being taken to address this matter and rebalance the number of employees to meet current demand".

I ask hon. Members to imagine for a moment the effect of that news on the 555 people concerned, just one week before Christmas. It is true that some of the employees are agency workers, but many are local, and some come from families in which two, three or even more members work at the plant. Many of the employees are women, a lot of the work involves shift work, and there are a number of part-timers. I know that the Minister will be aware of the employment patterns that are usual in the food processing sector.

The impact of the announcement on people who, by any definition, are neither powerful nor prosperous was immense, and the timing, just before Christmas, was incredible. Indeed, it was all the more incredible because, the next day, 17 December, I contacted the chief executive of Sainsbury, Sir Peter Davis, who told me that in June and July 2002, when Del Monte purchased the plant, it had been made aware that doubts already hung over the contract, and that Sainsbury had finally told Del Monte that it had lost the contract on 2 October 2002. When the Del Monte management became aware that I had contacted Sainsbury directly, they sent me a fax—I have to say that their communication with me has been, shall we say, economical—which stated:

> "I would like you to be fully aware that the decision to reduce our workforce in Methwold is not one for which J Sainsbury can be held accountable."

That is by interesting contrast with the letter to the work force just two days previously. There is also the question concerning the delay in informing the work force, which I shall come to later in my speech.

I immediately contacted the Thetford citizens advice bureau, warning it to expect a large number of queries about redundancy rights, job prospects and so on. On the same day, I also rang the East of England Development Agency to ask for immediate help with job search and other appropriate action. The Minister may wish to describe to hon. Members what the development agency was able to do at that stage, and what it might be able to continue to do.

During the Christmas period, I was contacted by a large number of constituents, including some who worked at the plant, some who were members of the local community who were very concerned about the situation, and others who expressed their amazement at the timing and general handling of the redundancies. Sadly, but very significantly, several people pointed out that they had been forbidden to speak to the media, and asked that, if I intended to pursue the matter, as I am doing today, I respect their anonymity. I intend to quote people without giving their identities, but will hand in the original letters with my notes. Hon. Members might like to reflect on the fact that we are in the 21st, not the 19th, century.

One correspondent, a former human resources manager at the plant, wrote on 20 December:

> "On acquisition, the workforce were told by the receivers that Del Monte were not in the habit of buying out businesses followed by redundancies and they were not to worry."

He added:

> "At no time since the acquisition have Del Monte assembled the workforce to advise them of the new company strategy, structure, future plans or indeed anything at all."

Another wrote on 21 December:

> "I am one of the many employees at Del Monte . . . who this week has found himself getting well and truly shafted."

That may be unparliamentary language, Mr. McWilliam, but never mind—it is a quote. That person went on to say that he had kept a diary of events following the hammer blow of the announcement of the redundancies on 16 December. He had been in the plant and had decided to document what was going on. He said that some employees had been aware that job losses might occur, and went on:

> "What many of us find curious is the timing. You did not need to be too bright to figure out that something was amiss when I saw a member of personnel removing the company rules on redundancy from the main notice board several weeks in advance . . . We all thought that when Del Monte bought the site that at last there would be sweeping changes and improvements to the place . . . We waited and waited but the situation grew worse by

> the month . . . With all that has happened this week there is a growing feeling that nothing changed because they knew something we did not. Why change the system if nobody is going to be here to implement the system?"

The entry in that constituent's diary for 18 December reads:

> "A number of people here are in tears. This is not good. Why string us along like this? Everyone seems to have a story to tell about the lack of communication. I myself am being told conflicting answers to the same question. You just don't know what to believe. For example, there are now rumours that the transport drivers will be starting their redundancy packages on the day that they leave whilst we are not. We just don't know. Our manager cannot help because he is being given the runaround whenever he does try."

The rest of his letter catalogues a series of broken promises, lost opportunities for dialogue, and what he considers to be unfairnesses. He concludes:

> "Even if I could meet their terms I would not want to work for a company that has shown such disrespect for the welfare of their staff. I would have no loyalty, drive, or commitment for a company that treats dedicated staff in this manner."

I also received an e-mail from a woman who stated that no fewer than five members of her family worked at the plant. She wrote:

> "We were informed of this news on 16/12, we were then told to expect to hear of some news about who would lose their jobs by 19/12, and when they could expect to receive their pay. It is now 30/12, and we are still none the wiser. We were told we would hear by 23/12, and then it grew to 4/01, and now it is 6/01 . . . We had a black cloud hanging over Christmas and now it appears it is never going to end."

I repeat: we are now in the 21st century.

The Chamber would be entitled to ask what contacts I have had with the company itself. I have had two communications from it. One, dated 18 December, from the managing director, Mr. Peter Miller, was brief in the extreme, and gave no indication of the HR work planned to help so many people facing redundancies. The other, giving me the background to two specific cases that I had raised, arrived on 20 January.

It is only fair to say that the company disputes some of the evidence that I have just given to the Chamber. It maintains that when it learned that it had lost the Sainsbury contract on 2 October, staff were made aware of that fact. All I can say is that that is not the impression I have been given by people who worked at the plant. It is possible, of course, that staff were given some indication, but in such guarded terms that they had no idea of the implications for them and for their jobs.

What is not in doubt is the impact on staff, which I have already described, when they received a full account on 16 December. The company maintains that efforts were made to help redundant staff, and it is true that on 8 January jobcentre staff and representatives of local employers were present in the plant to give advice and counselling.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk): I am sorry that I could not be here for the start of my right hon. Friend's speech. Is she aware that many of the staff affected live in King's Lynn, in my constituency? Obviously they are dismayed by what has happened, but they are also very grateful for the effort and the work that my right hon. Friend is putting in on their behalf.

Mrs. Shephard: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. We discussed this matter when the redundancies were announced, because, as in the case of Albert Fisher Foods, the rural nature of the constituencies that we represent means that our constituents have to travel a long way to work, and transport arrangements have to be in place especially for work such as food processing. Perforce, a blow such as this affects people over a wide area. As my hon. Friend says, redundancies on that scale are a hammer blow to the whole of west Norfolk.

The managers of Del Monte pointed out that many of those made redundant had already found new jobs. We are fortunate in Norfolk in that, as the Minister will be aware, we have very low unemployment at the moment. It is also true that jobs of that sort can be filled by people working for agencies—the agencies that, as my hon. Friend will be aware, used to be called gangs. Some of the people who work for the agencies these days come from overseas, and companies that impose many redundancies still have the flexibility that the agency network affords them to cope with the highs and lows of demand.

At my meeting with him, the managing director of Del Monte said that he wished to correct the bad press that the company had had over the issue. I believe that he intends to put some of that right today, which is a good month—indeed, five weeks—since the trouble arose. He admitted that mistakes had been made, that he might not have been aware of all the problems perceived by employees during the redundancy period, as he is not on site, and that improvements had to be made.

As the Minister knows, I fully recognise that the Government's role in such matters is limited. We all live in the real world, which is one of difficult decisions and harsh competition. When such decisions have to be made, there is not always time to do everything perfectly. However, in the case of the Del Monte employees, it seems to me that the procedures were rushed, unclear to the people most affected, and uncaring. The work force did not deserve such treatment. The effect of 316 redundancies out of a total work force of 555, in an area of very small communities, where families often contain two or three members of the same work force, can be imagined by those in the Chamber—and the timing of the announcement defies description.

As I have already said, I am grateful to the Minister for the great interest that he has shown in this case. I hope that he will now give the Chamber the benefit of his views on what I have said, and that he will also tell us what the Government, through their agencies, have been and will be able to do to help my constituents.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Nigel Griffiths): This debate is on one of the gravest subjects that we ever consider—the loss of jobs and livelihoods on a large scale, affecting whole families, and generations within those families, in a rural area where incomes are not high and opportunities for other employment are hard to find. The right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) has set out the issues in the case with great clarity, and I know from my discussions this morning with both the chief executive of the East of England Development Agency and the manager of the local jobcentre the veracity of her words.

[Nigel Griffiths]

Redundancies are, of course, sad, but they are an inevitable part of commercial life. Some companies handle them well, treating their work force with dignity and compassion, working with employees and their trade unions to save jobs wherever possible, and where jobs cannot be saved, working with local agencies to help secure employment or training with others. Sadly, in this case Del Monte has not been one of those companies. That illustrates the need for an information and consultation directive to provide a real opportunity for better employee involvement in larger companies, and to help to steer employers round the potholes, rather than leaving them to be lifted out.

I recognise that Del Monte employs a large number of people, and I have no wish to damage its reputation further, but rather to give it some words of counsel. However, I must say that I am taken aback, if not astonished, by Del Monte's attitude to one of our most distinguished and experienced Members, who has Cabinet experience and is highly regarded on both sides of the House. Its failure to listen to the right hon. Lady and treat her with the respect that the House expects from companies dealing with Members, especially senior Members, is a grave disappointment, to say the least. I know that the company will feel that its apparent disregard for the feelings of its employees and their relatives is a matter of shame, and that it will want to go a long way to restore its reputation. In a moment I shall ask the right hon. Lady to help them to do that.

As the right hon. Lady said, although Del Monte was aware that it had lost a major contract on 2 October, it apparently made no contact with either the East of England Development Agency or the jobcentre—or, as far as I can see, with any agency that could have helped the company and its workers. It formally notified the Department of Trade and Industry redundancy payments office in Birmingham on 13 December that there would be large-scale redundancies—news that it communicated to its work force on 16 December.

It is not true to say that the company did nothing; that would have been illegal. It fulfilled its absolute minimum legal duties by informing the Secretary of State through the redundancy payments office. It also held some consultation with the representatives of its employees, as it had to do at least 90 days in advance of the first dismissals taking effect if, as was the case, there would be more than 100 redundancies. That was the company's legal obligation under section 181 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992. It appears to have done nothing else.

Fortunately, the right hon. Lady, with her finger on every pulse in her constituency, and her formidable experience and drive, had already contacted the East of England Development Agency and the rapid response service. The chief executive of the development agency, Bill Samuel, told me this morning how grateful he was for that, and also highlighted a data protection anomaly that may interest the Chamber. EEDA and all the other development agencies are not automatically informed when form HR1 is received by the RPO, until the employer gives permission under the Data Protection Act 1998. The data protection registrar might look into that as a process that hinders rather than helps possible victims of redundancy.

The jobcentre, the learning and skills council and the Government office for the east of England were all made aware of the situation. The right hon. Lady has asked me for an account of the action that they took, and I know that the Chamber will want to have those details. I have to confirm the impression, and the facts, that she gave us earlier, which show very poor co-operation by the employer in this case. Phone calls from both the jobcentre and the development agency were unreturned, and constant pestering—perhaps "pestering" is the wrong word, but certainly constant chasing up—by those agencies, offering the sort of help that I shall describe in a moment, was rejected.

I do not know whether companies in that situation get caught in the headlights and are paralysed with fear about how to deal with redundancies and about whether the bad publicity might have an impact on their share price, or some such factors, but I can tell companies that it is much better to be frank with their work forces and explain that there are no certainties and there might be further redundancies, than to leave them living in a climate of fear, without information.

This is not an American phenomenon. My hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) came to see me with trade union representatives from Corning in his constituency. Because they were coming to the Department of Trade and Industry, officers from the company flew from America to meet me and talk frankly through with the work force why the redundancies and closures were necessary. They said that similar redundancies were taking place both in their home town in America and in Germany. That information was not fresh to the unions, but it was shared with the work force, and it was very useful. Why Del Monte has taken a different approach I do not know.

The manager of the jobcentre eventually managed to set up a meeting with the company's work force on 6 January, but that meeting was a shambles. It was held in a different building so people had to leave the factory and go up the road, very few employees attended, and the human resources people from the company were 20 minutes late. There was a general impression of a lack of co-ordination, for reasons that Del Monte management must explain and justify, both to themselves and to their work force.

The jobcentre manager contacted the company yesterday to say that she would organise a jobs fair for the employees, as she had managed to extract from the company the information that some of the employees had finished before Christmas—some were due to be released on 20 December and some about 27 December—but that the bulk would go on 15 March. She was told that there were only another 30 people who were to go still left in the company. Almost all had gone already, so she has not been able to organise the jobs fair, the offer of which could have been available from day one of this sorry episode. She has not been able to do what, if the employers had co-operated, she would normally have done—

Mrs. Shephard: Is the Minister saying that, if the company had bothered to return the phone calls from the jobcentre and the East of England Development Agency before Christmas, a huge percentage of the 30 people now left would have benefited from the advice that was available then—and that sadly, those 30 people cannot now benefit from that advice?

Nigel Griffiths: I am saying precisely that. The jobcentre manager was in contact with other employees, with the Inland Revenue, with the Department for Work and Pensions and the social security offices, and with the training agencies. Indeed, she had even contacted the town hall to book it tentatively for a jobs fair. More than that—it is important that the right hon. Lady and her constituents know this—on day 1 she immediately applied for day 1 eligibility for those who wanted to apply for workplace learning. That scheme is normally for people who have been out of work for six months or more, but when there are large-scale redundancies an application can be made for day 1 eligibility. That means that training can be provided in the workplace of the new employer while the person is working, without taking them into a training room—almost on the production line.

The jobcentre manager gave me an example of how one employee, who had applied under their own steam, had been helped—and that help is still in place now. The manager has a full programme, with a host of ways of helping individual employees who come to the jobcentre, but she has to operate it without the tremendous help that the company could have given by notifying all its employees about that programme. They are helped with interview skills and with how to find agencies and update their CVs, and can use free postal and telephone services, and many other facilities that can be so helpful.

Indeed, the jobcentre could have helped the company to cut down the bureaucracy and red tape—that red tape that I am always banging on about, which is a common cause of complaint on both sides of the House. There is a facility by which the company, by liaising with the redundancy payments office, can have all the employees notified. The RPO is duty-bound to write to all 300-plus employees individually via the company. I understand that the office asked the company—if the request did not get through, that was the company's fault—to supply it with a list of all the employees, which would have absolved people of the need to open more than 300 envelopes and process the contents. That is the sort of co-operation we expect; it is common among employers, but sadly it did not happen here.

I have described the help that could have been available. Indeed, that very same jobcentre in the hon. Lady's constituency is already giving such help to others. It helped Fenmarc last year when it closed its unit in Southery. The Jobcentre Plus staff went to the factory, interviewed all the staff and gave them information about payments, working families tax credit and current vacancies. They also gave other help such as I have already described. The King's Lynn jobcentre is working with staff at Snap-on Tools, where there are now approximately 125 redundancies, and that company is co-operating. The regional development agency worked hard on the Luton Vauxhall partnership. I shall be happy to send Del Monte the examples.

I have asked the right hon. Lady, and she has kindly agreed, to chair a meeting with the regional development agency, the jobcentre, the training agency—the learning and skills council—the rapid response team, and, I hope, Mr. Miller, the plant manager and representatives of the work force. I think that we could learn some lessons that would be beneficial both to the company, in restoring its reputation, which I am keen to do, and also to the workforce and to others who find themselves in the same position.

Sitting suspended until Two o'clock.

National Service Framework for Long-Term Conditions

2 pm

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): First, I shall set out the reasons why I asked for this debate. The proposal is to adopt a national service framework for long-term conditions. That will add to a series of NSFs, the purpose of which is to remove the lottery of care that currently applies to many conditions and circumstances in medical and care planning. I strongly approve of the principle behind the establishment of the NSFs. I am delighted that the Government have chosen this approach, and I am pleased with the initial steps that have been taken. For example, the implementation of the NSF for diabetes has recently begun, and this approach has been taken to the care of older people.

The NSFs are a key part of ensuring that our national health service addresses the needs of all its potential users. They permit a localised response, but clear national standards are established, and any citizen facing a particular circumstance or condition can expect them to be met. The principle behind the NSFs is absolutely right. They are also a mechanism for establishing whether best practice is shared, and for setting out ways in which it can be more widely adopted.

The methodology of NSFs commands partnership. Many of the aspects of care that they address rely not only on the NHS but on the activities of social services, the voluntary sector, carers and the patients themselves. What we are looking for from any NSF is the bringing together of the various parties involved in an individual's care to achieve the best possible outcome.

I particularly welcome this proposal. By their very nature, long-term conditions require complex co-working between different agencies, carers and the patient. That often continues over a long period, as one would expect from the definition of a national service framework. During that time, the care of the patient will need to be changed. The protocols for defining how that change is most efficiently brought about are crucial, and involve the wishes of the patient and the carer. I understand why this NSF has been proposed, and I welcome it.

It is worth recalling the principles behind the establishment of NSFs. In politics—and in health politics—a lot of worthy and substantial documents are produced that add greatly to our knowledge but do not necessarily prompt action. That is not the purpose of NSFs. They are supposed to provide a framework for progress towards set goals within an agreed time scale.

The expectation is that this NSF will be activated in 2005, and that there will be a time scale of 10 years. A key part of the process is that goals are set and achieved within a time scale and with a particular methodology proposed in the NSF. The goals are not wish lists: such an approach should not be part of this NSF.

When the Secretary of State announced the scope of the NSF for long-term conditions, he said:

> "The NSF will have a particular focus on the needs of people with epilepsy, Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson's Disease, motor neurone disease and other similar conditions."

I commend that approach. There is much common ground between many of those conditions, and I shall dwell on the common aspects that should concern us all when we respond to the needs of people with these conditions.

Since the announcement, the approach to be taken has been refined. The focus is on people of working age, on facilitating their continued working, if that is possible, and on implications for people who suffer from several of the conditions listed in the Secretary of State's initial speech. I do not want to cover that now.

One could describe the approach that has been taken as measured. We have not raced away with the establishment of a body of people who will prepare the NSF. That is not a criticism, because it is important to assemble the right people to do the task. An expert external reference group has been put together, and I know of several people on the group. They seem to be well chosen, and it is a good model because it contains clinical specialists, managers from the NHS and other agencies, participants in the voluntary sector and representatives of service users. The group does not contain anyone with an individual disease-specific perspective. That is understandable, because it would be difficult to accommodate all such people who could contribute to the exercise. I assume that part of the group's work will be to ensure that people with a perspective on each disease have input on the preparation of the NSF through the external reference group.

Several generic points about the identified conditions should worry us. Most are neurological conditions. There is a massive resource gap. I would be amazed if most Members of Parliament did not have a constituent who had encountered difficulties getting referred to a neurologist in their local NHS trust. There is an acute difficulty, and there is certainly a painful shortage of people in South Derbyshire with the appropriate skills to diagnose people who suffer from many of the conditions.

The United Kingdom has six neurologists per million head of population. Germany has 12 per million, the Netherlands has 33 per million, Italy has 71 per million and Denmark has 100 per million. One could argue that those statistics are not necessarily precise reflections of skill levels, but they give a clear indication of the shortfall. All our observations as constituency MPs would confirm the shortfall in the first level of skill, which is correctly to diagnose the condition that a person is suffering from.

The second generic point is the identification of a person's need for therapy and the delivery of that care. It is also clear that there is a desperate shortage of physiotherapists in this country, and the welcome attempts by the Government to recruit and train additional physiotherapists have, to date, drawn relatively small yields. I emphasise the need for the Government to deal urgently with that requirement.

A third problem, and one that I would be surprised if hon. Members had not encountered, is the difficulty in finding an occupational therapist to advise on adaptations of living circumstances for many people with such conditions.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): With many conditions, the problem is not only finding someone to assess the need for adaptations and aids but the speed at which such demands can be delivered. By the time some of my constituents have received the aids for which they have been assessed, their condition has already progressed. Six months' delay is no use if a person has a neurological condition and has only one year's life left.

Mr. Todd: My hon. Friend has made an important point. I was about to deal with that matter, but I am glad that she has raised it. I have referred to the assessment of appropriate adaptations. I imagine that, at present, there are significant waiting lists in many areas for people to be assessed for adaptation of their living circumstances to a level that they can live with in the future. As my hon. Friend rightly said, there is massive difficulty in the delivery of solutions to such problems. That brings to mind the co-ordination of various elements of care support for people with such conditions. There are often huge delays in obtaining adaptations that are necessary for a person's home. As she said, speed is of the essence in some cases. If a response is not rapid, it will be irrelevant. It will be too late to improve the quality of the individual's life. That is clearly a problem that most of us encounter with our constituents, and I am glad to receive my hon. Friend's support.

I am chair of the all-party parliamentary motor neurone disease group. The disease affects about 5,000 people at any one time. It is a progressive, and sometimes rapidly progressive, disease. There is no cure for it. It is fatal. The mechanisms that we put in place to respond to people with neurological conditions face their sharpest test when responding to motor neurone disease. If we can devise approaches that respond effectively to the needs of someone with MND, it is likely that we will achieve a quality of service that is more than acceptable for people with a less progressive condition.

The unique features of motor neurone disease are its rapid progression, which, incidentally, highlights the desperate need for early diagnosis. The early symptoms of the disease are easily confused with several other conditions, but if it is not spotted early, some of the steps that can be taken to improve the quality of the person's life and slow down the progression of the disease cannot be taken. At present, diagnosis can take 17 months, and some people with motor neurone disease could be dead within 12 months of diagnosis. That is a huge part of that person's potential life span in which no effective response can be made by either the national health service or caring agencies.

I have already touched on generic issues. I suggest that the focus should be on early diagnosis and the co-ordination of services to enable a flexible response to progression. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) rightly said that we must be able to respond to a moving process. We cannot simply say, "We have seen this person and will devise something that will be delivered in three months", because it may not work any longer. We must have a protocol that drives a more urgent response than is currently available.

We must identify particular clinical interventions that work best and promote their wider adoption within the NHS. If there is doubt about whether the approach is the right one, referral should be made to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to establish whether the best technology is being used to respond to the condition.

Carers should have support frameworks. In my view, the voluntary sector is well established, partly through the crisis of need faced by an individual with a particular condition. I am a strong believer in the voluntary sector co-working with state agencies whenever possible. In any protocol, we should devise a way of making best use of the unique skills, commitment and knowledge of particular diseases gained by people working in the voluntary sector.

We must also recognise that with some diseases the role of the expert patient is critical. I would be surprised if hon. Members had not encountered people in their constituencies who fit this bill. Expert patients gather information from the internet and develop a genuine knowledge of their diseases. Such patients want to contribute to the quality of their care, suggest outcomes and be listened to. We must devise systems in which that can happen. Such systems are less relevant in cases involving rapidly progressing diseases such as MND, but arguably more important for sufferers of Parkinson's disease, which has a longer life cycle.

I understand the relatively recent aversion to targets in the NHS. I have long argued—privately and publicly—for fewer targets that are more focused on critical outcomes in the NHS. I am glad that the Government have adopted that approach. However, I would not want the NSF to become a NICE shelf document in which people share valuable good practice but do not necessarily make solid commitments about how it can be shared and adopted throughout the country. Targets for early diagnosis and mechanisms for establishing quality social services—with a clear model of what is meant by such services locally—should be defined in the document for particular diseases.

It is right that each of the diseases originally listed by the Secretary of State when the NSF was announced should have clear reference in the framework. I would be disappointed if it became a generic document and people said that, somehow or other, all the responses were relevant to all the conditions, because they vary substantially. The document should attempt to highlight the particular needs created by individual conditions, and should seek a clear goal for each of them. I need not dwell on that at considerable length, but there should be clear reference points back to the fact that these diseases were identified at the start.

Some of the more recent statements require a little more reflection. The Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), made a speech that emphasised the importance of people of working age who suffer from long-term conditions. No one would wish to minimise the importance of that issue. Again, most constituency Members will encounter people who long to have more time to work, even though they suffer from a long-term condition. However, we must accept that the onset of some of these diseases tends to be towards the end, or at the end, of someone's working life. It would therefore be wrong if we set aside the importance of the quality of life of people aged, say, 55 and over, on the basis that they had ceased to be part of the active work force.

I ask the Government to consider that statement further, and to reassure us that it does not suggest that people who are beyond working age should not regard the document as particularly relevant to their concerns. There has been concern that that is suggested.

[Mr. Todd]

Most people who suffer from a long-term condition are dependent on benefits. Indeed, I became involved with the Motor Neurone Disease Association as a result of a visit from a person who told me about the extraordinary processes that someone who suffered from MND had to go through to get the disability living allowance. We need clear co-working with the Benefits Agency to meet the expectations about its response to the changing circumstances of people with long-term conditions.

It would be wrong if the document focused purely on the care aspect.-The anxiety and stress that is produced by relationships with the Benefits Agency for some of the people who live with these diseases is substantial, so it is important that we get that protocol straight. I recognise that that is a demanding task for the authors of the document. No one in the reference group has that particular brief, but I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to consider carefully how we can bring that element into the NSF.

This is a great opportunity to spread good practice, and there is good practice.

Miss Begg: I am sorry that I cannot stay much longer, for this is a very important debate, but I have to attend a Select Committee. My hon. Friend is talking about good practice. He may be interested to know what Sue Ryder Care is doing in my constituency for people with Huntington's disease. It involves a new model of care for people who are end stage. Currently, most young chronically sick people end their lives on geriatric wards in hospitals or in nursing homes, but Sue Ryder Care is developing a new model whereby they can live with all the necessary care, but in a home environment—in small houses within a bigger complex.

I hope that other people and charities working with those suffering from diseases such as motor neurone disease and Parkinson's disease will consider the model that Sue Ryder Care has developed in Aberdeen and Kincorth, which may be a model for the future. It is expensive, so my hon. Friend's comments on the benefits system have an important part to play in that regard.

Mr. Todd: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. I agree that that is certainly one model of care. The key concept that I always emphasise is choice. That is a working framework for many people; others choose different models. We should try to ensure that there is a flexible response.

As I said, this is a great opportunity to improve the quality of care for people who are suffering from some of the most terrible and, sadly, intractable diseases. We should not miss that opportunity. The purpose of calling the debate was to prompt the Government to think all the harder, having taken the welcome step of setting up the NSF, about the quality outcome that we seek from it.

2.24 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I congratulate ~~the hon~~. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) on securing the debate, not least because when it is read alongside the debate on head injuries that took place in this Chamber yesterday, which was secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Bob Russell), we may begin to get a picture of the progress that the Government are or are not making in developing neurological services.

I come to the debate wearing several hats, or with several interests. I am a vice-chair of the all-party disability group and a vice-chair of the all-party multiple sclerosis group. Recently, I was invited to act as a patron of CMT UK, which is a small charity that deals with a neurological condition known as Charcot-Marie-Tooth. CMT is an inherited neuromuscular condition with a range of symptoms that include pain and gastrointestinal, hearing and eyesight problems. In most cases, it has a genetic basis. The charity has raised several issues, some of which pick up on themes in the opening remarks made by the hon. Member for South Derbyshire.

I want to address three issues. The first concerns the capacity of the work force, because I believe that that is fundamental to delivering a national service framework of a standard that we all want, in a time frame that will make a difference to the lives of people today. Secondly, I shall briefly return to the focus of the national service framework and discuss whether the statements that have been made so far address all the issues on which we need to concentrate. Finally, I shall deal with implementation of the national service framework, which is absolutely crucial.

Neurological conditions account for 17 per cent. of visits to general practitioners and almost one in five acute hospital admissions. Studies suggest that 3 million people have a neurological condition of one kind or another. What is interesting about the figures is that the studies on which they are based are often ancient, because we do not have a robust mechanism for gathering data about prevalence. I raised that issue yesterday but did not receive a reply.

In 2001, the British Medical Association proposed to the Government that a health and injury surveillance system should be set up to capture such information so that the Government would be able to plan and commission services on the basis of need. It would be helpful if the Minister would say whether the Government are minded to do that.

One in four of the people who have neurological conditions need daily help with living tasks to remain in their own homes. Among the range of conditions with which the national health service grapples, only heart disease and cancer affect more people.

On work force planning, I understand that the average length of training for a neurologist is six years. On the basis of the numbers in training, there will be fewer than 90 extra trained neurologists by 2006. At present, there are 358 neurology consultants, which is one to 177,000 people. As we have just heard, that is the lowest number of neurologists per head of population anywhere in the western world and way below what the Association of British Neurologists says we need to provide a good-quality neurology service. Indeed, the ~~ABN puts the~~ required figure nearer 950. With just 30 new neurologists coming on stream each year, and given retirements, there will on current trends be 550 more neurologists by 2010. With no retirements, it would take until at least 2020 to hit the ABN's target, which is outside the planning horizons of the national service framework. The figures raise some questions that I hope the Minister will be able to address.

Similar concerns apply for therapy staff and specialist nurses. There has been an increase in the numbers entering training in allied professions, and that is welcome. However, the initial increase in places has been disappointing. For example, the figures show a 1 per cent. increase in the intake of physiotherapist trainees between 2000 and 2001. How is the target of a 59 per cent. increase in NHS physiotherapists to be achieved within the planning period encompassed in the national service framework?

The hon. Member for South Derbyshire referred to the patchiness of provision. I was struck by some recent work undertaken by the Parkinson's Disease Society to garner information about understanding, awareness and expertise of that disease among geriatricians and neurologists. In London, there is apparently one gerontologist, or neurologist with any expertise in Parkinson's disease for every 465,000 people. I suspect that for some of the more rare neurological conditions, that figure would be even worse. That raises concern about how we can ensure that the pathways not just to care but to initial diagnosis can be established robustly and clearly.

I hope that the Government will tell us that they are aware of the problem. Although they are doing much that is to be applauded in recruiting extra staff, it is clear from the figures that I have given that we are well adrift of what is needed to deliver a meaningful national service framework. That takes me on to the questions about the focus of the framework.

Many patients' organisations and neurological research charities share a concern about the statements made so far concerning the intention to focus the national service framework on people of working age and on getting people back to work. Given that neurological conditions tend to be more prevalent among the older population, we need to ensure that the framework addresses their needs, not least because the national service framework for older people addresses only dementia and fails to address any other neurological conditions that impact on older people.

Given that the forthcoming national service framework on children's services also does not address neurological conditions, will the Minister assure us that the framework under discussion will address the needs of children with neurological conditions?

Mrs. Patsy Calton (Cheadle): Should ME, which particularly affects young people, and autism be considered as two of the long-term conditions?

Mr. Burstow: I am of the view that the key to success with the national service framework is to build its foundations on generic issues. Having said that, and as the hon. Member for South Derbyshire rightly said, one can from that point identify and deal with the unique aspects of a particular condition. Many ME sufferers feel in limbo when it comes to how the NHS deals with their needs. Many are affronted at being sent down the mental health route rather than the neurological route. There is a case to be made for their needs to be addressed in that way, but others may have a different opinion.

The focus of the national service framework should be on promoting independence and quality of life and on supporting carers. Will the Minister clarify whether the framework will cover all ages? If not, will those who have needs but are outside the working population be picked up? How will joined-up services be achieved if the transition points between paediatric and adult services, and adult and geriatric services, are not addressed in the national service framework?

My third and final area of concern is implementation, which has been touched on, but which is important to the success of the national service framework and all such frameworks to come. How will the Department ensure that implementation is achieved in the context of the new devolution? What role will strategic health authorities have in monitoring implementation? Will there be clear targets and milestones, and what feedback mechanisms will be in place between the Department and the strategic health authorities? We need a picture of how the process will work. The early national service frameworks had very clear, robust milestones and targets, and were monitored by the Department. It appears now that some monitoring mechanisms have gone and data are not being collected. Will data be collected under the new system, or are we now talking about guidance?

On a number of occasions I have raised with Ministers—not the Under-Secretary, but others in previous debates—concerns about the national service framework process blighting existing planning and work in the Department and the NHS. I would like to touch on two examples. In 1999, during a debate that I secured on MS, the Minister of State, Department of Health, the right hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), told me that the Department was working on a compendium of good practice for general practitioners and primary care groups in commissioning neurological services. Furthermore, that was regularly trotted out in written answers as evidence that the Government were acting to improve the situation. That was back in 1999. I suspect that the work had been commissioned even before then.

Will the Minister explain why that compendium has never been published? Why does it appear to have been dropped altogether? Surely it would have been a valuable tool for primary care trusts, which as we heard just yesterday will pick up the specialist commissioning role from April 2004. Was any work done on that compendium? Why was it not put into the public domain? Why do we have to wait for the national service framework process to result in that work coming into the public domain and benefiting people with neurological conditions?

The second example concerns assessment of neurology specialist nurses, which is being reviewed by the Department. Numerous written answers have referred to the work that the Department has been doing. Again, it dates back three or four years but has never seen the light of day. Why not? Again, the patchiness of specialist nurse provision is a real issue.

I shall conclude on a number of core issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders), who chairs the all-party group on diabetes, is concerned that there is no ring-fencing for funding to deliver national service frameworks. I hope that the Minister will take that point on board. The first core issue is speed of

[Mr. Burstow]

diagnosis. People must be diagnosed quickly and their health and care needs must be assessed too. Rehabilitation services need to be strengthened. Symptom management is crucial and pain management should be part of it. Patients need to be seen as co-producers of their care. We need to ensure that carers are part of the national service framework. All that rests on a foundation of multi-agency working. Unless the agencies share information, and plan and deliver services together, the experience of the patient will be poorer.

Only if these services are founded on strong common ground will we deliver services that are tailored to the individual's unique circumstances and condition. Neurology has been a Cinderella service for far too long—undervalued, under-resourced and unrecognised. As a result many thousands of people do not get the support they need to enjoy a quality of life that the rest of us expect and have. I hope that the Minister can give some positive responses.

2.36 pm

Phil Hope (Corby): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) on securing this important debate and on his excellent analysis of the issues of concern. My focus will be on primary headache disorders as another aspect of neurological conditions that could be covered by a national service framework. Primary headache disorders have been misunderstood and under-recognised for far too long. They are often incorrectly diagnosed and inappropriately treated. To put it bluntly, it is time that headache sufferers got taken seriously in this country.

I have to declare an interest. I am a migraine sufferer. I do not have them too frequently, but in creating the all-party group for primary headache disorders I discovered that a great many Members of both Houses are migraine sufferers. Some of them suffer from cluster headaches, which is a particularly severe condition. This newly created group will press hard to move the issue much higher up the health agenda. I am delighted to say that the Migraine Action Association has its headquarters in my constituency. Its chief executive, Ann Turner, has been helpful, along with the Migraine Trust and others, in supporting the all-party group. It has a good website—Migraine.org.uk—and it runs a helpline for those who need support.

Some 60,000 people are members of the Migraine Action Association and the Migraine Trust. They have joined a voluntary organisation because they suffer severe headaches and migraines. That is the extent of the condition. We have heard of the prevalence of other conditions, but that is a huge proportion of the population. Headache UK is an alliance of people who work on headache and who have come together to promote this agenda. I thank them for their support. I welcome the new national service framework for long-term conditions, most of which, as my hon. Friend said, are neurological. The scope of the external reference group's activities has not been finally determined, and there is anxiety about the fact that migraines and severe headaches have not yet been included in the national service framework. I ask the Minister and his colleagues in the Department seriously to consider whether such headaches should be included in the national service framework.

I share hon. Members' concerns that the frameworks should be not just about guidelines and suggestions but about targets and goals, which should be monitored so that we can find out what is being developed. I understand from a meeting held earlier today that it might take five years to create the national service framework, and that it might not be published until 2007. I hope that I am wrong about that. However difficult the task may be, I hope that we can get on with it a lot quicker than that.

I shall explain why I am pressing my case so hard. The facts about headache astonish me, as does the fact that the issue has not been at the top of the agenda. The World Health Organisation has already classified headache as a major health disorder, and 75 per cent. of the UK population suffer from headaches each year. I do not think that there is any other condition that is experienced by 75 per cent. of the population. Migraine, the most common cause of severe headache, has a prevalence of 15 per cent. Roughly one in six people in this country suffer from migraines.

The difference between a headache and a migraine headache is profound. Someone who has never had a migraine headache will not know what migraine sufferers are talking about. Migraine completely wipes people out. They suffer from appalling pain, have trouble with vision, and can do nothing—they cannot go to work or look after their children. They just have to lie down in a darkened room, take whatever works for them, and live with the migraine until it goes away. That is happening to one in six or one in seven people in this country, which means that some 187,000 people on any given day are going through the appalling experience that I have described. About 10 per cent. of schoolchildren get migraines. It does not take much to work out how that affects their studies and their performance at school. Some 60,000 people suffer from cluster headaches. That is a much rarer, but very severe disorder.

Those suffering from migraines cannot go to work or look after their family, or may be absent from school. Up to 3.8 million people feel that they are not in control of their condition. They have migraine, but do not know what to do about it. They have tried treatments, but none of them have worked. Many feel that the treatment on offer is unsatisfactory.

There is also the economic cost of not dealing with headache. It is under the surface, but affects so many people daily. It is estimated that some 270 work days a year per thousand people are lost due to migraines, and an estimated 820 work days a year per thousand people are lost due to tension headaches. That is the huge economic impact of our failure to get to grips with the condition. If we take into account the regular medication needed, the cost of child care, loss of earnings, and the fact that people cannot function properly, the cost to the economy is some £1.5 billion. That is a big sum. It amazes me that people with migraines wake up and get on with their lives. They just cope, yet our country is failing to recognise their plight and the consequences for the economy.

The difficulty within the NHS is that headache remains a low priority. There is limited understanding of headache diagnosis or effective management by health care professionals. There are guidelines and protocols, but they are not very well applied. Up to 30 per cent. of neurology referrals are for headaches. In a Migraine Action Association survey conducted by the organisation in my constituency, 70 per cent. of migraine patients said that they wanted better treatment. Some 31 per cent. of general practitioners—one third—felt that they did not understand their patients' migraine illness, and 45 per cent. of migraine patients needed up to five visits to the doctor before their condition was understood. Some 20 per cent. needed 10 visits to the doctor, until the doctor suddenly understood what the problem was. Those figures are staggering. Clearly, there is an urgent need for better guidelines for treatment and referral.

The NHS Modernisation Board has accepted that neurological conditions are neglected and poorly understood. The National Headache Alliance feels that headache is the most neglected of all the neurological conditions, despite being the one that people get the most. It seems to us that the physical, emotional, social and economic burden of headache is poorly acknowledged compared with other less prevalent neurological conditions. Some 75 per cent. of GPs in this country—three quarters—say that they do not know how to treat migraine, or find treating sufferers difficult. Incorrect treatment and interventions lead to 60 per cent. of referrals going to secondary care headache clinics for chronic headache. That represents 20 per cent. of all referrals to consultant neurologists—so those 20 per cent. of referrals are because the doctor did not know what to do and said, "Oh well, we'd better send you off to the consultant." That is a crazy use of resources, and it should not happen in today's NHS.

People can be knocked out by migraines and left not knowing what they will be like the following day. However, they get other symptoms too, especially depression. If a person gets migraines regularly, it is so appalling that there is nothing more likely to make them feel like giving up.

We do not know the quality of headache services because no one has measured them. The response to demand is pretty ad hoc. We know that services are inadequate and are not cost effective. There are no national or local targets for dealing with migraine, and very little research or auditing has been undertaken. We cannot seem to generate much interest among GPs or neurologists in focusing on and dealing with headache.

Current spending on headache is inadequate, unevenly distributed and poorly managed. That is a damning indictment, and it is time that we did something about it. There is a way forward. Professionals in the field have considered this issue and produced some detailed proposals. The first is inclusion in the national service framework. That would certainly ensure more equality in the delivery of care and in access to the best treatments that are currently available for headache sufferers. I am pleased to be able to draw to the Minister's attention the new guidelines for the management of migraine in primary care that have just been published by a group of professionals—the migraine in primary care advisers group. Those guidelines are going out to everyone in primary care. Those professionals have also produced a shorter guide for the use of clinicians. Hon. Members may be interested in seeing it. A patient guide will also be produced. Those guides are comprehensive and thorough, and show how migraine might be better managed in primary care. I hope that the Minister will give the guides his endorsement. A larger group, the National Headache Alliance, has also produced a summary of how it would like headache services to develop and improve.

I will briefly summarise the key points that have to be addressed. First, we must have better patient education and information, along with support for groups such as the Migraine Trust, the Migraine Action Association and others. As hon. Members have suggested, patients with information can control their care much better. If they do not know what it means to have their condition, how can they control their care?

Secondly, we have to take a multi-disciplinary approach, as hon. Members have said. We need to use the skills of a range of people—GPs, therapists, nurses and pharmacists. Thirdly, it has been suggested that, working to accepted guidelines, each GP should have available a first-line headache service, based on best practice—we need to spread best practice round the country—and evidence-based medicine, so that they can enable individual patients to manage their needs.

To achieve Government targets, we will need to develop specialist headache centres within primary care—either in GP clinics or in primary care trusts. Primary care trusts may have a specialist headache clinic or centre staffed by GPs with a thorough knowledge of particular headache problems. Some might ask, "A clinic just for headaches?" However, when 75 per cent. of the population experience headaches and 60,000 people experience migraines that are so debilitating that they become members of a migraine association trust, having specialist headache centres in every primary healthcare trust is not unrealistic.

In secondary care, there could be headache centres in every region, so that consultants with a specialist interest in headaches in every regional neurology centre could support the primary care centres. People could visit a GP, a specialist headache clinic and a consultant at the end, so their needs could be met where those services are required. At the moment, if a person has migraines they go to the doctor and the result is either a painkiller or a brain tumour—there is nothing in between. That is something of a caricature, but we must provide a range of services for people who experience headaches.

I hope that the debate will mark the start of a step change, whereby the policy makers and the professionals in the NHS—the health care providers, managers and the Department—give significant and proper recognition to the problems presented by migraines and other, sometimes severe, headaches. That issue must go higher up the agenda. Will the Minister ask his colleague the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), who is responsible for such matters, to receive a delegation from the all-party group on primary headache disorders? We could put our proposals to the Government, we could go through all the issues and concerns and get headaches firmly on the agenda, then

[Phil Hope]

the three quarters of the population who have a problem would be convinced that the Government are taking their needs seriously.

2.51 pm

Mr. Alan Campbell (Tynemouth): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Phil Hope). As a former headache sufferer, I recognise the frustrating picture that he so clearly painted for us. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) on securing the debate and on his introduction to it.

I want to raise some issues regarding neurological conditions that are pertinent to the NSF, and some of the concerns of consultant neurosurgeons at the Newcastle upon Tyne neurosurgical unit, which is the regional centre. I have already drawn some of those concerns to the attention of the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), to which she has already kindly responded. I would like to take this opportunity to place those concerns on record. Before I do that, I declare a personal interest, having undergone surgery at the Newcastle unit some two and a half years ago. I want to place on record my thanks for the vital work that it did for me and for my family, and to thank it on behalf of the thousands of people across the region whom it helps every year.

The consultant neurosurgeons in Newcastle welcome the principle of the NFS, but they have some concerns and they want to ensure, as we all do, that it achieves what it is intended to achieve. Those consultants are concerned that the framework, as it stands, focuses rather narrowly on services for people with the chronic neurological diseases and long-term impairments that follow a brain or spinal injury. They would also like to draw attention to the importance of the acute services. The initial treatment may involve an operation, and there may be long-term consequences. They cite head injuries, vascular disease, brain tumours, or, as in my case, a tumour on the spinal cord. In such situations, timely and effective neurosurgical services are crucial in preventing long-term neurological disabilities. They are concerned that, if there is no proper provision of acute neurological services, that will frustrate the aims of the NHS framework in seeking to reduce the long-term burden of neurological disease. I am sure that the bureaucrats in the Department and the Treasury will be keen to note the fact that, if we provide first-class acute neurological services, we could reduce the need for support and help later on. That would represent good value for money.

The consultants asked for the framework to incorporate the requirements of neurosurgery as a whole, including acute neurosurgery. Will the Minister tell us when we should expect the appointment of the external reference group? Will he ensure that the Society of British Neurological Surgeons is involved at every stage of the development of the framework? Will he also ensure that the needs of people with neurological conditions are met at all stages of their illness, including the acute stage?

I want the NSFs to succeed. National standards and investment are the two most important aspects of NHS modernisation. Long-term conditions such as neurological illness often show the NHS at its best, not least in its aspirations for people in its care. Such conditions also underline the importance of ensuring continuing investment through collective funding via the public purse. If that investment is reduced by some arbitrary figure, such as 20 per cent., some of the most vulnerable people will be put at further risk.

I recognise that long-term conditions, such as those we have discussed today, make a nonsense of the idea of a health care system that is largely or wholly based on private insurance. If insured people develop neurological conditions, they struggle to have their insurance policies renewed. If people have such a condition and seek insurance, they can forget it, because they will not be able to get insurance. We need proper investment and national standards, and I believe that we are now getting them. However, we must get our actions right.

2.56 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): We should express our gratitude to the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) for introducing this debate. He has been very active in the past week with the food supplement directive and the traditional herbal medicines directive. He has followed his interest in other matters in the House as well as preparing for today's debate. He is certainly earning his wage this week. I am sure that his staff are also working frenetically.

I shall raise some general concerns about the national service framework in order to paint a picture, and I shall question the Minister about his approach to NSFs and that already taken by the Government. I shall highlight concerns about the process, and shall ask the Minister for solutions. I shall also respond to issues raised in the debate so far.

The Liberal Democrats believe that national service frameworks are doubly worthwhile. They are worthwhile in their own right, because they identify good practice, standards, treatment mechanisms and approaches, but also because the standards in the NSFs, in so far as they are targets, are so much more evidence-based, rational and clinically-focused than some of the other targets in the NHS.

Indeed, some of the targets that the Government have imposed on the NHS give the setting of minimum standards and progress benchmarks a bad name. In many cases—almost invariably outside the NSF—there is no evidence that achieving targets actually improves patient outcomes in the long term. They are not necessarily rational, nor do they solve the problem of the distortion of resource allocation without good purpose and clinical priority, when the target is treated rather than the patient.

It is much harder to make those complaints about the standards set in NSFs. Some of the standards in the coronary heart disease programme have proved to be useful in levering up performance, because they involve prevention and primary care. However, they also involve the levering-up of expenditure on drug budgets.

The NSF approach is welcome, but the Government must recognise that hon. Members from all parties are aware of problems that have arisen as a consequence of the NSF programme. The Government owe it to the House to ensure that they recognise the problems and ameliorate the situation. The first problem is the blight that is almost inevitable when waiting for the publication of a national service framework. It is well known that primary care trusts and health authority commissioners were loth to commission and develop new services when an NSF was in the offing, because they thought that they may be taking the wrong action. Competing priorities gave them an excuse to wait. We experience such blight with the appraisal of drugs by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and in the development of NSFs.

The timetable and the speed at which NICE makes its determinations is somewhat swifter—probably because of necessity—than that for the NSFs, which are a bigger piece of work. Nevertheless, the Government must recognise that the speed at which NSFs are established has big implications for the services that are blighted because people are waiting for the outcome of the NSF. An NSF was announced in February 2001, but the chair of the external reference group—which, to the outside world, is a sign of work being done—was appointed only in October 2002. As the hon. Member for Corby (Phil Hope) said, the time scale is already long, and people worry that it may be even longer. The treatment of conditions such as motor neurone disease, which were first thought to be included in the NSF or in its recommendations, is likely to suffer as a result of this blight. It will be doubly disappointing if it is not included in the NSF.

The second problem is the tyranny of the appraised. That is inevitable to a certain extent, but it is a real problem. A national service framework has standards against which commissioners and providers are measured, and resources are applied to the area. When resources are limited or the increase in expenditure to meet standards is greater than the share of the growth money that that area of expenditure would receive, resources are pulled from elsewhere, such as areas that do not yet have an NSF—often it is not even in sight. That has been a worry. The priority given to mental health, coronary heart disease, services for older people and diabetes is at the expense of clinical investment in long-term medical conditions, for which resources are limited. The Government must recognise that. Support is needed for those people working in increasingly tight financial circumstances, even though there have now been reasonably generous increases in overall health expenditure.

The third problem is that target setting, even within NSFs, is an inexact science. There is a risk that unrealistic targets are set, which creates doom and gloom, and heavy pressure is put on expenditure to try to meet them. Some obvious targets merely go with the flow and follow long-term trends. They do not represent a challenge to people, so services are not improved. In a given area, targets will be met without the service necessarily being improved when it needs to be.

The fourth problem that surrounds NSFs is the need to ensure that there is adequate user input. The NSF provides an opportunity for user input. Obviously, that is easier for some conditions than for others, but for long-term medical conditions the opportunity to use the expertise of a patient group that has experience of the illness and knows how it affects people is significant. Expectations of user input into the NSF are raised, but are sometimes not met. Many of our constituents come to us with such concerns.

I shall now deal with the question whether there is a rational programme of NSFs or whether goal posts are shifted at inappropriate times. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) said that the working age focus of a particular NSF was announced some time after the publication of the NSF for older people, so there was no opportunity to pick up the slack in fields that might not get as much attention as it was once thought they would. Such problems are significant for NSFs generally, and I would be grateful if the Minister accepted that they exist. I realise that some of those problems are an inevitable part of the process, but I hope that we can agree that the situation needs to be ameliorated.

My hon. Friend mentioned important work force issues. If, as we expect, this NSF raises standards, as other NSFs have, additional staff will be needed. Staff take a long time to train. Responsibility for the shortage of consultants in this field clearly cannot be laid at the door of the current Government, because of the length of time it takes to train consultants. I have always made it clear that there was a failure many years before the 1997 general election to put in the pipeline the number of home-grown staff who would be needed. None the less, career decisions are still being made based on that pipeline, and unless consultant expansion in certain fields continues apace, people will not choose to train in those fields.

People following medical careers are not concerned only with where the glory is. The Government must consider forming a policy on consultant expansion, and not merely leave it be. There are targets, thresholds and limits at every stage of a medical career, from students and house officers to senior house officers and specialist registrars. Only at the end stage do the Government say that that is not their business but a matter for local providers. Without planning, we get inadequate consultant expansion. That can cause oversupply, so that people have nowhere to go at the end of their training, or undersupply.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam and the hon. Member for South Derbyshire referred to the problems of physiotherapy. The hon. Gentleman made various points that are worth stressing, including the importance of early diagnosis. As many long-term conditions are often, although not invariably, insidious, there can be a period of morbidity before presentation, let alone before diagnosis. It is therefore very important that a swift diagnosis is made.

The hon. Member for Corby gave the excellent example of headaches. People think that they just have a headache, without realising that something more serious might be going on. Neurology is considered by the medical profession to be a hard subject—take it from me that it is. General practitioners are less likely to have a specialist interest in neurology than in other fields, and GP specialist clinics are an excellent idea. That is a major problem.

The same applies to acute medicine in hospital. The neurological side is not the highest priority for the on-take medical team. That works both ways. Someone very close to me had headaches and failed to be diagnosed with a tumour. That person was over-diagnosed with migraine in primary care, and the tumour was not even picked up in hospital. There is a real gap in knowledge, and I plead guilty to such gaps in

[Dr. Evan Harris]

my own medical career. The hon. Member for South Derbyshire mentioned the importance of the voluntary sector. That is not unique to this clinical field, but it is significant, and ensuring that we preserve the value of the voluntary sector is important.

We have had a useful debate, and valuable contributions have been made. I hope that the Minister, in praising the Government's NSF programme and their investments, will recognise that there is still a long way to go.

3.9 pm

Mr. John Baron (Billericay): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) on securing this important debate and on his thoughtful speech. Contributions to the debate generally have been of very high quality. As chairman of the all-party group on motor neurone disease, the hon. Gentleman has a substantial interest in such illnesses, and during his opening speech, he showed a substantial knowledge of motor neurone disease, which is one of the many illnesses that are collectively termed long-term medical conditions. As we know, that term covers a vast array of illnesses that can be defined as:

> "a condition of prolonged duration that may affect any aspect of the person's life".

Symptoms may come and go, and usually there is no cure for the condition, although things can be done to maintain and improve quality of life.

It is estimated that one in three people generally and two in three people aged 75 or over are currently living with a long-term medical condition, so I welcome the Government's February 2001 announcement about establishing a national service framework for such conditions. Few would disagree with the aspirations cited by the Secretary of Sate, who said that the framework should overcome the lottery in care and ensure that health and social services work together in all parts of the country. The Government now have a duty to ensure that those aspirations are delivered. The debate is an opportunity for the Minister to provide us with more details of how that will happen.

I am concerned about the adverse impact that Government targets can have, particularly on illnesses such as long-term medical conditions, which are not targeted. I suggest that the Government are so fixated by the 300 or so NHS plan targets that services that are not on their hit list are suffering. Recent figures for neurology, pain management and ophthalmology, for example, all show that an increasing proportion of patients are forced to wait longer for out-patient appointments following a GP referral. The worry is that long-term medical conditions are not headline-grabbing conditions. As one doctor from John Radcliffe hospital recently put it:

> "if you don't have a vote winning illness, then sod you."

Medical professionals must determine clinical priorities and politicians must stop interfering. Recent figures show that although spending on the NHS has risen by more than 21 per cent. during the past two years, hospital treatments have increased by only 1.6 per cent., hospital admissions have fallen by 0.5 per cent. and the number of bureaucrats and administrators has increased by 13 per cent. That is partly due to the meddling of politicians.

Too often the needs of those with long-term medical conditions have been overlooked in favour of more headline-grabbing conditions, such as coronary heart disease and cancer. The Long-Term Medical Conditions Alliance has pointed out that the NHS focuses on acute and emergency care, rather than on the needs of those living with long-term health conditions. We fail as a nation if we provide for one and not the other. I therefore ask the Minister to assure us that that will not be the case.

As for the timetable and content of the framework, we know that it will be published in 2004 for implementation in 2005, with a timetable of something like 10 years. Certain bodies, including the Neurological Alliance, believe that to be a very challenging timetable, as other hon. Members have mentioned. Bearing in mind the fact that the external reference group did not hold its introductory meeting until the end of last year and has not met again since, the timetable does indeed appear to be very tight. That is particularly true given that many experts in the field who need to be consulted work within the charity and voluntary sector and will need more time.

Can the Minister assure us that when the framework is published, it will be published in full? That is preferable to publishing only the principles, with the implementation plan following up to a year later, as was the case with the framework on diabetes. Can the Minister confirm that it is the Government's intention to ensure that the national service framework will be as inclusive as possible and will cover the full range of medical conditions?

A press release issued on 12 June last year explained that the framework will focus in particular on services and support for people of working age. Several hon. Members have picked up that point. That focus would exclude so many in our society, yet surely the mark of a civilised society is the extent to which it cares for the vulnerable and less able. Can the Minister explain why the framework discriminates as it appears to? Certainly the Neurological Alliance questions the focus on work and how that sits with previous statements from the Minister that the framework should be about the needs of users.

The Department of Health has confirmed the need for the national service framework to have a joined-up approach to people's social, educational and employment needs. Can the Minister confirm what role the Department for Transport, the Department for Education and Skills and the Department for Work and Pensions have had in helping to formulate the framework?

Looking forward, a precondition for any national service framework to work is that a sufficient number of medical professionals are in place, but we are all aware of the problems of staff shortages in general practice. The British Medical Association recently highlighted that GP vacancy rates have increased dramatically, and an article in *The Independent* last year stated:

> "the shortage of consultant Neurologists is so acute that most patients admitted to hospital with brain disorders including stroke, epilepsy and meningitis, never see one—they have to be treated by specialists in other disciplines".

That point was made by the hon. Member for South Derbyshire. The Neurological Alliance believes that because of a problem with recruitment and retention, we will still be 400 specialists short by 2010. It should also be noted that there is currently a shortage of specialist nurses. What progress is being made to correct those acute staff shortages, with emphasis on the training programmes required to do so?

I have asked a series of questions because the success of national service frameworks cannot be guaranteed by good intention alone. The Government's track record on national service frameworks has been patchy at best—an example is the national service framework on coronary heart disease. The Minister will know that the target was that by April 2002 three quarters of all suitable patients should have received clot-busting drugs within 30 minutes of arriving at a hospital. However, research by the Royal College of Physicians found that fewer than one in three hospitals met that door-to-needle target, and more than 50 per cent. of hospitals were 25 per cent. outside the target.

Conservative Members will keep a close eye on development of the framework. Stating intentions is a worthy start, but the Government must be judged by the improvements felt by those who use and deliver the services. I pay tribute, as other hon. Members have done, to those who work with people suffering long-term medical conditions, not only the medical professionals but the army of carers who support people who are less able than themselves, and those in the voluntary and charitable sectors who dedicate so much of their time promoting the needs of those with long-term medical conditions. Many are unsung heroes in our communities and I am sure that we all want to congratulate them on their work and ensure that they are properly supported.

Outside this place, many people with long-term medical conditions are anxiously waiting for a real improvement in the way in which they are treated. It has been two years since the Secretary of State's announcement on the framework. I hope that the Minister will now provide us with more details by answering my questions fully.

3.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. David Lammy): I join other hon. Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) on securing this debate on the national service framework for long-term conditions and on raising the issue in the measured and assured way that we have come to expect. I am afraid that it is extremely unlikely in the 12 minutes left to me that I shall be able to answer all the questions asked in the debate, but I shall endeavour to write to my hon. Friend if I do not reach some of his points.

This has been an excellent debate with some excellent contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg), the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow), my hon. Friends the Members for Corby (Phil Hope) and for Tynemouth (Mr. Campbell), and the hon. Members for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) and for Cheadle (Mrs. Calton).

Many people in the country, from all backgrounds, have a wide range of neurological and long-term conditions. More than 300,000 people have epilepsy, 120,000 have Parkinson's disease, and 100,000 have brain injury. Fewer people have other, rarer, conditions, such as the 4,000 with motor neurone disease. In a primary care trust covering 250,000 people, about 1,500 adults will have a physical disability that affects their quality of life and means that they require help with their daily activities.

Co-ordination between hospital and community services and health and social care services could be better. Professionals are sometimes not aware of the wider impact of long-term conditions on people's lives, and service users could be more involved in the management of their conditions. We want to improve services and the experience of people with long-term conditions by addressing some of the issues, such as ensuring that people receive the right kind of integrated health and social care assessment and support, including access to community commitment, providing good-quality information and support for carers and families when they need it, and developing the concept of the expert patient so that people can take an active role in managing their condition if they want to.

Previous national service frameworks, such as the national cancer care plan and the coronary heart disease framework, have made real improvements in their services, and I am sorry that the hon. Member for Billericay (Mr. Baron) felt that he had to make political points in that respect. There is no doubt that there has been tremendous improvement across the board in those fields, and I am particularly proud to have announced the NSF for diabetes a few weeks ago. The long-term conditions NSF will build on the successes and will be developed and implemented in a world in which there are fewer national targets but more scope for flexibility in local implementation.

Mr. Baron: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Lammy: No. I want to make progress.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire shares the concern felt by some that the NSF will have fewer teeth than its predecessors. However, it is a fine balancing act. We cannot talk about targets in the wider NHS while wanting targets for every condition or NSF that we choose to introduce. As I have seen in examining the NSF for diabetes during the past months, we are working in a context in which primary care trusts have funds over three years to examine closely what is happening locally. We put that in place. Alongside PCTs, there are national bodies such as the Commission for Health Improvement—we will introduce legislation soon to firm up the inspectorate for that—patient advisory and liaison services in hospitals and the Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health. All those bodies ensure that NSFs and the standards, rather than the targets, that lie within them are delivered. They report back to both the PCT and the

[Mr. Lammy]

centre, so in the next two years, hon. Members will be able to hear what the inspectorate or patient forums in local communities say about whether the local communities are delivering the standards. That is the context in which we now operate, together with the National Institute for Clinical Excellence.

The NSF for long-term conditions is a good opportunity to put right some of the problems that my hon. Friends have identified. We want a wide range of people to benefit, but we need to be realistic about the service improvements that we can deliver. The long-term conditions NSF will focus on neurological conditions and brain and spinal injuries. It will cover the whole patient pathway, examine the common issues that affect this group of people, and set standards that can be more widely applied. The NSF will acknowledge that people often have neurological conditions that will deteriorate and lead to long-term disabilities. It will focus on working-age adults, but it will also address important transitional issues between children's and older people's services. I want to emphasise that in the light of hon. Members' comments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Corby made an impassioned speech about headaches and migraine. The Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), who has responsibility in this area, will closely look at *Hansard* to see what he said, and will consider his invitation to meet her.

Some people will be disappointed that more conditions are not included in the NSF, but we have a wide range of other mechanisms—

Mr. Burstow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Lammy: I will not give way because we have had a rich debate and I want to make progress.

Some people will be disappointed that more conditions are not included in the NSF, but we have a range of other mechanisms such as the NICE programme, existing NSFs, Action On programmes and modernisation service-redesign programmes to tackle all of those other areas.

Although people with neurological conditions share many common issues and problems, there are specific issues that are relevant to particular conditions, so, where necessary, the NSF will address those issues that are relevant specifically to people with, for example, epilepsy, motor neurone disease, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, or brain injury and spinal injury. It will also consider conditions such as headache.

Motor neurone disease is a rapidly progressive condition, and my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire is right to bring to our attention the importance of people getting an early diagnosis. That takes an average of 14 months, as there is no quick and easy way to diagnose the disease—to some degree, it is a process of elimination. Following diagnosis, people immediately need a wide range of support from health and social care professionals to help them to live independently at home for as long as possible. That support includes fast-track access to welfare benefits. That rapid response can be a great challenge for local services, but it can be made to work. In Warrington in April 1998, a motor neurone disease service was set up, funded jointly by health and social services. It aims to co-ordinate care for people with motor neurone disease and to avoid delays and interruption to services for people who cannot wait for boundary disputes or arguments about who pays the bill to be settled.

People with motor neurone disease need access to clinical interventions, such as tubes being fed into the stomach and special equipment to help them breathe through the night. Those services must be available throughout the country, and professionals need to be aware of them. NICE has already issued guidance on the use of relevant drugs to help to control the progression of the disease. The Government support research into motor neurone disease through the Medical Research Council and the Department of Health. In 1999 to 2000, we spent approximately £1.6 million on research.

We are aware of many of the problems that were mentioned and we are addressing them by taking forward the NSF. We have set up the external reference group to advise us on what a modern neurological service should look like and how we can put things into practice: its members are drawn from a wide range of fields. I say to the hon. Member for Billericay that Ministers do not in isolation in Whitehall set the targets that improve the quality of people's lives; we set them in conjunction with the royal colleges, the professionals and others. We work together to improve services across the board.

We plan to publish the NSF in 2004, and to start the 10-year implementation programme in 2005. We know how important it is to listen to representatives from across the board of stakeholders, and we hope to do that in the months, weeks and years ahead.

Obesity in Children

3.30 pm

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): I am delighted to have secured the debate on obesity in children, the importance of which we are only beginning to understand. Had we had this debate a few years ago, we might have categorised childhood obesity as a cosmetic problem and talked about image, self-esteem, peer pressure and bullying. However, as I hope to show, the problem of obesity is far more serious than that. If not tackled effectively, it could become as serious a public health issue as smoking. Obese youngsters have already brought lawsuits against McDonald's in the US.

The impetus for this debate comes from my research assistant, Brian Jones; he and I wrote a report on public health in children that was published by the Fabian Society under the title "All's Well that Starts Well". The facts are stark. According to Andrew Prentice, professor of international hygiene at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, seriously obese children are losing up to nine years on average to diseases that were not as common in their parents. The number of obese children in the UK has doubled in the past 10 years: about 10 per cent. of children are now officially obese and are therefore at serious risk of developing any number of potentially life-threatening conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

The Harvard growth study assessed mortality and morbidity in 508 lean or overweight adolescents after 55 years of follow-up. The relative risk of death almost doubled for obese adolescent boys. Obese teenagers are now being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, a condition that is closely linked to obesity and usually found only in those over 40. Those who develop type 2 diabetes in their teens run a high risk of visual impairment, leg amputations, renal failure requiring dialysis or transplantation, or premature death from heart disease. Obese people are 27 times more likely to develop diabetes than people of normal weight. It is estimated that at least 5 per cent. of all cancers can be attributed to obesity. There is also a class dimension to obesity: the UK 1958 birth cohort shows that only 18 per cent. of obese seven-year-old boys from non-manual backgrounds remained obese at 23, compared with 31 per cent. of boys from manual backgrounds.

Exercise is vital. Compared with 20 years ago, our diet now contains much more fat and high-energy foods, whereas we burn about 700 calories a day less. According to the British Heart Foundation, one in three children between the ages of two and seven do not do even the minimum recommended amount of exercise a week, and by the age of 15, two thirds of girls fall into the physically inactive category. In the past five years, the time spent by primary school children in physical education has more or less halved. Only about a third of secondary school children receive two or more hours of physical education a week, compared to half in the mid-90s. That is particularly alarming given that, as the report by Fairclough and Stratton shows, school sport provides the only form of regular exercise for 30 per cent. of secondary school pupils. The National Playing Fields Association also points to a huge drop in the number of school playing fields in the past few decades.

Fear, too, has become a factor. According to the Children's Society, 15 per cent. of parents refuse to let their children play outdoors because they are worried that their children might be approached by strangers. Less than 5 per cent. of children now walk or cycle to school, compared with more than 80 per cent. 20 years ago. Nurseries rarely let their young children play outdoors for fear of accidents and due to lack of supervision. Children become accustomed to staying indoors and become unused to exercise. Faced with such disincentives, children are simply abandoning exercise in favour of other pursuits. Who needs a playground when you have a PlayStation? Studies in the USA suggested that television viewing may be one of the most important determinants of childhood and adolescent obesity. One study showed a 2 per cent. increase in the prevalence of obesity for each additional weekly hour of television viewing.

There is considerable epidemiological and metabolic evidence that dietary fat plays an important role in the aetiology of obesity. The proportion of fat in the UK diet has increased dramatically since the second world war, from about 20 per cent. to nearly 40 per cent. of total energy consumed. There is evidence that obese people tend to have diets that are far higher in fat than the average. National surveys show that the typical diet in the UK contains 11 per cent. of its energy as protein, 37 per cent. as fat and 48 per cent. as carbohydrate. The report of the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy—COMA—indicates that we should keep our dietary proportion of calories from fat to less than 30 per cent.

High sugar intake is also an issue. Twenty-one per cent. of seven to 10-year-olds in the UK drink almost 10 cans of fizzy drink per week. The US Department of Agriculture, however, recommends consuming no more than 40 g of refined sugar per day—the equivalent of one can of fizzy drink, which can contain up to 11 teaspoons of sugar. Only 12 per cent. of UK children choose to drink water. In addition, a Government study of the diets of more than 2,000 children aged four to 18 over a week in 1997 suggested that, on average, British young people were eating fewer than half the recommended five portions of fruit and vegetables per day, and one in five children ate no fruit that week. Seventy per cent. of parents with young children who were interviewed in a recent survey admitted that they do not know enough about food and nutrition to feed their children healthily. Many parents use sweets, biscuits and fizzy drinks to buy good behaviour from their children.

What can we do to prevent that? First, it is vital to instil the habit of exercising in children when they are young if they are to carry on taking exercise when they are adults. Traffic, fear of crime and intimidation, dirty and poorly maintained facilities, and a lack of time have, as we have seen, led to a decline in children using public parks and playgrounds. To make those amenities more appealing to parents and children, we must invest in equipment and facilities to ensure they are safe to use, and as attractive and child-friendly as possible. We must make it easier for children and parents to walk or cycle from home to community facilities. That means creating safer road crossings, dedicated cycle lanes and, where necessary, better lighting. Wherever possible, road planners should give priority to pedestrians and cyclists, especially in heavily built-up areas. We need more home zones and quiet lanes.

We must deal with the fear of crime. The public want to see a greater uniformed presence—be it police officers, park wardens or street wardens—on our streets

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and in public places. Visible patrols may not add much to the crime-fighting capability of the police and other law enforcement agencies, but they have the effect of reassuring anxious parents.

We must ensure that young people are consulted when new play spaces and amenities are being designed. There is no point in investing money in facilities that will not be used. Better use must be made of the 100,000 voluntary sport and leisure clubs across the country. By creating links with local clubs and municipal leisure centres, and by encouraging them to provide coaching sessions for schoolchildren, schools could make extra-curricular sport much more accessible. That would also ensure that children are introduced to a much wider range of sports and leisure activities than the schools themselves can provide. If they are to let children use their facilities without charge, most clubs will require extra funds from somewhere to meet their additional running costs. The Government would have to consider making grants available to any club that participates in such a scheme.

The Government White Paper "Schools achieving success" gave a commitment that all children will be entitled to two hours of physical exercise and sport every week, within and outside the curriculum. However, much work must be done before that pledge can be realised. The new opportunities fund, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and the Department for Education and Skills are making substantial funds available to enhance and refurbish existing physical education and sports facilities, especially in deprived areas, but that is only the start.

We need better teaching. Primary teacher training puts little emphasis on sport and PE, and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority does not offer primary teachers who teach PE much guidance. Much PE teaching is stereotyped, with most children being exposed to the major sports only. Schools need to broaden the range of sports that they offer. Given the choice, many teenagers would prefer to use a treadmill or weights than play hockey or football. If young people would prefer disco-dancing or roller-blading, why not let them do that? If every secondary school could buy fitness machines or at least come to an arrangement with a local fitness centre, it could significantly boost physical activity rates among teenagers. We must also improve access to school facilities. The key to sustaining children's interest in sport is to ensure that they have access to school facilities and equipment after school, at weekends and during school holidays. Schools should keep their sports halls and fields open all year round, although pupils would have to be properly supervised. We need to look into how that could be funded.

The responsibility for school and community sport should be transferred from DCMS to the Department of Health. To give that Department the responsibility for promoting sport would highlight—in the most public way possible—the link between sport and exercise, and good health. It would show that we consider sport to be more than simply entertainment.

How can we set about modifying young people's diets? We must broaden their food horizons. If they get into the habit of eating fruit and vegetables from an early enough age, they will continue to do so throughout life. An obvious place to start to teach good nutritional habits is at school, but an outright ban in schools on sweets, chocolate, burgers, crisps and the like is not the answer; children will simply react against any such coercion. It is perfectly reasonable to serve burgers in school canteens once or twice a week, as long as plenty of healthy alternatives are on offer. The challenge is to ensure that healthy alternatives are appetising and affordable. We need high-quality produce and imaginative catering staff. We must also ensure that schools have the required resources at their disposal. Earmarked funds may be necessary to ensure an annual healthy meals grant that would go directly to the head teacher.

We need to make fresh water freely available to all children; for example, there should be a water cooler in classrooms. Children are often forced to drink fizzy drinks simply because there is no alternative. In 50 per cent. of schools, drinking water fountains in the toilets are the only source of fresh water, and in 10 per cent. of schools, there are no facilities at all. Children should not be prevented from buying fizzy drinks, but they should be encouraged towards better alternatives, providing fresh water is available.

We should make nutrition and food education a compulsory part of the primary and secondary curricula. Food education has become increasingly marginalised in recent years because of pressure from core curriculum subjects, a lack of specialist equipment and kitchen space in schools, and a shortage of properly qualified staff. There is a statutory obligation on primary but not secondary schools to offer food technology lessons. The Government strongly recommend that schools offer students the opportunity to study food technology, but 10 per cent. of schools offer nothing at all, and many others offer only a limited introduction to the subject. Unless children are given a grounding in cooking and have some understanding of what they are eating and the effect that it will have on them, they will not learn the skills that they will need to eat properly when they leave school. We need a food education syllabus that is focused specifically on cooking and nutrition. At present, there is not enough emphasis on food in food technology lessons. Pupils are more likely to spend time designing biscuit packaging than baking biscuits. Schools would have to be given extra capital grants to invest in facilities, but I believe that it would be money well spent.

I will now tackle the controversial area of food advertising. Sustain recently carried out a survey of television food advertising to children. It found that between 95 and 99 per cent. of the advertisements are for products that are high in sugar, salt or fat. Sustain points out that there are twice as many advertisements for such products during Saturday morning children's television than after the 9 o'clock watershed. That shows that food companies are deliberately targeting children. Food companies are also allowed to sponsor children's programmes. Although broadcasting rules prevent them from displaying their products on screen, they remain entitled to put their logo on the screen whenever there is an advertising break. For example, McDonald's sponsored GMTV's early morning show "Diggit".

Persuading children of the dangers of over-consumption of food that is high in sugar, salt or fat and of the need for a balanced diet is difficult when they are confronted every day by a barrage of food industry advertising that promotes processed foods. The adverts are designed to show that the regular consumption of sweets, crisps, chocolate and so on is perfectly natural and consistent with a healthy lifestyle. Backed up by celebrity endorsements, special offers and plenty of glitz and glamour, it is not surprising that young children, who are the most credulous and impressionable section of the viewing public, find the products attractive.

Obesity is a killer. Its consequences can be just as devastating as smoking or alcoholism, yet as a society we are prepared to allow the processed food industry to target its products at children. The Government should consider a comprehensive ban on food advertising to children. Doing so would not be without precedent in Europe. The Swedes, who have some of the best health outcomes in Europe, have had a blanket ban in place on all advertising to under-12s for some years. Not only has it stood up to legal scrutiny but it is highly popular with the Swedish public.

Far from restricting consumer freedoms, a total ban would enable young people when they reach adulthood to make a more informed choice as consumers about the food that they eat, having had the opportunity as children to learn about food in an environment free from undue external influences. The purpose of a ban would not be to prevent children from eating chocolate, crisps and so on but to help them be more discriminating as to when and in what quantities they eat such foods. A ban would help children to see such products more as the occasional luxuries that they once were than the staple foods that they threaten to become.

What about food labelling? According to the Food and Drink Federation, more than 80 per cent. of manufactured products in the UK carry nutrition labelling. However, there is considerable doubt as to whether consumers understand or even read the labels: for example, a recent survey carried out by Safeway revealed that only one in five people know what RDA stands for. Consumers have complained about the sheer number of different messages that appear on labels and have said that they find it difficult to gauge the value or relative importance of each of them. Messages such as low fat, percentage fat free, low in saturated fat, and others in the same vein leave consumers confused and no better informed.

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes): On the point about fat content in food and so-called lower fat products, is it not the case that some of the advertising is completely false? Manufacturers bulk out the product with water and then sell it at a premium as lower fat food. In fact, the way in which they work out the figures is wrong and misleading and can lead to people eating higher quantities of so-called lower fat foods, which cause obesity.

Dr. Stoate: I thank my hon. Friend, who has considerable expertise in this field. I have discussed this issue with her on a number of occasions and I share her concern that food labelling is very misleading, often deliberately so. Consumers want manufacturers to employ simpler, standardised and above all spin-free language on their packaging. Instead of labels that say that a produce is low fat or that it is a certain percentage fat free, they want to be told how much fat is in the product that they are buying. The Food Standards Agency should draw up a universal nutritional code that incorporates a handful of readily recognisable symbols and a set vocabulary that is as transparent as possible. Nutritional labels should also follow a set form.

Not since the British standard diet in world war two have the public had access to a definitive, or supposedly definitive, guide to precisely what, when and how much they should eat each day. It should be possible for the Department of Health to produce a set of broad nutritional guidelines that incorporate advice on recommended daily allowances for the average man, woman and child, what foods contain and even some suggested daily menus. If the Government decided to send an officially sanctioned national nutritional guide to every home in Britain, it would transform the profile of public health in the United Kingdom and allow us to hammer home the importance of healthy eating.

We must focus on public health. In our society, as in every other advanced market economy, we perceive health as something that inevitably worsens with age, but it can be restored quickly and efficiently through the intervention of trained professionals. Many seem to believe that the test of a good health service lies in its ability to manage disease, not prevent it. Perhaps that is because effective disease management is much easier to measure than effective disease prevention. Statistics relating to bed numbers, MRI scans, waiting times and successful operations can be easily compared, whereas successful disease prevention is less easily quantified. It is hardly surprising that the media and Parliament focus to such an extent on acute services, but that debate inhibits our ability to create a healthier society. After all, it is by influencing lifestyle choices, not by pouring billions into high-tech medicine, that we will make the biggest difference to the nation's health.

The Wanless report states that effective public health measures could save the national health service about £30 billion—20 per cent. of its budget—by 2022. By investing in prevention now, we could in the long term save the NHS billions in terms of expensive interventions of possibly limited effectiveness and treatment for long-term, chronic conditions. The human and financial costs of obesity are astronomical. In 1998, the cost to the NHS of treating obesity-related conditions was already close to £500 million, while the loss to the economy through 18 million sick days and 40 million days lost through premature death was nearly £2 billion. Obesity places an enormous financial burden on the individual through lost earnings and increased insurance premiums. According to figures given to me by Diabetes UK, the annual cost of treating diabetes is nearly £5.2 billion, or 9 per cent. of the NHS budget in 2000. By the time that this short debate is over, the NHS will have spent nearly £250,000 on treating diabetes. Given that there are at least 1 million undiagnosed diabetics in the UK, that figure will surely rise considerably.

There is no magic pill for obesity. Its effects—heart disease and diabetes—are almost irreversible. The wrong lifestyle choices during childhood and adolescence can prove devastating in later life. Until that is widely understood by parents and families, we will not be able to tackle obesity effectively. Refocusing the health debate on disease prevention is therefore

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essential. Unless we do that, we will not be able to persuade people of the importance of taking responsibility for their own health and living healthily.

The Government must take the lead. They must spell out the dangers of obesity to the public and make it clear that, although they can make it possible for families to live healthily by investing in schools and local amenities, the primary responsibility for preventing obesity in children lies with families.

3.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. David Lammy): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) for raising the very important and serious issue of obesity in children. He is extremely active in the House on health issues.

UK researchers have predicted that the increase in obesity threatens to reverse gains in longevity made during the past 100 years and could in some cases result in parents outliving their children. A National Audit Office report highlighted the fact that obesity is responsible for more than 9,000 premature deaths each year in England, and that it reduces life expectancy on average by nine years. My hon. Friend will agree that we need to work hard to combat this disease. I was particularly alarmed when recently I visited an accident and emergency department in one of the most deprived communities in London, and a consultant told me that just a few months previously a four-year-old had died from obesity in the department.

Obesity is not simply a health matter. It requires cross-Government action, which is why the issue is at the heart of many of the Government's priorities. My hon. Friend is right to say that the percentage of obese adults in England has trebled since 1980. Figures from the latest health survey for England, which was published this week, show that 21 per cent. of all adult males and 23.5 per cent. of all adult females—more than a fifth of all adults—are now obese. Although the majority of obese and overweight adults were not obese children, we know that children's weight tends to track from childhood to adulthood. Obesity in childhood is an important risk factor for adult obesity.

The increase in the number of people who are overweight or obese is too rapid to be explained by genetic factors alone. It is most likely to have been caused by changes in lifestyle—diet and physical activity habits. The majority of children and adults in the UK do not meet recommendations on diet and physical activity. Increased snacking, increased consumption of carbonated drinks, and diets that are high in saturated fat may all contribute to increasing obesity rates. Few children eat the recommended five a day portions of fruit and vegetables. Four in 10 boys and six in 10 girls do not take the recommended hour of physical activity a day.

The World Health Organisation recently highlighted prevention as the key to lowering the global burden of heart disease and strokes. More than half of all deaths and disabilities caused by heart disease could be prevented by national and individual action to reduce major risk factors, which include obesity. The prevention and management of obesity are highlighted in the NHS plan and national service frameworks. Promoting health will be a key component of the children's national service framework, and the prevention of obesity in children will form an important element in that.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, obesity is linked to diseases such as diabetes. I am proud to have recently published the diabetes national service framework. The key elements of the delivery strategy include systematic plans to achieve NSF standards by 2013. They include plans for every primary care trust to provide eye-screening services, regular check-ups and appropriate medical treatment for every person who either has diabetes or is at risk of developing the disease. Further plans include setting up local diabetes networks and giving appropriate advice on diet, physical activity and smoking.

We are working with a range of national, regional and local partners on programmes to tackle obesity, improve diet and increase levels of physical activity. Government action on obesity takes a life-course approach. The prevention of obesity starts at birth. Breast-fed babies are less likely to become obese later in life than formula-fed babies. Breast-feeding may also help mums to return to their pre-pregnancy weight. The infant feeding initiative, which was launched in 1999, aims to increase the incidence and duration of breast-feeding. We are moving ahead with the NHS plan commitment to reform the welfare food scheme. Our healthy start proposals will ensure that pregnant women, mothers and young children in low income groups have more access to a healthy diet, in addition to increased support for breast-feeding and parenting.

The fruit and vegetable intake of both children and adults remains low. We know that increased consumption of fruit and vegetables can reduce the risk of coronary heart disease and cancer, but increased consumption might help the maintenance of a healthy weight and the achievement of other dietary goals, such as a reduced fat intake. We are bringing fruit into nurseries and infant classes throughout the country through the national school fruit scheme, which is backed by £42 million from the new opportunities fund. The scheme will provide every four to six-year-old in school or nursery education with a piece of fruit a day.

Much more needs to be done to ensure that both children and adults have all the information that they need to choose a healthy lifestyle. We have developed a simple "5 A DAY" brand to help people to recognise the five-a-day message and to give the message consistency in all settings. Children and young adults were involved in the development of the brand logo, and they decreed it to be trendy, cool and so on. The message is reinforced by the food in schools programme, which aims to improve children's health by encouraging a healthy diet at school and promoting clear and consistent messages on diet and nutrition within the school environment. Initiatives being set up as part of that scheme, such as the assessment of water provision in schools and the inclusion of healthier options in vending machines in schools, are part of the ongoing programme of promoting healthy diets in school, which includes nutritional school lunches.

My hon. Friends the Members for Dartford and for Cleethorpes (Shona McIsaac) both raised the issue of labelling. We are keen to engage with the food industry to ensure that the levels of fat and sugar in their products contribute to a healthy diet. Clear and explicit food labelling is vital if people are to make healthy life choices. My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford, in his recent paper for the Fabian Society, drew attention to the fact that fat-free claims are often confusing. The Food Standards Agency is working to improve food labelling as well to provide clear, practical advice for consumers on what constitutes a healthy diet.

Shona McIsaac: Is my hon. Friend aware that although we can purchase sandwiches from the Members' Tea Room that are advertised as being healthier, the percentage of calories that come from fat in those products is higher than in normal sandwiches? It is happening even in the House. It is essential that we tackle the problem of calories from fat, and food labelling should show the information clearly. A measure that gives the real content of fat in food should be used, instead of the figures constructed by the industry.

Mr. Lammy: My hon. Friend will recall that I was with her a few days ago when she made that point in the Tea Room. I do not wish to cast aspersions, but it is a serious issue and I would encourage my hon. Friend to talk further about the subject with the Refreshment Department.

Poor diet is only one side of the problem. A low level of physical activity among children also contributes to a rising level of obesity. We are putting in place a major programme of work to provide opportunities for children to be more physically active. My Department is working with the Departments for Transport and for Education and Skills to help children to develop travel plans and to put in place measures to make it safer and easier for children to walk and cycle rather than be driven to school. More than 1,000 schools have a travel plan in place, and a further 2,100 schools plan to have one during the next two years. Success stories include a school in Suffolk where 60 per cent. of pupils now go to school by bicycle. That is a result of a series of changes, including the introduction of traffic-free cycle routes that link nearby housing estates and neighbourhoods—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. John McWilliam (in the Chair): Order. Will hon. Members wishing to take part in the next debate please not interrupt this one?

Mr. Lammy: Thank you, Mr. McWilliam. Those routes, which link nearby housing estates, enable pupils to cycle to school from up to five miles away without having to go along main roads.

The Departments for Education and Skills and for Culture, Media and Sport are developing schemes aimed at increasing the take-up of sporting opportunities among five to 16- year-olds. They aim to increase the percentage of children who spend at least two hours each week on high-quality PE and school sport. Significant investment is also being put into transforming physical education, school sport and club links over the next three years. For example, we are spending £224 million to expand the school sports co-ordinated programme; £60 million on club capital to help sports clubs to develop good-quality junior programmes and to make links with schools; and £10 million on supporting playgrounds. Those programmes are not only about sport in the traditional sense; they include other forms of physical activity such as dance, and walking and cycling to school.

The early identification of overweight and obese children is vital so that they can be given appropriate guidance and support. The Department supports the development of recently published guidance from professionals in primary care on the weight management of children. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford will recognise that we are doing much in this area, and will be encouraged to work with us to take the agenda forward.

Dolphins

4 pm

Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): I appreciate the opportunity to raise the extremely important issue of dolphin deaths, especially in and around Cornwall.

Last month, 31 dolphins and other cetaceans were washed up on the beaches of Devon and Cornwall. I understand that this month the figure is 70 in Cornwall and 24 in Devon. Between January and March last year, 120 dolphins and porpoises were found washed up and the scale of the problem is substantially greater even than these horrific figures suggest. Some 800 dead dolphins and porpoises were washed up on French beaches over the same period—30 times more than would normally be expected at that time of year.

The cetaceans that wash up represent a small fraction of those that are killed, as most carcases sink at sea. Although this year's winter storms have probably washed up more than usual, we know that the problem has been going on for some years and has rapidly escalated. I shall speak in a moment about a new form of fishing, pair trawling for bass, which has only been established in the last six or seven years, with which it has been linked.

There has been huge and widely expressed public concern. The *Western Morning News* has run an extraordinarily effective series of articles outlining the scale of the problem. As a result, large numbers of members of the public from around the country as well as from my constituency have contacted my office. That concern will increase as the number of deaths increases. It reflects not just a sympathy for the dolphins, which sustain horrific injuries as a result of being caught up in fishing gear, but also the more fundamental concern that we risk wiping out our local dolphin and porpoise populations.

The best research information available from the Institute of Zoology is that the common dolphin could be extinct in the area within a decade. The small, but well-established, bottle-nosed dolphin population, closer inshore, is at risk of extinction within the next two years. That is at threat from a different type of fishery—gill netting—for which a solution is at hand. However, the Government have failed to implement any action, despite an EU agreement.

The estimated impact of pair netting is substantial. Post mortems conducted by the Institute of Zoology at London zoo established that many of the deaths have been the result of by-catch. From 1995 to 1999, more than half the dolphins for which a cause of death has been established by post mortem were killed as a result of by-catch. It is estimated that approximately one dolphin is caught in every two hauls. The International Council for the Exploration of the Seas has repeatedly identified by-catch as the biggest single threat to cetacean populations in the seas.

To gauge the scale of what is happening, an Irish study of the trial pair trawl fishery for tuna observed 30 dolphins being caught in a single haul, with 145 caught by just four pairs of trawlers in one season. During 2001 observers on UK pair trawlers, targeting the winter sea bass fishery, recorded a catch of 53 dolphins in 116 hauls. It is important to emphasise that the fishery involved in this is not a traditional fishery. It has been established only in recent years. I have written to Ministers on several occasions to express my concern that it entails severe overfishing of the bass stocks in any case, and poses a threat to the traditional local fishery, with long-lining, and the sports fishery. Increasingly the problem for cetaceans presents an even more immediate risk.

The fleet is, incidentally—although this need not be the prime motivation for the Minister in tackling the problem—almost entirely composed of French and Dutch vessels. Perhaps eight Scottish vessels take part for part of the year, fishing out of Plymouth, but they are a very small proportion of the vessels in the fishery.

Tackling the problem is ultimately a matter for European Union action. There must be European Union agreement if the problem is to be tackled overall. The good news is that the fact that there is a problem has been clearly acknowledged. Parties to the agreement on the conservation of small cetaceans of the Baltic and North seas have acknowledged the threat posed by by-catch and are committed to taking steps to reduce unacceptable by-catch.

The EU Commissioner has said that action must be taken without further delay, but there are caveats. In his letter of 28 October to the Minister, Commissioner Fischler said:

> "If we want to succeed better than in the case of driftnets . . . we need to build a strong case on the basis of the best scientific and technical information . . . we need more specific details both on the areas in which and times for which closures of certain fisheries would be desirable and on other technical specifications for the remedial measures proposed. As soon as the scientific information becomes more complete, we intend to take swift action"—

the problem being, of course, that there is some contradiction. Swift action does not happen, because the information is not complete. Commissioner Fischler is also pressing for

> "a co-ordinated observer programme in all fisheries where by-catch is suspected a problem."

The Commissioner has thus given a pledge to take action, but only where evidence has been assembled, whether that relates to closures or fishing techniques.

Andrew George (St. Ives): My hon. Friend raises some important issues and I know that even this past weekend Looe and Polperro fishermen went out and witnessed considerable numbers of dolphins and pilot whales floating dead on the surface. Their injuries were clearly consistent with pair trawling. We know that there is a small, insignificant catch in the gill net fishery, but does my hon. Friend agree that it is not good enough to play for more time for research, when it is clear where the problem is, and that action is needed, particularly in France where most of the pair trawlers are based?

Matthew Taylor: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend, which is why I sought the debate. I hope that the Minister will acknowledge what we say, because he has several times expressed concern about the issue. He is aware of it, and has pressed the Commissioner on it. All of that is welcome, but the simple fact is that both at European Union and United Kingdom level there is pressure for delay. Not enough speedy work is being done.

In addition, in some cases a concerted effort is being made to refuse to act, on grounds of lack of evidence, when people actually engaged in the business—certainly the Cornish fishermen who get blame from some people who have not looked into the matter, but who are innocent in this case—want action in a hurry. They do not believe that there is any question about what is happening. Some countries are blocking the observer programme. Only Denmark, the United Kingdom and Spain have any monitoring programmes at all. In particular, as my hon. Friend said, France has no monitoring programme at all, despite its having the largest number of such trawlers. Some member states have simply refused to accept that there is a problem.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I would not like my hon. Friend to give the impression that the fault is all that of the European Commission. In direct discussion, Commissioner Fischler quite openly said to me that there is a desire to do something, but the Council of Fisheries Ministers has not given the permission to do so. The delay is in getting the issue on the Council of Fisheries Ministers, not so much the lack of scientific evidence to support the case that my hon. Friend makes.

Matthew Taylor: I share that concern and would go a little further. There is more that the Government could do to provide the evidence. The UK has a unique ability to answer those who would resist action on the grounds of lack of evidence. There are things that the Minister could do. He needs to act more quickly and firmly, and I have no doubt about his desire to do so.

The Department promised conservationists a by-catch response strategy as far back as June 1999. It has been four years and we still do not have that strategy. The Minister needs to explain what is happening on that and why it has been so long delayed. However, a debate about history is not terribly relevant to saving dolphins, and we cannot put off action on a wider strategy, particularly in relation to the pair trawlers.

I would like to see observers on the Scottish boats. The UK has the role of ensuring that that takes place now. There are no plans for observers until February. I would like some reassurance that the observers will be placed at the earliest date, and an explanation of why they are not there now. Without those formal data, it will more difficult to persuade other EU countries of the need for immediate action, however much we believe we know the answer.

The Department is in the middle of trials of adapted nets. Those trials have been dogged with problems. Last March, the camera fell off the adapted nets and no dolphins were recorded escaping. The trials planned for December were put back again after the adapted vessel that was hired for the trials was rammed, and it is now, I understand, in dry dock. Could the Minister explain why it is not possible to find another vessel for that work? Trials have been put back to at least March and might in practice be put back to next year, given that the fishery ended at that stage last year.

In any case, the Minister should not pin all his hopes on trials that are, frankly, highly unlikely to deliver. That fact is unfortunate, and I wish it were not so. Similar trials in New Zealand left sea lions with lethal injuries sustained while escaping the nets. They are smaller and less liable to damage than the dolphins, and I am therefore not over-optimistic. Pair trawling is a threat not only to dolphins but to bass stocks, and is not a sustainable technique compared to traditional fishing, which sustains a viable economy for the local communities that have traditionally used techniques such as long-lining, not to mention the high value of the sports fishery. Given that the Government have invested huge amounts of time, effort and money in preserving the spawning stock and the estuarial stock, it seems extraordinary to then allow such stock to be scooped up mid-water on its way to and from the spawning grounds, effectively wiping all the effort out.

I therefore put it to the Minister that he should seriously discuss with colleagues—perhaps he could tell us whether he has already done so—whether it would be more appropriate to close the fishery, at least pending the development of techniques that will avoid the problem of the dolphin by-catch and deal more clearly with the issue of bass stocks. The Cornish Fish Producers Organisation supports that option. Indeed, it makes the point that driftnets were banned for similar reasons, arguably on the basis of less evidence of their impact on dolphins than is available in relation to pair trawlers.

I want to mention a couple of other techniques about which I am concerned. First, I hope that the Minister will agree that research should be carried out by observers on industrial trawlers, which also fish midwater areas, albeit that horse mackerel do not attract dolphin to the same extent. However, dolphins are present in those waters and no research has been done into whether the trawlers pose a threat. Secondly, the European Union agreed last year that pingers should be fitted to gillnets because there is evidence to suggest that that is effective. There is a highly vulnerable bottlenose dolphin population around Cornwall, but there is not time to wait for the introduction of that change, to which the United Kingdom is committed.

Mrs. Annette L. Brooke (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): I should like to point out that although we are largely talking about Cornwall, the problem also affects the Dorset coast. All the conservation bodies are working well together. There is enormous public awareness of the issue, especially among young children. Only last week, I delivered dozens of postcards, showing pictures of dolphins caught in nets, to Tony Blair, so it is the Government's duty to respond in the way suggested by my hon. Friend.

Mr. John McWilliam (in the Chair): Order. The correct mode of address is the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) or the Prime Minister.

Matthew Taylor: There is no doubt about the degree of public concern, which is shared by local fishing communities, and it is the duty of the Government to act. Even more attractive to the Minister might be the fact that he would receive enormous public support for action. We cannot rely on technology to solve the problem and we cannot wait for technology. We need to take action now. Research may continue, but we need the Minister to save the dolphins before there are none left to save.

[Matthew Taylor]

The Minister's Department is in some financial difficulty and is having to make cuts as a result of differences of opinion between the Treasury and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs over staffing levels. We have heard that large numbers of staff are likely to be departing from the Department. I trust that this issue will not be caught up in that. In particular, I hope that the dedicated team at Bristol, whose members have expertise in the area, will be retained, so that work to protect dolphins can continue.

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor) on obtaining the debate and addressing this serious issue. As the hon. Gentleman said, I have been aware of the problem for some time and have not been idle in terms of addressing it.

Three years ago, no one in any sector of the fishing industry, including our own, would admit that there was a problem. The observer programme implemented and paid for by DEFRA identified the problem in the winter bass fishery. I understand the concerns of non-governmental organisations and acknowledge and pay tribute to campaigns, such as the one run by the *Western Morning News.* That effective campaign has been helpful to me because I have shown it to Commissioners and representatives from member states to demonstrate the level of public concern, as well as the alarming number of dolphins that have been found washed up on not only our coastline but the French coastline. That is the crux of the issue. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has committed funding to the sea mammal research unit, which is doing most of the study's work on identifying where the problem is and how we can best tackle it.

On the observer programme, there have been observers of every type of fishery, including pelagic, mackerel and sprats fisheries, on UK vessels. The only fishery involved in a by-catch problem was the winter bass fishery, although that is not to say that other fisheries are not causing problems, too. UK vessels have very little involvement with the winter bass fishery; it is other—and, in particular, French—vessels that are active in that fishery.

The hon. Gentleman should be aware that there is not much activity in the winter bass fishery at the moment; it tends to build up to a peak at the end of February and beginning of March. Yet large numbers of dolphins have been washing up. Many of the French pair trawlers are away in the south, in the bay of Biscay, at the moment. They tend to work their way north at this time of year. UK pair trawlers are operating offshore in the pelagic fishery. It is quite possible that other fisheries are causing the mortality rates, and it would be wrong to think that this is simply a pair trawling issue. It is about the kind of gear used, where and how it is used, how and in what fishery it is fixed, and in what conditions.

It is a mistake to think that if pair trawling were banned, the problem would be solved. It is clear that pair trawling in the bass fishery is implicated; we know that because we have some information. However, it is quite likely that the issue goes further than that. Often, comments about pair trawling are made by people who do not like pair trawling, do not do it themselves and would like the practice to end. We need a better and sounder scientific argument than that, and that means collecting information and looking for solutions.

Ms Candy Atherton (Falmouth and Camborne): There is genuine concern in Cornwall and the wider west country on this issue. I understand that there is a marine mammal project that a London zoo vet, Paul Jepson, has co-ordinated. He said recently that two dolphins have had post-mortems, but we have not had the results. Could the Minister enlighten us as to the findings, in light of his request for more science?

Mr. Morley: I do not know of that particular case, but I know that there have been a great number of post-mortems. They suggest that the animals have died as a result of fishing activities, and were part of the fisheries' by-catch. I know my hon. Friend's concerns about the matter, as she has raised the issue with me a number of times.

I have raised the issue with the Commission, and with the Council of Minisers. It is not quite accurate to say that the Commissioner has to wait for the Council of Ministers to act. The Commissioner can take action under both the habitats directive and the cetacean by-catch strategy, which we have agreed in Council as part of a common fisheries policy review, and which calls for observer programmes of all member states. That strategy is agreed, so it is now a matter of the Commission pressing member states to ensure that that information is collected. To be fair to Franz Fischler, the Commissioner, he has been quite strong on the subject. He has been very supportive in response to the letters that I have sent to him. However, support is one thing; action is another, and I agree that it is needed.

In relation to the action plan and strategy on by-catch, I assure the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell that we will put that in place in the near future. Much work has been done on that strategy, both in relation to the agreement on the conservation of small cetaceans in the Baltic and North seas, and by other Departments and the devolved Administrations. The strategy is in its final stages, and we will be launching and implementing that soon. We will of course be pressing ahead on our work on acoustic devices.

Matthew Taylor: Obviously, the strategy is welcome, if indeed it is to be imminent. Can the Minister give me any idea of what "imminent" might be interpreted to mean?

Mr. Morley: I cannot at this stage, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are talking weeks.

Acoustic devices on gill nets is a United Kingdom issue.

Andrew George: I should be grateful if the Minister would clarify a matter. He said that French pair trawlers had not been fishing in the western approaches, yet the Cornwall sea fisheries committee has confirmed to me that pair trawlers have been operating offshore from the

Cornish coast where a large number of dolphins and pilot whales have been found floating dead on the surface and a few might have floated to the coast. Can he confirm that now or could he write to me and my colleagues and confirm that no French pair trawlers have been operating in that area recently?

Mr. Morley: I can certainly give the hon. Gentleman more information. Pair trawlers may be operating, but not in the bass fishery. They may be operating, in other fisheries and some may be French. Those that are generally involved in the winter bass fishery are not in the area. It is wrong to think only of pair trawling. There are, for example, Dutch horse mackerel fisheries and industrial fisheries. We need observers on all those vessels and fisheries to see exactly what the implications are.

We have pioneered acoustic devices and we should not be slow to acknowledge that, on many of those issues, the United Kingdom leads the rest of Europe. We were the first to treat the issue of dolphin by-catch seriously and the first to identify where the problem fisheries are. We were the first to trial solutions in relation to the separator trawl and we were the first to begin to develop acoustic devices. The earlier ones had reliability problems, but the later ones are much better and will feature in our action plan.

We have had some setbacks in the trials of separator gear and no one is more frustrated with that than I am. We cannot simply use another vessel because the vessel we engaged for the experiment has had some rather expensive gear fitted, including winches and equipment for cameras and nets. It is expensive to remove those and refit them and by the time that it has been done, the vessel will be ready again. However, I have some positive news. The vessel has been repaired and is operating again, but we have chartered it for the period of the bass fishery and it has now gone to the pelagic fishery on the west of Ireland. It will be back in Cornish waters at the end of February and we hope to have the net up and running at the end of February or beginning of March, which is the peak of the winter bass fishery. That will be helpful in ascertaining whether the net works.

I know that reservations have been expressed, but some of them seem to have been motivated by people who just do not like pair trawling and believe that it is the reason for everything. I do not believe that. Pair trawling may be a problem, but we must research it carefully. The comments on the website of the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell suggest that the net does not work. The hon. Gentleman is an able Member of Parliament, but he is not psychic and we should give the net a chance to see whether it works. I know that it caused some injuries to sea lions in the New Zealand fishery, but I have spoken to the New Zealand Minister for the Environment and she told me that although there were some problems in the early stages, adjustments and changes to the net had eliminated injuries to sea lions. Sea lions are very different from dolphins.

I am not saying that the net may be the magic solution, but I certainly believe that we should try it out and see whether it works. We shall not know until it has been used in a fishery where dolphins are going into nets. We know that when it was used last year, a tope, which is a species of shark, went into the net and was ejected successfully from the escape hatch. We also know that the net catches fish, which is important if we are to persuade fishermen to use it. Some people were saying not only that the net would damage dolphins but that it would not catch a single fish. We know that that is not true, so let us see how effective it is for dolphins.

If it is not effective, I do not rule out further action and arguing for closures and restrictions. That may be necessary, but it is important first to obtain the evidence, ensure that other member states are doing their bit in collecting evidence—we need more help from other member states—and to see how we can tackle it and where it is. I assure hon. Members that I am fully committed to that. I share their frustration about what is sometimes seen as slow progress, but we are committed to dealing with the problem, to making progress and to ensuring that there is progress throughout the EU as well as the UK.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Four o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 23 January 2003

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Youth Policy

2.30 pm

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. This being this first session of questions in Westminster Hall, I have a short statement about the procedure that I intend to follow. As happens in the House, I will call each hon. Member with a question in turn; as in the House the hon. Member should rise and respond "Question No. 1," and so on. I will then call a Minister to answer.

This session is different from questions in the House, in that we have four Ministers here, from four different Departments. The House has decided that questions in Westminster Hall should relate to an overall "cross-cutting" theme—on this occasion, youth policy.

After the Minister's initial answer, I will call the hon. Member in whose name the question was tabled to ask a supplementary question. It may be that one of the other Ministers present will want to come in to answer that supplementary question, either instead of, or in addition to, the Minister giving the original answer.

I will then call other hon. Members to ask supplementary questions, including, on some questions, Opposition Front Benchers. I may also call an hon. Member to ask a second supplementary question if I deem it appropriate.

Hon. Members should remember, however, that this is a question and answer session and not a series of mini-debates. I expect Ministers' answers and supplementary questions to be short and to the point. I hope to achieve a free-flowing exchange to allow us to make good progress through the Order Paper in the hour allotted to questions.

This is a novel procedure and I seek the co-operation of all hon. Members to help to make it a useful addition to our procedures for holding the Government to account. It is, inevitably, experimental at this stage. I do not intend any precedents to be set by my rulings today—except brevity—and I will be happy to receive, privately, any suggestions from colleagues for modifications.

I remind hon. Members too that sittings in Westminster Hall are governed by the same conventions concerning behaviour and mode of address as in the Chamber.

2.34 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

2.48 pm

On resuming—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I had better mention that all the microphones are live, so it would be helpful if there were no background conversation to interrupt the main proceedings. I re-emphasise my point about brevity in case anyone has forgotten it in the past 18 minutes. Although it will become obvious later, for the convenience of hon. Members I shall tell them now that Question 5 will be answered with Question 3 and Question 10 will be answered with Question 9.

Oral Answers to Questions

The Government were asked—

Re-offending

1. **Simon Hughes** (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): What assessment the Government have made of the impact on reducing re-offending by young people of participation in schemes promoted or supported by the Youth Justice Board. [91805]

The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety (Mr. John Denham): The reconviction rates of offenders dealt with in July 2000, just after the national introduction of the main reform measures, were reduced by 14 per cent. compared with 1997.

A range of YJB funded programmes are also being evaluated. The results include a 25 per cent. reduction in re-offending following education, training and employment programmes, a drop of 29.5 percentage points in children offending after their parents had been on parenting programmes, and on the nine-month intensive supervision and surveillance programme pilot a drop from 160 to 47 offences.

Simon Hughes: It is a great pleasure to ask the first supplementary question. We all accept the success of the Youth Justice Board. Its programmes have been widely welcomed. Will the Minister guarantee that the funding will not only continue, but be extended for the splash programme, the youth inclusion programme, the intensive supervision and surveillance programme and, above all, the youth service, which has been badly cut back over the past decade? If funding is there, we know how to give youngsters positive alternatives to antisocial behaviour and boredom.

Mr. Denham: The YJB programme has been successful, although I do not have the details regarding that. We intend to repeat last summer's very successful programme of youth activities, and to do that in a way that frees money and brings it together into a single pot for local authorities and agencies to use.

We have already guaranteed the future of the youth inclusion programmes, which have been very successful in helping young people in high crime areas. I hope that we will shortly be able to give more details about the extension of the intensive supervision and surveillance programmes, which are effective in keeping young people out of custody and out of trouble.

The Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills will talk about the youth service.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Ivan Lewis): One of the problems in taking an integrated approach to the needs of young people has been the underfunding and undervaluation of the youth service over many years. A new vision for youth services and an understanding of how those services and others—such as Connexions—connect together are fundamental to achieving many of our objectives in respect of education, performance, antisocial behaviour, street crime and so forth.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): Because of the devolution to Wales of many matters that affect young people who offend, it is important that there are close links between the different Government Departments and between the Government and the Assembly in Wales. What progress is being made on an all-Wales youth offending strategy involving the YJB, and what is the value of such a strategy?

Mr. Denham: I will have to get back to my hon. Friend about our position on an all-Wales strategy, but it is important that people can see that the YJB has a strategy that ties in well with the other agencies that work with young people to reduce crime.

We liaise well with the Assembly: for example, the equivalent of an English regional crime reduction director is based in, and works with, the Assembly and helps to link the work of the local community safety partnerships with the YJB and other organisations. There is value in having coherent policies. I will write to my hon. Friend about the matter.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): Conservative Members welcome this opportunity to cross-question Ministers—in this case, on youth policy.

Against a background of a huge increase in the number of persistent young offenders, the work of the YJB is essential; its great value has been mentioned. The Minister referred to intensive supervision and surveillance programmes, which are a step in the right direction. I understand that Oxford university is assessing those programmes and analysing their benefit. There is doubt about whether 25 hours over three months is adequate contact time, but we need to see the results. When does the Minister expect to hear from Oxford university? Will he be publishing that report?

Mr. Denham: The intensive supervision and surveillance programme is aimed at the 3 per cent. of young people who are estimated to commit about 25 per cent. of all crime. It is not the case that we have necessarily had a rise in the number of persistent young offenders. According to the figures that we have, the reconviction rate has fallen. The Oxford university study must be long term if its full effects are to be seen. It will be available in 2004. The interim assessment has shown a drop in the number of offences from 160 to 47 among young people involved in the programme. This is not just a matter of contact time, which is rather more extensive than the hon. Gentleman suggests. Offenders are also tagged and subject to curfew, so there is a mixture of intensive engagement and some limits on freedom, and the expense and problems that arise from young offenders institutions are avoided.

Mr. Paice: May I turn the Minister's attention to the issue of funding, which was touched on by the Liberal Democrat spokesman? I visited a youth improvement programme this morning. One of the facts that came through loud and clear was that although those involved welcomed the decision to extend the programme for another three years—we, too, are pleased with that decision—there is such a disparate range of sources of funds and requirements that the bureaucracy being imposed on those involved, who are basically youth workers, is insufferable. One such worker told me that they had turned down £150,000 because the bureaucratic burden that went along with the job in question did not make it worth while.

It is sensible to have a range of programmes. However, will the Minister consider whether he can bring together the various bodies—some charitable, some publicly funded—that are funding the programmes, whether they provide core funds or extra money? Could we put all the money together, so that those involved with programmes could concentrate on bidding in the first place and on dealing with youths, rather than constantly filling in forms and meeting different requirements for different forms of assessment?

Mr. Denham: That is a good point. Last summer, we increased the number of young people involved in summer activities from 25,000 to more than 90,000, but that was done at a great pace and involved some 12 different streams of money. Much work has been done, led by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, to bring that money together into a single pot—or as close as a single pot as we can get—so that it is much easier to administer next year. Much the same principles should apply to the youth inclusion programmes, for which there may be funding from the lottery, local authorities or the neighbourhood renewal fund. Bringing the sums together is a major exercise, but I accept the hon. Gentleman's point and we are working hard on it.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Given the lamentable re-offending rates of those leaving young offenders institutions, would not the best idea to reduce youth offending be to ensure that the vast majority of young offenders did not go into custody? Given the recent decision of the High Court in relation to the application of the Children Act 1989 to young offenders institutions, what work is the Youth Justice Board doing to ensure that all young people who are locked up are supported by the provisions of the 1989 Act, and treated as children rather than criminals?

Mr. Denham: On the first point, the vast majority of young offenders do not go into custody. For every 100 young offenders, no more than four will go into custody. One reason for expanding the intensive supervision and surveillance programme is that it is targeted at a group of young people who might otherwise go into custody. If current success rates are repeated, the programme will have the benefit of protecting the public and being a satisfactory way of dealing with young people who have been carrying out serious crimes. However, there always will be some young people from whom the community needs to be protected. Every young offenders institution has a child protection co-ordinator and has established a child protection committee, and is in contact with the local area child protection committee structure, so there is a system for integrating what is happening in young offenders institutions with wider child protection arrangements.

Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) referred to the good work of the Youth Justice Board and mentioned some of its successes, one of which is its work with parents of young offenders. Is the Department for Education and Skills thinking about that work and considering working with the parents of young people who are truanting? Those young people often get involved in crime. Is there to be any debate on the lessons learned from the work of the Youth Justice Board?

Mr. Denham: Yes. We are looking at that while we draw up a new Green Paper on young people at risk. One of the things that we discovered was that parents who are required to attend parenting classes often react, after a time, by asking why the support was not offered before their children were in serious trouble. We are examining ways in which we can extend parenting support at an earlier phase of a child's life and give support to parents earlier. Money for families is available in the spending review from the parenting fund, and the Secretary of State for Education and Skills has talked about facilities at school to develop parenting contracts as a way of agreeing with parents how they can support the work done with their children. There will be more to come in the area that my hon. Friend talked about.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is not habitually the case that Ministers of the Crown are at a disadvantage, but I am advised that their microphones are dead. If they could use their own amplification, it would help those who are reporting our proceedings.

Drug Education

2. **Jim Dobbin** (Heywood and Middleton): What steps the Government are taking to improve drug education among young people. [91806]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Jacqui Smith): To protect young people from problematic drug use we must make sure that all young people, particularly the most vulnerable, have access to credible drug education and information.

Almost all schools now have a drug education policy in place and Ofsted reports that the quality of drug education in the classroom is improving year on year. Investment in training programmes for teachers and Connexions advisers, and the national healthy school standard are all providing an important boost to drug education. To build on improvements already made, the Government are implementing a five-year evaluation and research programme called Blueprint.

Jim Dobbin: Is the Minister aware of the excellent work that takes place in the voluntary sector on drug awareness in schools? An example of an organisation that does such work is the North-West Life Education Trust, which is funded by Rotary International in Great Britain and Ireland. It has put together an interesting programme of visits that take place throughout my constituency and Rochdale's local education authority area.

Jacqui Smith: Yes, my hon. Friend makes an important point. We recognise that the voluntary sector's contribution can be important in developing drug education. When young people are asked what they want from drug education, they often express an interest in using external visitors, for example. We welcome that contribution. We are aware of the work of Life Education Centres and its chief executive is represented on the advisory group for the Blueprint programme that I mentioned earlier. It is up to local schools to determine the extent to which their drug education policies use outside organisations and voluntary organisations. I certainly believe, and research suggests, that effective drug education is best provided by a partnership involving teachers, parents, voluntary organisations and pupils themselves in order to determine the programmes.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Are the Government giving consideration to, or undertaking studies on, cannabis liberalisation and the liberalisation of other so-called "soft" drugs?

Jacqui Smith: As I think the right hon. Gentleman is aware, research is being conducted on the health effects of using cannabis with regard to certain illnesses. The Government's position is now clear. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has proposed the reclassification of cannabis. The message for young people remains clear: cannabis is a harmful drug and taking cannabis is illegal—our drug education programmes are based on that message. We must also recognise that programmes should be credible and honest about relative health problems associated with different drugs. It is important that we continue to focus our attention and targets on ensuring that we reduce the use of class A drugs, which are clearly the most harmful drugs.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): I wonder what role sports stars and sporting clubs could play in the fight for drug education. Could that role be further extended through schools in the future?

The Minister for Sport (Mr. Richard Caborn): I think that my hon. Friend knows about the World Anti-Doping Agency. UK Sport signed off a memorandum of understanding supporting the agency in Moscow only a few weeks ago. UK Sport now has information available on its website or by other means. It is doing everything that it can to show the harmful effects of drugs and doping. We are trying to eradicate the use of drugs in competition, because it is cheating. We want to rid sport of cheating.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): The Minister will be aware that one drug kills more people than any other. That drug is tobacco, which kills roughly 300 people a

[Mr. David Rendel]

day. Is the Minister aware that one in four young people can become addicted to tobacco after sampling just two or three cigarettes? Would it not improve education in our schools if the message to young people were not so much "Do not smoke" as "Do not even start smoking because you may become addicted very quickly"?

Jacqui Smith: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point that is being reflected in guidance and practice. We need to take a broad approach that covers illegal drugs as well as tobacco and alcohol. The Government are concerned about young people taking up smoking because of the problems that that can lead to in later life. That is why many of our education programmes deal with the harm that tobacco can do; it is also why we are taking action on banning tobacco advertising.

Youth Services

3. **Phil Hope** (Corby): What action is being taken to improve the statutory and voluntary youth service. [91807]

5. **Alan Simpson** (Nottingham, South): What assessment the Government have made of the need for a statutory policy for youth services. [91809]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Ivan Lewis): On 18 December 2002, I published the Government's reform and investment plan for youth services and youth work over the next five years in a document entitled "Transforming Youth Work—Resourcing Excellent Youth Services". The document sets out, for the first time, the Government's vision for high quality, well managed and properly resourced services. It is an excellent document and I will circulate it to all hon. Members in the next fortnight.

Additional investment over the next three years means that there is now no excuse for local authorities to cut youth service budgets. Indeed, we expect to see significant increases in spending year on year.

The document also sets out, for the first time, a legislative basis to give the Secretary of State the power to intervene when a local authority is clearly failing to provide an acceptable level of service. He will not hesitate to use that power in circumstances where young people are being short-changed.

Phil Hope: May I record my support for this unique parliamentary occasion? It demonstrates that the whole House is committed to young people.

We would all agree that the youth service has been neglected for decades, under successive Governments. I very much welcome the document that was published in December. It was also welcomed by youth services and one leading practitioner described it as a "landmark document" and possibly the most important for 40 years. That is a tribute to the Government's proposals for the future. The document contains an excellent structure for better delivery of youth services, but when will we see a step-by-step implementation plan? Is the Minister confident that local authorities that have failed to spend on youth services in the past will deliver the kind of expenditure called for in the document?

Mr. Lewis: I would like to begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend. Over the years, even when it has not been fashionable, he has been among the most passionate advocates of youth services.

For the first time, this framework allows us to tell local authorities what we expect of them. If local authorities are not delivering the high quality services that young people deserve, we will have the power to intervene. We will not hesitate to do that if we feel that local authorities are not providing an adequate or sufficient youth service. We believe that the resources that we are investing give local authorities no excuse.

My hon. Friend asked about implementation. When we produce strategies, the main issue is to get the delivery right. People in communities up and down the country—especially young people—must start to see a tangible improvement in the quality of services to which they have access. Every local authority will be required to produce a pledge to young people, setting out what young people in their area can expect. That pledge should involve young people in the development of services. There should be an approach to community cohesion that brings together young people from different cultures and backgrounds, so that we can build positive relationships.

We also want to see far more intergenerational work. One of the sadnesses in many communities is the breakdown in relationships between old and young. We are going to come forward with proposals on those issues—a new curriculum for youth work, the contribution of Connexions and, most important, the commitment to engaging with the voluntary and community sectors.

We must make it clear that local authorities cannot do it on their own. They have to make best use of innovative and imaginative voluntary organisations, which are particularly good at getting to some of the hard-to-reach people who find it difficult to access statutory services. At a national level, our priority for next year is to develop a substantive work force development strategy. We know that we have major recruitment and retention problems, and it is vital that we have highly skilled, highly qualified, high quality people on the front line of youth services, both as youth workers and in management positions.

Alan Simpson: I welcome the increased clarity of directions and resources that we are offering local authorities. However, we are ducking the central problem—the failure of Governments to place youth services on a statutory basis. It has always been one of the softer targets—one of the services that local authorities can cut. We would be better advised to grasp the nettle and place youth services on a statutory footing. Perhaps we should follow the lead of the French authorities, which have an audit duty; they have at least to define the range and condition of sports and leisure amenities available to the youth in their areas. Without such an audit, we do not even know the amenity base that we are working from.

Mr. Lewis: A central part of our strategy is that, for the first time, we have defined adequate and sufficient services in a range of areas. Now that we have done that, existing legislation gives the Secretary of State the power to intervene and direct local authorities that are not providing an adequate youth service either to provide those services themselves or to insist that another organisation better able to do so take over that responsibility. The proposals in the document effectively put youth services on a statutory footing for the first time. It gives us the power to intervene and direct; we hope that we do not have to use the power, but we shall not hesitate to use it if local authorities that are now being given significantly more resources for youth services fail to fulfil their responsibilities to young people.

Bob Spink (Castle Point): Is the Minister aware of the youth service policy, and does he agree with it, of having an arbitrary age limit of 25 years old, which excludes people from some clubs? Some of those with severe learning difficulties who are excluded have come to rely on those clubs or social activities; indeed, they bring an awful lot to the clubs by their attendance. Does the Minister agree that their arbitrary exclusion should be avoided, so that they can continue to bring something to the clubs? Is that not an area where common sense rather than prescription would be the best policy?

Mr. Lewis: I empathise with the point made by the hon. Gentleman. Before being elected to Parliament, I spent many years working with people who had learning disabilities. The point is particularly relevant, although I have to say that the idea of 25-year-old adults attending youth activities is entirely inappropriate and unacceptable. We must have leisure activities that are appropriate for their age.

I understand how people can feel if a service is withdrawn or if, as they get older, they no longer have access to the same quality of life support that they previously enjoyed. I understand carers' concerns about that, but the challenge is to create age-appropriate services that give those with learning disabilities the opportunity to fulfil their potential and to participate in a mainstream way in the life of their local community.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have a short administrative announcement. Would Ministers please move two places to their right?

Citizenship

4. **Mr Andrew Miller** (Ellesmere Port & Neston): What plans the Government have to promote active citizenship among young people. [91808]

The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety (Mr. John Denham): The Government are committed to enabling our young people to voice their views and to take a full and active part in society. We are already encouraging young people to become more involved in the life of their schools and communities through a number of measures. Statutory citizenship education, which was introduced into the national curriculum last September, encourages young people to consider social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy. The millennium volunteers programme offers young people a practical opportunity to get involved in their communities. Government Departments have made a commitment to involve young people in the development and design of their services and policies.

The UK Youth Parliament is also an excellent means of encouraging young people to be more aware of democracy and citizenship. I know that some members of the UKYP are here with us today. I am pleased to be able to announce that the Government will provide continued funding for UKYP next year at an enhanced level—tangible evidence of our commitment to encouraging active citizenship among young people.

We have done substantial work on getting young people involved and that is linked directly to new initiatives by the Electoral Commission to encourage young people to vote and to ensure that they are on the voting lists.

Mr. Miller: I welcome my hon. Friend's response. However, there are different problems in different parts of the country, reflecting the varying sizes and structures of local authorities. In my own local authority, which is a small district council, a great deal of positive work is being done to promote youth council work. It has been a tremendous success. Sadly, I have yet to find a little pot of gold that I can tap into—and I am looking at four here—to assist in the development of that programme. It is working. Those of us who represent constituencies that are a considerable distance from London find it very difficult to bring parties of young people down here. The Government should consider that problem. As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills said, local authorities cannot do those things on their own; they need help. I hope that the Government will consider that very carefully.

Mr. Denham: We need to be clear about what can be funded. Some activities are the responsibility of the Government to fund. For example, we will be funding the UK Youth Parliament with £110,000 of core funding. We will be providing £55,000 to support regional development, as we recognise that not everybody can partake in national activities.

I am strongly of the view that local youth councils and local youth forums should not be merely an add-on to local authority activity. Local authorities deliver services that will affect young people, and those services will be better if they consult the young people at whom they are aimed. It is unreasonable to expect central Government to pay for the development of local plans; we expect local authorities to do that as part of their business. Local authorities should build in support for youth participation and consultation during every working day rather than do it when there is an extra pot of money available.

Matthew Green (Ludlow): May I, on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, welcome these cross-cutting youth questions? It is a very positive way of re-engaging young people with the political process. The Minister wishes to promote active citizenship, but what would he say to a 16 or 17-year-old who is in work and paying income tax, national insurance and council tax but who cannot vote for the politicians who set those taxes?

Mr. Denham: I would say to the hon. Gentleman and to the representatives of the Conservative party that

[Mr. Denham]

there has been consultation with young people on the voting age. It should be for the Electoral Commission to decide whether it wants to review independently the arguments for and against a change in the voting age. Several issues must be considered. One is rights, which affect how the question is framed, but we must also consider whether a change in voting age would make a significant difference to the declining participation of young people in the electoral process. We will consider all these matters when the Electoral Commission launches its consultation next month. I know that many young people will take an interest.

Claire Ward (Watford): Voting is just one of the responsibilities involved in active citizenship. Will the Minister review the ages at which children acquire rights to a range of things in Britain? On the national Youth Parliament and the Government's support for it, will the Minister and the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills ensure that all schools actively promote the opportunity for their pupils to vote in the elections for members of the Youth Parliament?

Mr. Denham: We would strongly encourage all schools and all local education authorities to do that—the level of involvement and commitment across the country is varied—and to do so in a way that represents a form of a democratic election. Within the last year, we have taken the powers to give statutory guidance to schools and school governors on how they should involve and listen to young people in the management of schools, sometimes by schools councils, sometimes in other ways. I would pushing the boundaries of this Question Time if I were to answer the wider question of whether there should be a total review of everything, from when somebody can drive to when they can pay tax, or own a firearm.

Mr. Charles Hendry (Wealden): Does the Minister agree that the Connexions service, which the Government set up to give young people advice, can play an important role in helping young people to become active citizens, by giving them information on volunteering opportunities? If so, does he share the concerns of many voluntary organisations that are increasingly frustrated by the fact that Connexions makes it harder to give such advice, because it acts as a block on their work? Can he confirm that, although the two are expected to work in partnership, this year Connexions has a budget of £334 million, yet it spent only £2 million with voluntary organisations? How do the Government think that they can encourage young people to get involved in more voluntary activity, when they are so evidently failing to develop a partnership with the voluntary sector?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Ivan Lewis): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the benefits of getting young people involved in active citizenship through voluntary work, and there is a consensus on that in the House. He did not refer to the millennium volunteers project, which the Government introduced, and which has been an incredible success in getting young people under 16 involved in voluntary work, and continuing with that voluntary work in later life.

I agree that the Connexions service is a vital new youth service that, through work with other youth services, has the potential to transform the opportunities available to young people. It can provide universal high quality advice, information and guidance to young people, work in a more intense way with young people with serious problems who need a lot of support and mentoring assistance, and ensure that such young people have access to the right specialist services.

I share the hon. Gentleman's view on the Connexions service's engagement with the voluntary sector. There were difficulties in the early days, although Connexions has not been going very long. That is why we recently issued clear guidance to all the Connexions partnerships about how they are expected to work and engage with voluntary and community-based organisations. I shall monitor those partnership relationships and expect to see tangible improvement in the engagement between the partnerships and the voluntary organisations.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): One aspect of active citizenship, as the Minister said, is having one's voice heard in the services that affect one. Will the Health Minister say what steps are being taken to ensure that young people's voices as patients and carers are heard through the forums?

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Jacqui Smith): My hon. Friend makes an important point that is linked to the point made earlier that we should engage young people in the mainstream of public service development. She rightly referred to developments in the health service, such as the setting up of the commission for patient involvement and the patient forum, which are to be set up in every trust. We have already ensured that the consideration of how young people can be engaged in that work is an important priority for that commission. I expect to see efforts made in those patient forums to ensure that young people get a direct voice. We are now considering what we need to do nationally to ensure that there is a young people's voice in that commission for patient involvement. That will ensure that their voice can be heard.

My hon. Friend also mentioned young carers. Some important work is being supported by both the Government's carers initiative and local schemes to ensure that young carers benefit from the increased investment, and that their voices are heard alongside those of other carers. That work also includes giving advice to schools on identifying and supporting young carers in their important role.

Sport Action Zone (Stoke-on-Trent)

6. **Ms Joan Walley** (Stoke-on-Trent, North): What progress has been made in involving young people in a sport action zone in Stoke-on-Trent. [91810]

The Minister for Sport (Mr. Richard Caborn): I had the opportunity to visit my hon. Friend's constituency to discuss the sport action zone. As she knows, Sport England, which is the Government's agent, is working on 18 further schemes. Twelve schemes are already operational, and a further 18 will be rolled out in the not-too-distant future.

Sport England has been working closely with Stoke-on-Trent city council and the strategic partnership to develop a bid for the whole of Stoke. As my hon. Friend knows, there are two contenders for the region, and I understand that Stoke is making a strong case.

Ms Walley: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply, and I hope that our bid will be even stronger as a result of this debate. We are desperately in need of extra support in meeting the city's health needs, although extra work is being done on employment and skills. We feel that the power of sport could transform the aspirations of the people of Stoke-on-Trent.

Will the Government look urgently at the merits of our case? We must encourage people to aim high, and sport can bring about a transformation. However, I am concerned because there has been a moratorium on decisions by Sport England since we submitted our bid last November. We had expected a result in January, but we understand that no further decisions will be made until April, because of the regional bodies that have been set up. Please can we have a decision—and the right one—as soon as possible?

Mr. Caborn: The new chairman of Sport England, Patrick Carter, has asked that there be no further expenditure for the next three months so that the organisation can take a total view. However, I do not believe that the sport action zones are under threat, and I hope that answers will be made available around April.

The involvement of young people in the Stoke-on-Trent scheme is important, and I commend the consultation. Young people have developed the scheme through a young people's local strategic partnership. Two of those young people will be on the main local strategic partnership, which is making the bid to Sport England.

There have been wide consultations with young people, which have been extremely well received. One of the scheme's dimensions therefore relates very much to young people. Indeed, in the real world, and in a practical way, the scheme is very much aimed at the young people of Stoke-on-Trent.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): Whether or not Stoke-on-Trent's bid is successful, sport action zones are a potential success. There are also encouraging early results from the Youth Justice Board's splash scheme, which shows a 5.2 per cent. reduction in youth crime in the participating areas. Has the Department factored those things into the cost-benefit analysis of bringing the Olympics to this country?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the Minister that we are talking about Stoke-on-Trent.

Young Prisoners

7. **Mr. Paul Burstow** (Sutton and Cheam): What the Government's policy is on children in prisons. [91811]

The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety (Mr. John Denham): With the support of the Youth Justice Board, the Government have provided a wide range of alternative sentences for juveniles and young offenders, including community sentences. However, the most serious or persistent young offenders should receive a custodial sentence.

The Prison Service has created discrete juvenile institutions, which are for juveniles only. There are also juvenile units in young offenders institutions. As a matter of policy, juveniles and adults are separated in Prison Service establishments. A small number of juveniles may, on occasion, be held outside juvenile institutions for security or medical reasons, or to be close to court. Where possible, they will be held separately from adults.

Mr. Burstow: I am grateful to the Minister. He will know that over the past 10 years the number of children in custody in adult prisons has doubled. The figure today stands at 2,609. He will also be aware of the report "Safeguarding Children" by the joint inspectors, which expressed many concerns about young offenders institutions. Can he and his colleague from the Department of Health comment on the situation since the judgment by the court in respect of the judicial review called by the Howard League? What extra steps are the Government taking to tackle what Mr. Justice Mumby described as

"degrading, offensive and totally unacceptable treatment"

of children, to ensure that all children enjoy their United Nations convention rights? The judge in that case predicted that it was only a matter of time before there was a successful challenge under the human rights legislation. Can he comment on those matters, particularly in the light of the fact that it appears that the Home Office and the Department of Health do not have the same view about whether the Children Act 1989 applies within prisons?

Mr. Denham: There are two points there. It is misleading to talk about the number of young people in adult prisons without allowing for the segregation of those young people from adults. The number of young people who may mix with adults—meaning 18-year-olds and 19-year-olds—is much smaller than the figure that he gave. There is a small number of cases, for example, in the mother and baby unit at Holloway, in which young women may mix with older women. It is wrong to give the impression that there is a routine mixing of juveniles with ordinary adult offenders in our prisons. That is not the case.

Mr. Justice Mumby made it clear that one phrase in the guidance said that the Children Act did not apply. He was right to say that that was wrong in law. He also recognised that the philosophy of the guidance concerning young people in the prison system was in line with the aims of the Children Act. Child protection committees are in place, and we are training our staff. We are linking into social services work with young offenders. Some practical issues have to be tackled. If somebody is, say, 200 miles away from his home area—he might be there particularly to ensure that he is in a juvenile institution and not in an adult prison—it is difficult for there to be the necessary practical working links with the social services. We know that improvements are needed, but a substantial commitment has already been made and we shall build on that, following the judgment.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling): As co-Chair of the United Kingdom Youth Parliament, some of the members of which are here, I welcome this session and the Minister's comment about funding—it is very good news. Can I ask the Minister about young people and children in prison? We are locking more and more young people up, for longer and from an earlier age. While that makes us appear tough, the re-offending rate is something that we are all concerned about. Can the Minister describe further what happens in prison to encourage those young people to turn away from crime and to reduce their re-offending? What structures are in place to support those young people and their families when they leave prison after three or four months and to stop them from going straight back into a life of crime?

Mr. Denham: We are aiming to improve the quality of the education and training that is provided in young offenders institutions. There is a new senior post of head of learning and skills in each establishment, and special educational needs co-ordinators and learning support assistants have been appointed on a ratio of one assistant for every ten prisoners. Each young person has an entitlement of 30 hours' education, training and personal development activity per week, as recommended by the social exclusion unit in its report "Bridging the Gap".

We have concentrated on basic skills. Many of those in young offenders institutions lack the most basic literacy and numeracy skills, and people in those institutions should receive recognition for their achievements—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Could the Minister speak up? He is not being heard at the back.

Mr. Denham: Some 2,000 young offenders achieved successes in basic literacy and numeracy skills last year. Those improvements in education within the service are enormously important. Equally important is the target that we have set to ensure that 90 per cent. of all young people coming out of custody are engaged in education, training or employment by April 2004. We expect not just those in the young offenders institutions but the youth offending team and the Connexions service to work with those young offenders to ensure that we have a high rate of successful placements when people come out of institutions.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): We have heard that the number of children in prison has increased in 10 years from 1,328 to more than 2,600. Why does the Minister think that that has happened? Is it because we are better at apprehending young offenders? Is it because they are committing more serious offences—or is it because we are becoming worse at providing other and more appropriate forms of care and custody?

Mr. Denham: There are several reasons why the number of young people receiving custodial sentences is increasing. There has undoubtedly been an upward trend over a long period in the more serious forms of offending by young people. There are two ways in which to reduce the trend, the first of which is the development of successful alternatives to custodial sentences. We spoke earlier about intensive supervision and surveillance programmes targeted on those who would otherwise receive custodial sentences.

However, more preventive work must be done. In the majority of cases in which 15-year-olds were sent to young offender institutions there were signs much earlier in their lives—sometimes as early as five, six or seven years old—when they fell behind with literacy at school. No Government have succeeded in such early prevention, but I hope that the Green Paper on children at risk to be published in the spring will show the way forward.

New Deal

8. **Mr Graham Brady** (Altrincham & Sale West): If the Government will make a statement on the new deal for young people. [91812]

The Minister for Sport (Mr. Richard Caborn): The new deal is providing individual young people with support to help them back into the world of work, such as education and so on. By the end of last September, 400,000 young people had moved into work since 1997.

Mr. Brady: I am sure that the Minister knows that one in four of the jobs provided to young people from the new deal has finished before its 13th week. One of the new deal's problems has been the failure to provide lasting long-term employment. He will also know that, in the second year of the new deal—in April 2000—45,930 young people had been through the new deal, and not just once—they had gone back into it. A revolving door had been established that was keeping people out of the unemployment figures, but they were not being provided with long-term work. Can he give me the up-to-date figure of how many young people have been through the new deal for young people twice, three times or more? How many of them have been through the new deal for young people and subsequently through the new deal 25-plus?

Mr. Caborn: The question shows a weakness in the arrangements, because such matters are not a departmental responsibility of the Ministers present today. I will write to the hon. Gentleman when I receive such information.

The new deal has been a great success. I represent an inner-city constituency, and the rate of unemployment of its young people has been reduced considerably. Furthermore, 79 per cent. of young people who have entered the new deal for a second time face long-term employment prospects. It has reduced the unemployment level of young people to the lowest level since the 1970s. By any standards, that must be successful. There can be argument about the statistics, but the hon. Gentleman is denigrating a highly successful scheme. Many young people have been given an opportunity in life that they would not have received, had it not been for the new deal.

3.39 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.51 pm

On resuming—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Hon. Members may note that a unique power has been established by the Chair in pushing four Ministers of the Crown to the Back Benches, but I hope that it will be for the convenience of hon. Members.

Victims of Crime

9. **Mr. Martin Salter** (Reading, West): What action the Government are taking to strengthen support for young people who are victims of criminal assaults by other young people. [91813]

10. **Mrs. Helen Clark** (Peterborough): What action the Government are taking to reduce the number of young people who are victims of crime. [91814]

The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety (Mr. John Denham): Young people are often the victims of youth crime. Actions such as the street crime initiative have not only reduced street crime overall; they have reduced the extent to which young people have been the victims of crime. In July last year, we introduced new support in the court system for vulnerable and intimidated witnesses, many of whom are young people required to give evidence. In addition, £2 million of the £28 million that we give to Victim Support, is designed to support vulnerable and intimidated witnesses.

Mr. Salter: Considering that one in four permanently excluded school children admitted, in the 2002 MORI youth survey, to stealing a mobile phone, mainly from other young people, does the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills agree that further work is needed to deal with the problem of permanent exclusions to counter the traumatic effect of youth-on-youth crime?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Ivan Lewis): I sympathise with my hon. Friend's point. There is a direct link between permanent exclusion and street crime which we must address. We cannot duck the issue; behaviour and discipline have become a major issue in our schools. Teachers have difficulty with that, and it undermines the ability of young people to learn. There must be support for teachers and head teachers because, in some circumstances, the only option available to them is permanent exclusion.

What is different now is that from September we have insisted that any child who is permanently excluded must have access to full-time education and objective advice to get them reintegrated into mainstream education as soon as possible. In addition, we are putting a tremendous amount of resources into preventive work, so that young people's behaviour does not deteriorate to such an extent that permanent exclusion is the only option. In excellence in cities areas, learning mentors in units in schools allow teachers to withdraw young people for a short time to work on a one-to-one basis and get the behaviour sorted out before they return to class.

We must also focus on teacher training. We must give teachers the skills and confidence to manage some of the behaviour and discipline problems that they have to face. In some circumstances, permanent exclusion is the only option, but we must make resources available for preventive work so that young people do not drift into criminal activities.

Mrs. Clark: I am grateful for that reply from the Under-Secretary, as well as for the reply by the Home Office Minister. Will they join me and, I am sure, hon. Members on all sides of the Chamber, in sending condolences to the family in Peterborough of Ross Parker, a 17-year-old killed about a year ago in an unprovoked attack by three young men older than him, who have now been convicted and sent to prison?

Will Ministers also join me in congratulating the Peterborough community in general, the police and the Jack Hunt school led by Chris Hilliard, where Ross was a student, on the tremendous way in which they have worked together to overcome the divisive effects of that tragic incident? Will Ministers visit Peterborough and the school, and perhaps meet Ross's family?

Mr. Denham: I certainly join my hon. Friend in sending condolences to Ross Parker's family. I know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary spoke to them at the time of the murder. I pay tribute to Ross's parents for their clear commitment to ensuring that that tragic event should not prove to be a divisive event in Peterborough. My hon. Friend has said what needs to be said about the work that people have done locally. A huge effort has been made in Peterborough to prevent that event from being even more damaging. If my hon. Friend thinks that it would be of value to the community, I will certainly consider visiting her constituency.

Richard Younger-Ross (Teignbridge): Does the Minister accept that one of the best ways to help a young victim of crime may be to ensure that the period between the incident and the trial is as short as possible? Cases in my constituency have taken over a year to come to trial, and schools that have approached me on the matter are concerned about the impact of that on the victim's education, as well as the damage that the long-drawn-out period does to the perpetrator of the crime.

Mr. Denham: That is an important point. Members will be aware that when this Government were elected in 1997, it took 142 days on average for a case involving a young offender to come to court. We made that a priority, and for a number of months the average has been less than half that. Some cases will take less time to come to court, just as some will take more.

It is also important that we provide good support to young people who are required to appear at those trials, whether they have been victims of crime or are witnesses. Among other initiatives, including Victim Support, which we have discussed, I have talked to the Department for Education and Skills about ways in which the Connexions service could provide additional support to young witnesses who are about to go through

[Mr. Denham]

the trauma of reliving their experience in court. It is important that we support young victims of crime through a very difficult time in their lives.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): What consideration are the Government giving in the development of their child protection strategy to assaults on children by their parents? Are the Government considering removing the "reasonable chastisement" defence in respect of physical punishment?

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Jacqui Smith): As my hon. Friend knows, the Government carried out a consultation on the issue. Although I know that my hon. Friend and other colleagues disagreed with it, many people felt that the law should not be changed to achieve what people see effectively as a ban on parents smacking their children.

My hon. Friend referred to the defence of reasonable chastisement. After the changes to human rights legislation, it is necessary for any court in this country which is considering a case of assault against a young person in which the defence of reasonable chastisement is being used, to consider the age and, if necessary, gender of the child and the kind of assault that was undertaken. The court must seriously consider whether the case constituted assault.

With the exception of reasonable chastisement, exactly the same law applies to adults and children. My hon. Friend and others believe that we should make it impossible for parents to smack their children. As I have said previously, that would not help us in the important job, to which my hon. Friend rightly draws attention, of preventing serious abuse against children. There is a clear distinction between a parent smacking their child—something that many of us may deplore—and violence against a child. It does not help us to make that distinction by changing the law as he suggests. We have asked the Attorney-General to keep the defence of reasonable chastisement under review, and assure him that we continue to monitor the situation. I share his concern that we need to tackle abuse against children. That should be our top priority.

School Governing Bodies

11. **Paul Holmes** (Chesterfield): What plans the Government have to require schools to include pupil representatives as associate members of school governing bodies. [91815]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Ivan Lewis): From 1 September it will be possible for pupils and others to be appointed as associate members of school governing bodies, enabling them to attend full governing body meetings and to be members of governing body committees. We have no plans to make it compulsory for governing bodies to make such appointments.

Paul Holmes: I thank the Minister for his reply. I welcome it, at least in part. When I was teaching at my second school in the 1980s, we had an effective series of pupil school governors. Unfortunately, Lady Thatcher's Government did away with them.

Many schools today have effective school councils; they use pupils to interview candidates for middle management and even for headship posts, as my last school did. Ofsted is now proposing to take evidence from pupils when doing school inspections. In the light of all that, and if promoting active citizenship is to mean anything, will the Minister assure us that the Government will reconsider the lack of urgency in, or commitment to, the matter of requiring all schools to allow pupils to become full, active school governors?

Mr. Lewis: If the hon. Gentleman was teaching in the 1980s, I could have had the privilege of being one of his pupils. The substantive point is that the Government are not neutral on that issue. We believe that it is part of the school standards agenda actively to involve young people in making key decisions about schools. How the schools do that must be left to them. It would be entirely inappropriate for us to prescribe the models that should be deployed in those circumstances.

If young people are to be motivated, the school environment should reflect their needs; young people should be turned on to learning, not turned off. Their active engagement and involvement in key roles and in the decision-making process is vital for the school community and for the skills that we want young people to develop for later life.

Another point is that the Connexions service actively involves young people in the recruitment policy; they recruit personal advisers and, in some circumstances, are involved in selecting chief executives. We are making significant progress. It is important to raise educational standards—the matter should not be treated as a sideshow—and to ensure that young people feel positively about their educational experience.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I thank hon. Members for enduring this afternoon's technical vicissitudes. I repeat that I would be delighted to hear privately from hon. Members about today's proceedings. It has been difficult to balance the need to achieve breadth with the need to ensure that penetrating serial questions are asked. We shall have to think about that and decide whether we should attempt to take fewer questions. I am sure that all those matters will be reviewed.

I also announce that there is to be a special meeting of the all-party children group with members of the Youth Parliament, now that the question session has ended. It will take place in Committee Room 21, and I understand that any colleagues who would like to go along for a discussion about what has taken place will be extremely welcome.

I propose suspending the sitting for two minutes to allow people who are not staying for the debate to leave.

Sitting suspended.

Pathways to Work

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Charlotte Atkins.]*

4.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Maria Eagle): May I say how pleased I am to open the debate on the Green Paper "Pathways to work: Helping people into employment", which we published by way of a statement in the House on 18 November 2002? I take this opportunity to remind hon. Members that the consultation closes on 10 February 2003, so there is still plenty of time for hon. Members and others who have an interest in these matters to send us their comments and suggestions.

It is appropriate that we are considering the issues that are raised by the Green Paper during the European year of people with disabilities—I was pleased to attend the celebration launch yesterday. Work, and access to work, is one of the biggest and most important issues facing disabled people. One of the key goals of the Department for Work and Pensions is the improvement of the employment rate for disabled people. That is also a crucial part of the wider Government strategy for the full inclusion of disabled people in our society. We have a twin-track strategy to make progress, which is both facilitating pathways into work—that is what the Green Paper and this debate are about—and improving the civil rights of disabled people while seeking to end discrimination against them, whether in the workplace or anywhere else.

Hon. Members who are assiduous in respect of their duties—I have only to look around to see how assiduous they are—will have seen that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions made a written ministerial statement yesterday announcing our intention to publish, for pre-legislative scrutiny, a disability Bill in draft later this year. That will enable us to deal with the gaps and omissions that remain in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. That, taken together with the changes that we are making in order to comply with article 13 of the employment directive, and with the full implementation of the remaining provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act by October 2004, will represent the biggest expansion of civil rights for disabled people ever seen in this country.

We have an environment that is conducive to change and which will enable disabled people to take their rightful place in the workplace. We need, however, to take practical steps to help disabled people overcome the barriers to work that they face. That is what "Pathways to Work" is all about.

I will briefly set out the scale of the problem. The good news is that, because we have record levels of employment in a strong and stable economy, the environment in this country is conducive to progress. Almost 1.5 million new jobs have been created since 1997. Some 74.3 per cent. of people of working age are in work—that is the highest percentage ever in the UK and it is the second best of all the G7 countries. We also have the lowest unemployment level in the G7 for the first time in nearly 50 years. Some of the most disadvantaged in the labour market have benefited most from the developments. For example, long-term unemployment has fallen by 75 per cent., which is greater than the fall in the general level of unemployment. There has been a 500,000 fall in the level of unemployment.

We can realistically hope to make progress in respect of the employment levels of disabled people, and we have, but the obstacles are formidable. A trend is emerging throughout the developed world of increasing numbers of working-age people being in receipt of sickness or incapacity benefits with no evidence of a commensurate increase in ill health in the population as a whole.

That trend is apparent in Britain. There are currently 2.7 million people on incapacity benefits, which includes severe disablement allowance. There was a 6 per cent. increase between 1997 and 2002. Before the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) suggests that that does not represent progress, I gently remind him that the last Conservative Government presided over a 26 per cent. increase in those numbers between 1992 and 1997.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry) *rose—*

Maria Eagle: I will give way in a moment.

In case the hon. Gentleman thinks that I am being selective with the years that I have mentioned, the number of people on sickness and incapacity benefits tripled between 1979 and 1997.

Mr. Boswell: The Minister does me a slight disservice, because I rose on a different point. My wife comes from industrial south Wales. We should recognise that geographic areas that have a history of high unemployment, deprivation and relatively low health tend to express the trend mentioned by the Minister. Perhaps there is evidence of a slight cultural and local factor as well as a purely objective derivation.

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman is right. I apologise for giving way to him on a point to which he was not intending to reply. There are geographical variations and other types of variation as well, all of which require careful study before deciding what can be done about the problems. As well as the rate of increase of those on incapacity benefits slowing there are other good signs—a narrowing in the gap between the unemployment rate of the working-age population as a whole and that of disabled people, for example. Between 1998–2002, the employment rate of working-age disabled people rose by about 4.5 per cent. It is still below the average for working-age people who are not disabled, but there is evidence of a narrowing, which should be welcomed.

We must remember that disabled people are still five times as likely to be unemployed as non-disabled people. In order to ensure that disabled people benefit from the increasing economic prosperity that I have outlined, we must close that gap.

What are the relevant facts about the benefit that will help us to come up with solutions? Almost half of all those on incapacity benefit are on the benefit for more than five years. Those on incapacity benefit for more than one year remain on that benefit for eight years, on average. However, we know that 90 per cent. of those coming on to incapacity benefit expect to return to work

[Maria Eagle]

when they first make their claim, so the trend is not evidence of malingering, scrounging or deliberately trying to play the system.

The people concerned want to work and expect to return to work. We know that 1 million disabled people on benefit say that they would like to work, but we are not as good at helping them to meet their aspirations as we are at helping those who are more traditionally unemployed. We must try to improve.

We have made some helpful changes—increasing flexibility in the benefit system, for example, making work pay and offering specialist help by way of disability employment programmes. The incapacity benefit linking rules, which were extended in 1998 to 52 weeks, enable people on that benefit to try out work. If, because of their health condition or for any other reason, they are not able to remain in employment, they can go back on benefit at the level at which they were before. To somebody with a health condition, the insecurity of worrying about taking a job and then losing it, and where that puts that person in relation to their benefit was a big disincentive to disabled people to try out work. The linking rules should remove that disincentive. We should remember that if a disabled person is in receipt of disabled person's tax credit, the linking rules extend to two years.

There is also a change in the therapeutic earnings rules, as they used to be known, in respect of permitted work. It allows people on incapacity benefit to work for an unlimited time earning up to £20 a week. If they work for less than 16 hours a week, they can retain their benefit while earning up to £67.50 a week for 26 weeks, and for a further 26 weeks if that will assist them. The therapeutic earnings rules used to require a doctor's certificate stating that work would be of benefit to somebody's health condition. That is no longer necessary. We have also uprated the earnings limit in incapacity benefit, which enables people to keep some of their benefit in line with the national minimum wage. Such changes help to make work pay and ease the difficult transition from being on benefit to being in work.

In addition to doing what we can to increase the flexibilities in the benefit rules, we have also, as a Department, improved our advisory services. We have developed some of our specialist disability employment programmes. For example, the creation of Jobcentre Plus is designed to provide a personalised service to those who require our assistance with getting back into work. That sort of more customer-focused, individualised service can assist only when helping people who are facing multiple barriers to work.

We have some long-standing programmes, such as workstep, although it has been reformed from the old support and employment programme to emphasise progression into non-supported work environments. Programmes such as access to work assist individuals in dealing with the costs of their disability to the extent that it is a barrier to work. New programmes, such as the new deal for disabled people, are trying innovative ways of helping disabled people into the workplace.

For many years, our services have attempted to provide additional assistance and, as I go round the country, I value the work of the disability employment advisers and the network of often very dedicated people who are skilled at assisting local disabled people into work. That work is ongoing and we are learning from it, but we need to do more.

The Green Paper outlines the next steps, which are concerned with how we can learn from what we have done already to improve the service that we can offer to people on sickness and incapacity benefits who want to work. I will briefly outline some of our ideas. We believe that a more tailored and intensive support system should be delivered at the point at which people start to receive incapacity benefits. I am referring to the flow on to the benefit, the point at which people are most job-ready. Having just come out of work, people are often at their most ambitious to get back to it and have expectations that they will. We believe that an intervention at that point could be effective, so we intend to deliver more intensive support in a new package of help.

As hon. Members will recall, having read the document, we intend to pilot the approach in six different areas—three pilots starting in October and three further pilots starting next April, with almost £97 million worth of new resources to establish whether we can devise a system that will work. The basis of it is that early, frequent support from skilled personal advisers, direct access to a range of specialist programmes and clear financial incentives to work will make a real difference to people as they start to receive incapacity benefits.

As for the better framework of support, those who are eligible for it in the pilot areas will receive an intensive series of work-focused interviews. They will not be compulsory for everybody with every condition. There will be exemptions because the package is devised to help those who are able to, and want to, get back to work, not to put disabled people and people with severe conditions through some kind of hoop in order to prove that they deserve their benefits. The approach is not coercive but supportive.

The personal adviser and the disabled person will produce action plans to set out a way of going forward and meeting aspirations to return to work. We recognise that our personal advisers will need new and better skills to deal with the client group because interventions will be more difficult. The advice will not be as straightforward as some personal advice that we can give now in Jobcentre Plus.

There will be direct access to a wider range of help including joint programmes that will join job-focused support with rehabilitation in conjunction with local NHS providers. That has great potential to be very effective.

Many of those on incapacity benefit—about 35 per cent., from memory—have a mental impairment of one kind or another, whether that is a learning disability or a mental illness such as depression. About 22 per cent. of people on incapacity benefit have back pain or musculo-skeletal difficulties. If there were interventions and rehabilitations at that level, many of those people would be able to return to work, and many aspire to do that.

We had excellent results when we piloted such an approach in Salford and Bristol, and I shall briefly outline some of them because they are encouraging. The pilot involved 91 volunteers who were on a range of benefits. Fifty were on incapacity benefit, 27 were on jobseeker's allowance, and the rest were inactive or on no benefits. About two thirds of the people had been sacked or had resigned from work because of back pain. They had been out of work for an average of three years and had suffered from back pain for an average of eight and a half years. The volunteers undertook courses in groups ranging in size from eight to 12 people. The programme was quite short because it lasted for four to six weeks. More than 95 per cent. of the people who started the course completed it.

Six months after the programme had ceased, 40 per cent. of the participants were in paid employment, which was full-time employment in almost all cases, and 25 per cent. were in job training education or voluntary work, and were thus edging closer toward the labour market. The results from the intervention are interesting and promising. We aim to pilot the scheme in a more widely more scientific manner in order to determine whether it can help.

We will also offer an improved visible financial incentive: the return to work credit. It is tremendously important to offer unambiguously a better-off calculation that works for people if we expect them to go back to work. None of us would choose to work for nothing. We like our work for many reasons, but pay is certainly one of those. It is not reasonable for us to expect people who have been out of the labour market for some time to go back to work for the love of it, although work can have other beneficial effects. People, especially those with health conditions such as depression, find that going back to work is a healthy thing to do. However, that does not remove the requirement to ensure unambiguously that those who make the effort receive a financial reward.

The return to work credit would operate through Jobcentre Plus. It would be £40 a week for 52 weeks for those who return to work but earn less than £15,000 a year. That will send a strong signal and it will be a popular measure that will have an impact on those who wish to return to work. We are also considering extending the advisers discretionary fund of up to £300 for any individual case.

I often go around the country meeting people who work for Jobcentre Plus and the Department, and I am often struck by the imagination, hard work and dedication of many of our staff. The advisers discretionary fund is an active tool that is entirely based on the discretion of the adviser, and it can remove those last difficult barriers to returning to work. Increasing the payment to up to £300 could have a major impact in tackling the last barriers in a flexible way, and will be great value for money.

We also want to make sure that there is better support for people with health problems who are on jobseeker's allowance. According to the Green Paper, some people fail their medical assessment—the personal capability assessment—and end up having to come off incapacity benefit. Many go back on to jobseeker's allowance. Such people do not necessarily receive the help getting back to work that they might reasonably expect.

We want to ensure that we do not clock up the fact that someone is no longer eligible for incapacity benefit as a success, rather that we help that person into work. We intend to make sure that such people receive specialist help, including personal advice, and straight away have new deal opportunities and a proper jobseeker's agreement. We also want to ensure that we recognise their health needs. Just because someone does not pass the personal capability assessment, it does not necessarily mean that they do not have a health condition. We also intend to focus on those who go back on to jobseeker's allowance, and are therefore technically not on sickness or incapacity benefit.

As I say, the Green Paper is out for consultation at the moment, and that is another reason why I welcome the opportunity to set out our plans. Once the consultation is over and we have considered the responses, we will come forward with suggestions on which of its ideas we will take forward. Before the pilots are extended nationally, we will evaluate them fully. The policy issue of the increasing numbers of our fellow citizens claiming sickness and incapacity benefit and not fully receiving the help that we give to jobseekers is a major problem that needs to be dealt with. If we came up with interventions that allowed us to deal with the issue, it would be a major success in social policy terms, and would be a great boost to our commitment and determination to ensure the full inclusion of disabled people in our society.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): It might be helpful for Members to know that the debate will conclude at one minute to 6 o'clock. I call Mr. Boswell.

4.27 pm

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): I welcome the opportunity to debate the issue of pathways to work, and I welcome the tone in which the Minister introduced the debate. Those of us who are interested in vocational rehabilitation and the employment of disabled people are, sadly, too few—although some hon. Members have duties elsewhere at the moment—so we can probably treat each other as hon. Friends in terms of our commitment to the subject, even if some of our approaches vary.

As we are giving proper plaudits—or credit where it is due—I am grateful to the Government for announcing the draft disability Bill, which will repair the omissions in civil rights in this subject. However, I should warn the Minister that I came to the debate straight from participating in the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation's annual general meeting. I asked a distinguished and active campaigner in the disability rights movement her opinion of the new Bill, and she replied rather firmly, "When I've seen it, I'll comment on it." We need that caveat; however, the sooner we see it, the better. On balance, it is probably better that the Bill has a period in draft, because it is important that we get it right. The Minister need not necessarily assume that we wish to diminish its provisions, because we may well want to beef it up in some parts. That will depend.

David Cairns (Greenock and Inverclyde): Is it not good that the reason why the Bill is still a considerable way off is to allow for pre-legislative scrutiny? That has not always happened in the past. It will allow people from RADAR and all the other organisations that the

[David Cairns]

hon. Gentleman and I know well from this field to make a contribution that is more likely to have an effect before the Bill is drafted.

Mr. Boswell: There is always an argument about whether to do such things before or after, and some of us are critical of the way in which the Government have, to some extent, compressed scrutiny during the passage of Bills, because I like discussing Bills in detail. If the pre-legislative scrutiny has that effect, and if RADAR and the other organisations can get at the Bill before things are set in stone, I will support it. Time will tell whether that is the case, but I do not wish to start on an ungracious note.

As the Minister said, this subject is very important. Currently, 2.7 million of our people—a very significant proportion of the labour force—are on one incapacity benefit or another. Last year, the Prime Minister rather briskly described that as a scandal; on that, I agree with him.

To make a point that the Minister tried to elicit from me earlier, the number of claimants declined after changes were made in 1995 but is now beginning to creep up again. The Government's introduction to their Green Paper rather archly referred to people on incapacity benefit as not yet fully sharing in the success of the Government's welfare to work strategy. That is a bit of spin, but it makes a genuine point; they must do better, and the Minister concedes that that is the case. My party would back any action that encourages people to stay attached to the labour market, provided that it is not coercive, to borrow a word that she used.

Maria Eagle: When I was preparing for the debate, I noticed a parliamentary question that had been put down by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), who is well known for looking for public expenditure savings. He asked whether it was the Government's policy to pay incapacity benefit for a fixed term. Is that Conservative party policy?

Mr. Boswell: The Minister needs to sort out her grammar. An interrogative is not a statement, and she should not confuse them.

We have a common objective; we want the same thing, so there is no point in messing about. I remember the Minister for Work disarming me once at Question Time by saying, "I think that we all want the same thing, even if we have to dress things up in politically charged language." We will not debate this matter further, because we accept that that is the case.

I welcome an announcement in a reply from the Minister for Work—and therefore from the Minister's Department—to a letter that I wrote on behalf of Rehab UK, which had expressed concerns about its financing of its specialist centres. The announcement put on the record on behalf of the Department that there was an economic benefit in vocational rehabilitation. We know that there is a personal benefit in that, but there is also—if I may put my gloss on it—a good business case for it. I am pleased that the Minister agrees with that.

It is a little chilling—but not very surprising—that the letter went on to say that that is to be judged against other priorities; 'twas ever thus, perhaps. The key is to get the right balance in our judgments, and we need to stimulate interest in achieving a much better understanding of the statistics and the case for these kinds of intervention. I will return to that point.

In this Room a couple of days ago, there was a very absorbing and rather good Adjournment debate on rehabilitation after brain injury. Figures from Rehab UK were quoted that suggested that the number of persons who had been through programmes and were then unable to find work was discouraging; some 60 per cent. of its throughput were unable to find work. There are also indications that the number of people returning to work in this country after a serious brain injury is lower than in the United States of America, for example. I hope that when the Minister looks at good practice in this country, she will also look at lessons that can be learned from other countries.

I will make two further points, neither of which is intended to be contentious. Indeed, to some extent the Minister is beginning to pick them up in the new Green Paper. The first is that there should be a seamless web—not a chasm, as there has often been—in respect of the health end of rehabilitation after such injuries. That does not mean only brain injuries, although those in the field often say that the quality of rehabilitation services for those is a proxy for the quality of rehabilitation services generally.

We understand that treatments start in hospital and may have to go through other primary medical phases but they cannot simply stop there, with the chain being broken. We need a continuous pathway, as the Health Committee's report on brain injury nearly three years ago made clear. Nor can the services be divorced from all the social agencies. It is not only a matter of the Employment Service but of supported or adapted housing, for example. The more we can bring such services together and, to borrow some Government jargon, join them up, the better.

It is in that context that I welcome the Minister's readiness to consider local NHS providers as part of job preparation and preparing people for returning to work. If she wants to examine a case after brain trauma, one of the most interesting that I can offer is the experience of the admirable community brain injury service at Aylesbury under Dr. Andy Tyerman, which has an excellent record. It has won awards, is practically focused and involves all the agencies. Even at the more intense, medical end, the more one is prepared to bring in psychologists to intervene early, the better. There is a common objective: bringing people back to work.

My second general point is implicit in the Green Paper. Maintaining people's position of employment is often at least as important as opening up opportunities for those who are already disabled and may never have participated in employment. We are conducting a double-headed operation, and properly so.

Chronic degeneration that is not remediated by reasonable adjustments can eventually drive people to retire from the work force and on to incapacity benefit. I have been given a figure for weekly entry into IB of 3,300. It is not the figure that is chilling so much as the number of people who go on to IB and stay there for six months or more. The number returning to work after that is disappointingly low.

There are several points to be made about that. The first—I concede to the Minister—is the need for an emphasis on early, though not premature, intervention. Intense therapy and focus are welcome and we will want to monitor how the pilots work. We have come light years from discussions about malingering and other negative phrases, but there is a sense in which these problems compound themselves. If people have an accident or injury or develop a condition and are unable to work comfortably, they may leave the work force. That can become a progressive problem, with people becoming dispirited so that they do not get involved. We are at one in our general approach. We do not want entry to IB to become a one-way ticket to permanent exclusion from the labour force.

It is good sense to set up arrangements to encourage the retention in employment of people with impairments or chronic or growing disabilities. That should be done in parallel with action to create opportunities for people who are being employed for the first time. The two go together. I am always struck by the quite low cost of the adjustments and adaptations that may have to be provided. They can be complicated, as with the brain trauma cases that I mentioned, but it may just be a matter of a better seat or lighting or a different posture. The changes may be almost cost-free. The Minister may like to remind us that the average cost of adjustment is about £175, not the thousands of pounds that many employers fear.

I, too, would like to praise the work of disability employment advisers, although they are sometimes constrained by targets. For example, with learning disabilities and mental health, there is a suggestion that people will not be taken on unless it is felt that they will have returned to employment within six months. That may not always be possible and it may act as a deterrent. DEAs still have too low a profile in the Employment Service and it is not self-evident that that will change automatically with Jobcentre Plus or the new pathways to work.

We should also pay tribute to the specialist agencies in the voluntary sector that give advice, such as the Royal National Institute of the Blind and Mencap, which do immensely valuable work. I shall further discuss that relationship shortly.

The Government need to sort themselves out in respect of some formal problems relating to arrangements for people at work. I have been banging on about that for some time and making some interesting revelations. For example, at one point, the Health and Safety Executive was parked with the Department for Transport, but I am pleased that we managed to get it back to the Department for Work and Pensions.

There is a split—with reason, as there always is in government—in that occupational health is under the Department of Health, including its consultancy arm, NHS Plus, while vocational rehabilitation is under the Department for Work and Pensions. I mention that not to suggest that that cannot work, but to point out that Ministers in both Departments must actively ensure that the interface is successful, especially given some of the schemes that the Minister is introducing today. Ministers must offer a common front or pathway on disability issues. That is sometimes called joined-up government, and the Minister might like to comment on that.

I shall discuss points that arise from, or have been made to me about, the pathways document. Specialist return to work services, protection in work services or adaptation in work services require a heavy input in terms of personnel, time and, to some extent, depending on the case involved, physical resources. We need to concede that they will not always have an immediate or easy outcome. Ministers are fond of adopting targets, and Oppositions of crowing when they are not met. Sometimes the targets change or are reinterpreted. We need not go into that now, but it is an area where we are trying to get the glass half-full, not half-empty. I shall try to reflect that in my comments now and subsequently.

The Government's paper talks of 700,000 people a year coming on to benefits for the first time, and mentions a similar figure—although one is a stock while the other is a flow—for the number of disabled people for whom work would be appropriate but who are not working. The Minister was frank in saying that that is not good enough and that we must do better.

The Minister did not say much about the new deal for disabled people, however, and I have found it hard to get a clear evaluation from the Government of how it is going. She will no doubt say, in part, that it is early days. I accept that, and I make my remarks in the context of realising that it is perhaps better to try than not to be successful at all, but the idea that 94,000 people are involved through all the job brokers and the scheme's agents while it leads to only about 1,400 or 1,600 long-term, secure, continuing placements is depressing. We need to reflect on why that should be and Ministers should ask more questions.

It is no wonder that Ministers have been coy and have not set targets for the pathways to work. Of course, if there are no targets, they cannot be missed. I say that not just for the sake of political debate. There is a real point about how much we should measure and how much should take place experimentally.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): Setting targets in this area could be dangerous. If the Government were to set them and then fall short, they might be tempted to pursue them in a way that would lead to coercion. For this to work, it is crucial that disabled people and those on incapacity benefit do not believe that they are being forced into jobs and that their benefits will be at risk if they do not take them. We must put the message out loud and clear, but setting targets will make it harder to hear.

Mr. Boswell: I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Lady for her comment. In support of her general point, I feel strongly that we should not give people the impression that they are being dragooned into work regardless of how they feel or of how they can perform, and if targets work—I cited a complaint that was put to me—we should resist that firmly.

My point is that Ministers like to set targets in most areas, yet they have been very coy in this one. There might be reasons for that, but it is incumbent on them to look carefully at how the pilots work. They have not always done that; the pilots of the new deal for disabled

[Mr. Boswell]

people were quickly rolled into the main scheme. Ministers should satisfy themselves, critically and objectively, that interventions are suitable and that any additional moneys are appropriately used.

I come now, on this tour of particular issues, to access to work. The Minister hardly mentioned it, which might be revealing. The scheme is important, not merely because it was introduced by a Conservative Government—extra money has been made available by the present Government—but because if it is that good, I am surprised that only some 25 per cent. of employers surveyed had heard of it. It is not well understood. For quite small costs of adjustment, it could make a huge difference—it needs to be publicised vigorously. While the Minister is looking at pilot schemes in some areas, she should address the national picture too.

May I give a small warning? I am concerned about any suggestion of using the disability rights lever as an alternative driver on employers. We all know that employers are recalcitrant, do not want to know and will not change their attitudes, so it might be necessary to get tough with them. However, it is important to emphasise the business case, the relatively low cost of most reasonable adjustments and the fact that access to work is available where there are significant additional costs.

I shall touch briefly on supported employment. There was a concern, which has not been much replayed since the introduction of workstep, that some targets set by Ministers would cause people who were comfortably established in supported employment, and often preferred it, to be pushed on as part of a churning exercise to meet targets. I have not heard much about that lately, but I invite the Minister to comment on the potential danger.

It is not surprising, in view of the Minister's figure of one third of the case load being on incapacity benefits, that representations that I have received on the pathways document have tended to concentrate on learning disabilities and mental health. That is appropriate, because they present some of the most intractable problems when it comes to gaining employment. For example, Mencap points out that only 10 per cent. of learning disabled people are employed. That is even more depressing than the overall figure for disabled people. One is looking at substantially less activity than one would expect in the fully able work force. I think that those people matter, even if some costs are greater and the economic return is relatively low. Many of them, some of whom are put into work by their own employment agencies, give excellent service. They are loyal employees, and they get great satisfaction from their participation in the labour market.

In that context, there is still concern about the 16-hour rule and its interaction with the tax credits. For example, Mencap has pointed out to me that it is possible to work for up to four hours under the minimum wage—£20 a week under income support—without losing incapacity benefit. People who do more than 16 hours of work could receive support from tax credit, although there is an awkward transition zone between five and 15 in which neither might be possible. I do not ask the Minister to find an instant answer to that, but I mention it as a continuing concern.

The learning disability charities and the mental health charities have concerns over whether the new arrangements will carry enough specialist firepower—if I may put it that way—to deal with the problems of the individuals involved. The answer is not to expect a disability adviser to cover the whole lot, like a paragon who understands everything. They have huge and broad expertise, however, and the new arrangements might stimulate that, thereby allowing for greater specialisation in the cadre of advisers. However, the problem can be overcome if one of the adviser's skills is the referral on and if they can use, for example, the voluntary sector in which they have expertise to handle a case and to make progress. Ministers have made progress on that with the outsourcing of part of the new deal for disabled people, and I hope that they consider the same approach on pathways, because not everything can be covered.

Two matters from my constituency experience bear on the issue. I have a constituent who wishes to be a disc jockey, but who happens to be totally blind. His case came to my attention because I read about it in the local paper. He needs some support for that ambition. One of the arguments about access to work—official arguments on principle are often maddeningly consistent, if I may put it that way—was that all disc jockeys need a certain way of stacking their CDs and that there was nothing distinctive about my constituent's needs. Therefore, there was no need for access to work, unless there was an incremental benefit. I can just about understand that argument.

However, an especial difficulty—I have gone back to the local branch of the Employment Service and I do not need to seek an Adjournment debate on the case—was that it offered him driver support, but at the national minimum wage. In Daventry, there is no chance of his picking up such support for less than about £7 an hour, so he must either subsidise the cost out of his earnings or not take the driver.

A case that bears more on the issue of specialist expertise is that of a lady with a severe latex allergy, and I became one of the joint parliamentary presidents of the Latex Allergy Support Group partly on the basis of it. The condition is quite uncommon, but more common than it should be, and that lady has had great difficulties in getting the right mix of support. That is not because anyone seeks to be unhelpful, but because the condition is not fully understood and aspects of it cannot be remedied easily. To be fair, the matter is difficult and I do not criticise the officers, but I must use the case as an example of some of the problems.

In closing my remarks, I refer to some long-term issues. The Minister opened in the spirit of inquiry and will, I hope, be amenable to listening to, and reflecting on, some of our concerns, although no instant answer is required. I have listed five of those on which the Government have not gone far enough in the Green Paper. The first is the question of adequate flexibility in the interaction between benefits and work.

I readily accept—as does Mencap, which stressed the point in its briefing to me—the highly beneficial changes that have been made in the linking rules, which are much better. A psychology is developing that has moved away from the idea that people are either in work or out of work and on benefit, and never the twain shall meet. There is now a much more flexible and nuanced arrangement. I may have mentioned to the Minister previously that, although I know of people with a physical injury who have felt well enough to work, until people go out and try, they do not know whether they can do it or not. People might run close to the law if they work, and a more flexible approach is required in such cases. One has been pioneered, but it needs further development.

Secondly, we all want to help, but good will is not always the best counsellor. We need a proper and rigorous evaluation of pilot studies, when they take place, and of the various activities that are taking place elsewhere in support of pathways to work. There is no point in shutting our eyes if remedies do not work; we need to concentrate on ones that do, while accepting that conditions differ throughout the country and that local discretion is important.

The hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns) would, I am sure, wish me to voice my support for his plea that one of the pilots should go to his constituency. I understand his views, although I hope that he will still make a speech. To be more objective, however, I hope that pilots will be spread around the country and reflect the differences that exist. Dare I put in a plea for some rural areas to be considered? There are disabled people who live in rural areas, and not everything goes well for them.

My third point is perhaps more unusual than the others, but I hope that it is proper to make it in this context. In future, our understanding of the Human Rights Act 1998 and of equality legislation may change. It may be that a single oversight body will be in place, and the Minister referred to changes that the draft disability Bill will introduce. She knows that I have just been chairing a meeting of RADAR at which we discussed some of those issues. It has become clear to me that, when we consider discrimination, attitude is critical. I see the Minister nodding. That is not a legal issue, but it relates closely to human rights. We should have the right attitude to people who are disabled or who have impairments or conditions that could give rise to discrimination.

It is important that measures are acceptable to people in the work place, and the Employers Forum on Disability, which I know reasonably well, is considering that issue. It is terribly important that trade unions—the other part of the social partnership—are seen to be involved and that measures are acceptable to them. Otherwise, difficult issues may arise, such as some people saying that there is a health and safety issue when there is not or when it could be overcome. Such disagreements can foul our best intentions.

I want to make two other more general points. We need better pathways. We would all agree with that and it is explicit in the title of the consultation paper, but, for the pilot schemes, Ministers should consider the possibility of having a single budget holder who can cut through bureaucratic tangles. The Minister referred to the advisers discretionary fund of £300. However, we should consider the whole range of provision—in health, housing, social care, transport, work place adaptions, physiotherapy and elsewhere—as it may be necessary for someone to go out, as would happen with an insured work force, and provide the missing component that may not otherwise be available. That may cross departmental boundaries. We must consider the possibility of putting budgets together so that there can be a single pathway.

Advocacy is a related issue. Most disabled people, if they return to employment, will be mentally capable, but, as the paper suggests, they may not always be strong advocates of their own cases. There should be advocacy for them, however, perhaps outside the system when appropriate, and proper case management that can take them through that pathway. That is all for the future.

I concede that Ministers have not claimed arrogantly to have solved the problems. In so far as they approach the matter with a degree of humility, they will have our sympathy and support. I suggest that a mixture is required—the right blend of humility and persistence—because the problems are deep seated and terribly important to the individual. Incidentally, they are also significant to the economy. They did not start today, they will not go away tomorrow and it is extremely important that we start on the path that leads to their being resolved to a much greater extent than has been so far achieved.

5 pm

Ann McKechin (Glasgow, Maryhill): I welcome the Government's paper on issues surrounding incapacity benefit, and I congratulate the Department on the imaginative solutions that it proposes to encourage and support substantially more claimants back into the labour market. Sadly, it is in my home city of Glasgow that the worst problems exist.

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.24 pm

On resuming—

Sir Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): I hope that the House agrees that we should restart our debate.

Ann McKechin: Thank you very much, Sir Nicholas.

Sadly, it is in Glasgow that the worst incapacity benefit problems exist. I believe that Glasgow needs special attention, and I hope that I can establish a case for that today. Glasgow, by a very long way, has the highest number of claimants—39,000, which is more than any other city outside London. Incredibly, although our population is only 609,000, about 25 per cent. of them claim incapacity benefit.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): I have to say to the hon. Lady that I sympathise with her and all in Westminster Hall, but I am obliged by Standing Orders to suspend the sitting. As soon as Members can get back, we will begin yet again.

5.25 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.36 pm

On resuming—

Sir Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): Once again, I apologise to hon. Members who are taking part in the

[Sir Nicholas Winterton]

debate in Westminster Hall this afternoon for what I can only describe as the eccentricities of the House of Commons. I apologise in particular to the hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Ann McKechin), who has already started her speech twice. This will be the third time. I know that other Members wish to speak who need to leave promptly because of trains and other things.

Ann McKechin: Thank you again, Sir Nicholas. Third time lucky, I hope.

Although the city population of Glasgow is only 609,000, we have more than 25 per cent. more incapacity benefit claimants than Birmingham and almost double the number in Manchester—both are cities which, like Glasgow, have experience of heavy industry in their recent past.

According to the latest statistics, seven of Glasgow's constituencies are in the top 100 United Kingdom employment blackspots. Last year, the Child Poverty Action Group rated three Glasgow seats, including my own, as the worst constituencies for child poverty in the UK. Glasgow also has the highest concentration of heroin injectors in Europe, and the Greater Glasgow health board estimates that we have 15,000 drug addicts, four times the national average. Glasgow also has rising suicide rates among the young, continuing alcohol misuse and chronic ill health statistics that are among the worst in Europe.

Problems of that nature are not unique to my city, but the sheer scale and concentration of deprivation mark Glasgow out as a place that deserves special treatment. I commend the Government on the programmes introduced in the past five or six years, which have already made a significant contribution towards Glasgow's renewal. During that period, the total unemployed count in Glasgow has fallen by more than 15,000. Glasgow is enjoying substantial expansion for the first time in many years: last year, the job growth rate was more than 7 per cent., the highest in any UK city. The consequent new build of office space in the city centre, together with substantial capital investment in our schools, housing and hospitals, has led to many additional jobs, for example, in the construction industry. In fact, there are already skills shortages in that sector.

The proposed transfer of the city council's rented housing stock—the largest in western Europe—to the new Glasgow housing association this year will offer the basis for substantial new capital investment and rebuilding, which will create even further demand for jobs in the construction sector. Our commitment to quality public services in schools, child care, community care and hospitals, as well as considerable expansion in our private sector, particularly in the financial sector, will inevitably lead to further job opportunities.

The challenges that we now face are to harness those opportunities for the benefit of Glasgow's citizens and to tackle the social problems that afflict so many of them. The opportunities have never been better and the rewards to our society for overcoming long-term non-employment would be enormous. The social justice argument is overwhelming and there is an equally strong economic argument.

According to the evidence given by Scottish Enterprise to the Scottish Affairs Select Committee at the end of last year, Scotland is the only country in Europe that is currently depopulating. It is estimated that by 2016 there will be 300,000 more people over 50 and 220,000 fewer people under 50 in the job market. If we do not improve the employment rate in Scotland's largest city, which has only 55 per cent. of its former population compared to the Scottish average of 71 per cent., the economy of the whole country—not just Glasgow—will suffer substantially.

Currently, only one in every two new jobs in Glasgow goes to a person who actually resides there. In substantial areas of the city, including my constituency, the majority of the adult population is not in work: people are either on the unemployment register, or they are on some other form of benefit such as incapacity benefit. In some areas, that group comprises as much as 70 per cent. of the total adult population. The Government's paper correctly states that many IB claimants have been out of the labour market for a substantial period, and many lack basic skills. Many in my city suffer from chaotic lifestyles and the majority lack confidence or have no knowledge of the current job market.

Many of those people were encouraged in past years, when employment was dropping sharply, to enter the IB system. In fact, a network of welfare officers was established with the principle of maximising income for those who were considered to have little prospect of re-entering the job market. We need to do the opposite, by taking more deliberate and structured action to convince and encourage those claimants who do not suffer from serious and permanent disablement or incapacity—it was said earlier that such people are clearly in a different category—to rejoin the labour market within a relatively short time. Longer-term support and training are vital if we really want to get substantial numbers back to work. I fully support the Government's proposals to merge the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency into Jobcentre Plus in order to offer an increasingly personalised service and to target the hidden unemployed in such areas.

Many applicants still have a poor view of their local social security office. Unfortunately, the local drug dealers in my constituency often hang around outside the benefits office, and many people find the place intimidating. In addition, the agency is perceived—rightly or wrongly—to be more interested in investigating abuses than in positively assisting applicants into the most appropriate programme. That is why I encourage the Minister to ensure that any new proposals incorporate a close partnership with other agencies that do not suffer the stigma of being an enforcement organisation, as social security offices do.

Jobseekers are likely to be more relaxed when talking about an application or any problems with agencies such as the local enterprise network than they are when dealing with the social security office. I know that my local enterprise company has had considerable successes in getting people who have been non-employed or unemployed in the long-term back into work. It has supported them in their application, their job interview and, most important, during their first months of work, when their confidence can still be very fragile.

We must be sensitive to what is the appropriate support for those who suffer from addiction problems. I know that the Government have already made proposals for special money to be set aside for those suffering from drug abuse, but they must also consider the fact that a large number of people who claim IB also suffer from addiction problems.

The Green Paper examines the current monetary barriers to making work pay. The so-called housing benefit trap is often viewed as afflicting only London and the south of England, but hon. Members might be surprised to know that we in Glasgow suffer from exactly the same problem. We have the highest council tax rates in the United Kingdom—£1,140 for a band D property—and historically high social rents. At the same time, the largest group of workers in the city are in the £10,000 to £14,000 per annum wage bracket. The steep withdrawal of housing and council tax benefit that occurs when applicants move from unemployment to work continues to act as a significant barrier to seeking work. Most of those moving from incapacity benefit back into the workplace are likely to start in low-paid, often part-time jobs—the very jobs that are affected by the housing benefit trap.

That is why I commend the proposal for a substantial and distinct financial incentive for a good length of time to encourage the move back into work. We can encourage people, once they have got back into work, to seek further training so that they get out of very low-paid jobs into better-paid employment as their career progresses. To be frank, without such an incentive, there is little prospect of persuading many incapacity benefit claimants to make the move to work.

Finally, the Minister may be aware that throughout 2002, the Glasgow group of MPs engaged in a dialogue with the Department about the need for action and greater resources to tackle our city's employment problems. Unfortunately, after a promising start, we have yet to make any progress. None the less, I trust that the group's discussions with the Department for Work and Pensions will be much more productive in 2003. I also encourage her and her colleagues to visit the city and to support the efforts of our civic agencies, which are very keen to assist the Government's efforts to eliminate long-term non-employment and to end this blight on our city once and for all.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her perseverance in the face of the hurdles that were placed in her way.

5.46 pm

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): I realise that time is moving on, so I will try to be brief. I was keen to participate in the debate because a week after the Select Committee on Work and Pensions announced an inquiry into getting disabled people into work, the Government published a Green Paper on the same subject. I like to think that our Select Committee has its finger on the pulse and that we are abreast of the issues of the day.

The Green Paper signals the Government's recognition of the fact that although other new deals, such as those for the young unemployed and for lone parents, have been extremely successful, the new deal for disabled people has been less so. That is certainly one of the reasons why the Work and Pensions Committee thought the subject worth a more thorough investigation. It is a thorny issue, and a difficult one, and the Government must handle it very sensitively if they are to get it right.

The Government are absolutely right to stress the importance of work, and it is dreadful that I still have to say that in this forum. Work is important to people for many different reasons, not just because we need money to live. Some people work even though they actually earn less by doing so. There is also an issue of social inclusion: people are defined by their work. It is important that people feel that they have a place in society. That is not to demean those who do not have work, but most people on incapacity benefit lose out in so many aspects of society by not working.

Work can be good for disabled people. It can be therapeutic of itself; there is nothing like long hours spent in front of the television to make someone feel ill. Work is important, and it is sad that I have to emphasise that because some people still take a paternalistic attitude towards those with disabilities. They claim that the Government are being unfair and unreasonable in wanting to help those with disabilities into work. Most incapacity benefit claimants say that they want to work. Of course, many of them do not think of themselves as disabled. For example, they might have suffered a heart problem some years ago, which qualifies them for incapacity benefit, but they have become progressively more ill the longer they remain workless. Such people often suffer psychological problems because unemployment can cause illness or incapacity.

Nevertheless, it is not easy for people who are leaving incapacity benefit to start work. There are all the usual discrimination issues—the physical and attitudinal barriers.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): On the issue of discrimination, has my hon. Friend seen early-day motion 477, which relates to the discrimination suffered by my constituent, Karen Godfrey? She was sacked before Christmas for no other reason than that she was disabled—apparently, she did not fit in for insurance reasons. It emerged that she had worked for WHSmith for five years for nothing but gift vouchers—she got £5-worth a week for working four hours a day. Does my hon. Friend not agree that it is excellent that the Government have established the Disability Rights Commission to investigate such cases?

Miss Begg: I certainly hope that the DRC takes up such cases. I well remember a time when I was regarded as a fire hazard simply because I deigned to go to the cinema in a wheelchair. Such attitudes are becoming things of the past, and it is sad to hear that the same health and safety regulations are still being used to push people out of work. There are other examples of such blatant discrimination, and I hope that the creation of the DRC will allow us establish the case law necessary to ensure that it becomes a thing of the past.

Some barriers to work are external to the person who is on IB or who has a disability, but others are often internal—they originate in the person themselves. If people have been workless for years, they inevitably

[Miss Begg]

have low self-esteem. They may not know what they are capable of, and they will be frightened of the unknown. The Government must be sensitive to such issues. They must realise that it will not necessarily be easy to get someone through the Jobcentre Plus door to see what is available. That is why it is important that letters inviting IB claimants to Jobcentre Plus are as non-threatening and as supportive as possible.

Jobcentre Plus has changed things. Aberdeen is a pathfinder area for the scheme, and the atmosphere in jobcentres is totally different from anything seen in the old benefits offices, which my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Ann McKechin) described. Jobcentres are changing, but many people on IB do not know that, because they have not been over the threshold of a jobcentre for a long time. They need quite a bit of persuading that it is not like the old system and that their benefits are not under threat.

Let me give a good example of what is happening in Aberdeen. The local jobcentre manager, Bob Alexander, and I organised a business breakfast and a seminar for people working on disability issues at Jobcentre Plus. I also invited people from the voluntary sector who were trying to get disabled people into work. Ironically, the two sides had never met, but the morning was very informative. Although successful, it provided a salutary lesson: many of the people from the voluntary sector said that Jobcentre Plus was the last place they would advise their client group to visit. They, too, had not seen the changes, and they thought that jobcentres would be threatening and too difficult for their clients.

The radical aspect of the new deal for disabled people is the use of job brokers. I was glad to hear the Minister say that the advisers discretionary fund would be increased, but I know that job brokers are effective, because the new cleaner for MPs' offices in Aberdeen was recruited through that process. A job broker phoned my office manager, saying, "This woman is absolutely wonderful. You'd be daft not to employ her," and that is exactly what we found when she came for her interview. She is so happy to be back in work, having been out of work for more than five years. Her self-esteem has increased beyond measure, and she feels much better than she ever could have done had she remained on incapacity benefit. However, she put the letter back in the drawer three times before finally lifting the phone, and it took her something like two months to take up the original invitation.

The Government must use people such as Anne, our cleaner, to argue the case for their changes. The clients who had succeeded because of the new deal were undoubtedly the best speakers at the meeting that Bob Alexander and I arranged in Aberdeen to bring people from voluntary sector and Jobcentre Plus together. They brought a tear to our eyes, because they were superb at selling the importance of what they had achieved.

I realise that my time is up, although there is much more that I want to say. I hope that we will get another chance to debate helping people with disabilities and those on incapacity benefit into work. It is an important issue, and I commend the Government on making a really good start, but there is still a long way to go.

5.54 pm

David Cairns (Greenock and Inverclyde): I shall try to condense my remarks into the briefest possible time. I warmly congratulate the Government on introducing the Green Paper. It has become more necessary as unemployment has fallen and the issue has emerged from beneath the receding waters of unemployment. Unemployment in my constituency has fallen from more than 20 per cent. in the mid-1980s to about 4.5 per cent., but, at the same time, the number of economically inactive people has risen to a staggering and shameful 39 per cent. Two in five adults of working age are therefore neither in work nor looking for work. That is the scale of the challenge that we face.

I was heartened to see the Government outline the five barriers that stand in people's way in returning to work. Looking at the skills and training aspects of Jobcentre Plus, may I make a special plea? Advisers with specialist skills include those who are specially trained to deal with people with brain and head injuries. Often, such people do not show that very much is wrong with them, but the relapsing nature of the illness means that specialist knowledge is required. I hope that the Minister can give us some advice on that.

A small caveat about the Green Paper is that it could contain a little more on rehabilitation. Only two references are made to it: one in the context of solicitors and personal injury claims, and a small reference in an annexe. Yet certain types of rehabilitation are absolutely central if people in my constituency who come from an industrial heritage and have industrial injuries are to get certain types of work. When the disabilities Bill is introduced—I appreciate that this issue is largely the responsibility of the Department of Health in England and Wales, and the Scottish Executive north of the border—close working will be required between the Minister's Department, the Department of Health and Malcolm Chisholm, the Minister for Health and Community Care north of the border. I therefore repeat the plea that the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) kindly made.

Finally, if the Minister is planning to site one of the pilot areas in Scotland, I make the plea that it covers Inverclyde, given its 39 per cent. economic inactivity rate.

5.57 pm

Paul Holmes (Chesterfield): The Liberal Democrats welcome the stated principles behind the consultation paper and many of the ideas that arise out of those principles. The 2.7 million people on incapacity benefit in this country represent a figure only slightly above the equivalent numbers in most of Europe, and 40 per cent. of such people already say in Government and disability organisation surveys that they want to return to work if the obstacles to doing so can be removed.

There are many measures proposed in the Green Paper that could do much to ease the path back into work, such as increased financial incentives to return to work, and a better support and referral framework. A more integrated approach to getting people back into work is needed. Use of the NHS, social services, and so forth to offer the greatest opportunity for work is vital.

We fully support the creation of an environment in which as many employers as possible are managing health at work actively and positively. I welcome the comments of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in *Disability Now* that to exhort employers to do more and to deploy the necessary legislation are key elements of change.

Although there is much to welcome, many concerns remain. Compulsory, work-focused interviews backed by the threat of benefit loss for those who claim disability benefits are not the best way to help those who are able back into work. It seems strange that only months after the nationwide roll-out of the new deal for disabled people, the Government chose to introduce the compulsory interviews that are integral to the Green Paper. The Government have said that the aim of the new compulsory interviews is to help the 750,000 disabled people who want to find jobs. The new deal for disabled people appears to have the same objective, although it is still voluntary. If the Government are so convinced that the reason that those on incapacity benefit who want to get a job are being put off is lack of support, skills and knowledge, will the new deal for disabled people provide that service while not threatening people with withdrawal of benefits for missing interviews?

Initially, the Government proposals talk sensibly of focusing on new claimants only. Experience shows that, once people have become long-term sick and unemployed, it is much harder for them to get back into work for all sorts of reasons, such as loss of skills, loss of confidence, and so forth. The Trojan horse is on page 39 of the Green Paper, "Pathways to work: Helping people into employment". It states:

> "In due course, the Government will consider whether . . . to extend a requirement to attend work-focused interviews to some existing recipients of incapacity benefits . . . as well."

I still do not understand the Government's reluctance to focus their initial efforts in respect of long-term benefit claimants on the 40 per cent. who, in Government and disability organisation surveys, repeatedly say that they positively want to work if help is provided and obstacles are removed.

The work-focused interview has not proven itself to be as successful as parts of the Green Paper suggest. A Department for Work and Pensions research report on the ONE service leads to some conclusions on that—

6 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

6.10 pm

On resuming—

Paul Holmes: A Department for Work and Pensions research report on the ONE service concluded that there was no evidence that participation in ONE had increased labour market activity among sick and disabled clients. A new study of the Government flagship disabled employment scheme showed that between July 2001 and September 2002, only 1,400 disabled people worked for longer than six months after getting help. Only 6,099 were helped into any kind of work at all, which is far short of the target of 90,000 people in jobs over a three-year period—in fact, just 5 per cent. of those involved. Regrettably, due to a technical hitch, those embarrassing figures failed to appear on the Department for Work and Pensions website alongside other figures on new deal schemes, and they had to be reported later in *Disability Now*.

As happens with many of the Government's proposals and schemes to get people back to work, there is concern from groups such as UnumProvident, which has worked in the field for 30 years, about the focus on merely getting people into work because focus is needed on the long-term aspects of keeping disabled people in work. Retention in employment is a critical challenge.

Disability groups such as the Shaw Trust argue that the key lesson to be learned from the weakness of the current approach through Jobcentre Plus is that employment interviews and work placements cannot be provided for disabled people by the same people who are responsible for monitoring their benefits. Only this afternoon at a seminar on welfare to work that was held in this building, the Shaw Trust, Remploy and speakers from two private sector firms—WTCS and Work Directions—all disagreed strongly with the proposals in the Green Paper on that issue. The same groups questioned the need for six Government pilots on top of the five previous ones. Their schemes, which are based on intensive work with voluntary participants, seem to have higher success rates than the general figures quoted by the Government.

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman has just criticised the new deal for disabled people for not achieving the high level of job sustainability that we had all hoped for. That is a voluntary project. Does he think that that might be one of the reasons why?

Paul Holmes: The groups that I mentioned—two private sector, one voluntary and one public—all detailed success rates this afternoon of between 30 and 40 per cent., which are higher than the low overall figures of Government projects. The groups argued specifically that the key reason for the success of their projects compared with the failures of the whole scheme was because they work with volunteers and provide intensive support.

If there are to be further pilots on top of the existing five schemes—three have reported, one is under way and one has not even started—the Minister could do worse than looking at the pilot in my constituency of Chesterfield. The chamber of commerce is running the Power project, which does excellent work by empowering those with disabilities who want to prepare to return to work.

A further concern is the Government's target-setting culture, although that does not mean public or headline targets in this case, unlike for education. Mencap reported that the ONE areas were given targets to move people off benefits and into work. That is a worry because target setting could result in personal advisers pressurising people into unsuitable work although circumstances dictate that that is not the best opinion, but the easiest option. A Mencap report said:

> "Mencap is aware that the One service had targets to move people off benefits and into work. Mencap would caution against internal targets such as the number of interviews conducted in a week by a personal adviser or a target of a specified number of people entering work".

[Paul Holmes]

The same issues repeatedly arise with SchlumbergerSema, which admitted, when questioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) and me, that its financial contracts with the Government and its general practitioners could represent a financial incentive to push through the maximum number of client assessments in the shortest possible time in order to maximise profits and bonuses, although this was not necessarily in the interests of the people being assessed.

I have received many letters from constituents calling into question the quality of the personal capability assessments conducted by SchlumbergerSema GPs. Can we therefore expect the company to increase the speed of assessment, as the Government have stated it should? Would that result in better assessments? The Government may be premature in their reliance on the competency of SchlumbergerSema to meet its current contractual obligations without increasing the pressure even more.

Disability organisations have other concerns about the proposals to help disabled people into work—specifically the failure properly to address systematic discrimination in the labour market. It is highly unlikely that work-focused interviews will fully meet their potential in helping disabled people into employment while the obstacles of employer discrimination and inaccessibility remain in place.

In the Green Paper, the Government admit that financial incentives are a huge obstacle to people attempting to get back into the world of work. It says that many people on incapacity benefit will gain only a small amount by getting a job and some may end up worse off. If the Government know that employment can result in the disabled receiving less income than they would from the many confusing benefits that are available to them, how can they be expected to move off benefits and into employment? Although the Green Paper proposals may be successful in gaining employment for some, no contingency measures are proposed in case employees find that they cannot cope with the job or employers discover that they did not realise what they were taking on.

Although the Government's disabled persons tax credit allows a combination of work and benefit, the minimum requirement of 16 hours work a week means that people on IB who can work for fewer than 16 hours a week, or who can work one week but not the next—for example, a multiple sclerosis sufferer may need to work one week in two—are ignored. Mencap and UnumProvident made the same point in their responses to the Green Paper. The Liberal Democrat suggestion of a partial capacity benefit would better address the situation, as it would encourage disabled people to do varying amounts of paid work without fear of becoming ineligible for benefit.

The plethora of benefits can appear overly complex and provide strong disincentives for disabled people to look for work, and they are in need of radical reform. It is similar to the complexity of the minimum income guarantee and the replacement pension tax credits—a third of eligible pensioners do not claim, partly because of the sheer complexity of the provisions.

The Government admit that employers are reluctant to employ older workers. That will be addressed by the implementation of age discrimination legislation, but it will not happen until 2006. If the Government are serious about addressing the fact that just under half of those claiming the benefit are aged 50 or over, it is nonsensical to wait for so many years before beginning to remove one of the obstacles to getting people off incapacity benefit and back to work. The Liberal Democrats would introduce that as soon as possible, as part of a single unified equality Act.

The Government are again dragging their heels on the question of a disability Act, with their otherwise welcome announcement yesterday that they would introduce a draft Bill. The Liberal Democrats and non-governmental organisations such as the Disability Rights Commission have campaigned for such a move as a matter of urgency for some time and it was widely expected that the Government would include the legislation in the last Queen's Speech, if not the previous one. The vague promise to legislate later in this Parliament means that the long-awaited disability Bill could be squeezed out once again as the next general election approaches. How much better it would be if that lengthy process had started last year or the year before.

It is essential that disabled people should have full and equal rights before the Government proceed with their aim of establishing a single equality commission. That is the only way to remove many of the obstacles to the employment of disabled people that the Government describe in the document.

I sum up by saying that Liberal Democrats support the stated principles in the consultation paper, in that barriers to work for those claiming IB should be removed. However, we have doubts about the value of compulsory work-focused interviews supported by the threat of benefit penalties. We oppose the target-setting culture that pressures those involved into making unsuitable and hasty decisions in order to meet Government targets or gain maximum financial bonuses. We believe that removing the remaining legal areas of discrimination against disabled people is a more urgent priority, and that the Government should utilise the expertise of disability groups more.

I hope that the Green Paper is a genuine consultation exercise, but I note the comments of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in the current issue of "*Disability Now*". He says:

> "I would welcome the responses to the document. However, we have thought hard about the proposals and feel that this is the direction we should be moving in."

If the Government have already decided to discount the views of the voluntary and private sector organisations—not forgetting Remploy, the experts in such matters—which all oppose compulsory interviews and benefit sanctions, that suggests that our deliberations could be a waste of time.

6.19 pm

Maria Eagle: I shall do my best to respond to the points that have been made in the debate as speedily as I can, so that we are not kept too long from our trains and so on. I commend most hon. Members today for the constructive way in which they have conducted the debate and on how they have engaged with the issues set out in the Green Paper. All of us in the House are concerned about such matters and we want progress to be made. The Government's consultation processes are always genuine and we welcome all ideas, because we want to find out what works.

There has not been as much progress as we would have wished in the past few years because such steps are difficult to take, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) said, and because we do not know what works. Had previous Governments attempted to get those on incapacity benefit and sickness and disability benefits back into work, we would have a better idea of what policy will work. We are feeling our way. We should not be condemned and criticised for that. Some of the constructive criticism that we have received today from some hon. Members has been positive, but I do not believe that churlish negativity, which we have also heard, helps.

Paul Holmes: Will the Minister give way?

Maria Eagle: I shall give way because I was referring to the hon. Gentleman's contribution to the debate.

Paul Holmes: Will the Minister confirm that she has criticised my direct quotes from the Shaw Trust, Remploy and two private sector training organisations, all of which have a proven track record in such matters?

Maria Eagle: I am criticising the hon. Gentleman's tone and the content of his remarks, not anything that has been said by the providers or organisations to which he has referred. I have not heard what they said. He may not have represented their views in quite the way that they would have wanted. The Shaw Trust and other organisations that he described as experts in such matters operate the new deal for disabled people on our behalf. It is not sensible for him to commend them on the one hand, and criticise the new deal for disabled people on the other. Those organisations provide such services for us. It is more sensible to be constructive than to forget the way in which this Chamber tends to operate, which is more calm and sensible than other parliamentary debates.

The hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) referred to the performance of the new deal for disabled people. Other hon. Members have also drawn attention to it, perhaps in a more negative way. At present, there have been almost 8,000 job entries, but a smaller number of sustained job entries. That is partly because the national roll-out is only 18 months old and many job brokers are still finding their way. It is not easy. Job brokers have different approaches throughout the country and some work better than others.

The Shaw Trust to which the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes) referred has a good record in delivering job broker services, as do some of our in-house providers. There is not a monopoly of good sense and experience in the public, private or voluntary sector. We must learn and be constructive across the piece to find out what works. The Department has been taking steps to improve job broker performance and achieve a better spread of success throughout the different providers. One of the downsides of bringing in many providers in different parts of the country is that we could start off with a variable performance. We are engaging constructively with the job brokers to improve the performance of those who have not done so well by spreading best practice from those who have. That is a good way forward.

The hon. Member for Daventry referred also to targets and expressed his worry that they would create problems. We do not have set targets of the number of people whom we want to take off incapacity benefit. That would be inappropriate. We have general targets to narrow the gap between the level of participation in the labour market of the working age population in general and disabled people, but those are positive targets. We are not providing incentives to local Jobcentre Plus staff to get so many people off benefits.

The hon. Gentleman said that he had five concerns. The first was adequate benefit flexibility, which he suggested required further development. Adequate benefit flexibility is easy to say, but it is difficult to achieve, partly because of the complex nature of our benefit system and also because many benefits are enshrined in legislation and are, therefore, not easy to change. Many of our benefits, including incapacity benefit and some working age benefits, must be sufficiently comprehensive to be applied in a wide range of circumstances. For example, a benefit might apply to everyone of working age. It can be difficult, therefore, to introduce the sort of flexibility that one would like to see for a particular group of individuals without creating all sorts of loopholes and potential for fraud. Those are the difficulties in promoting benefit flexibility, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we are always considering what can be done. The fact that we have introduced some flexibilities, which are well regarded by those who know about them, is proof of the fact that we want to make progress in the area.

The hon. Gentleman also called for rigorous evaluation of the pilot activity, unlike the hon. Member for Chesterfield, who does not seem to believe in evaluation. There will be a comprehensive evaluation programme, combining both qualitative and quantitative elements, with the aim of detecting the impact of any package of changes that we pilot on improving rates of return to work among IB clientele. That has not often been tried in the past. The statistical significance of interventions can be difficult to calculate and the methodology for evaluation can be difficult. We are committed to rigorous evaluation of the pilot activity. We want to find out what works, and only when we have done that and are convinced that it will make a difference will we actually spread the practice more widely.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to attitudes among the business community and social partners. He is right about that. The reference by my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) to his constituent, Karen Godfrey, illustrated just how far we still have to go in respect of attitudes in society. The idea of expecting someone to work for vouchers that can be spent only where the person works, instead of a wage, was outlawed by the Truck Act 1831 and the Wages Act 1986—although, apparently, not at WH Smith, if the worker is disabled. That sort of practice must be

[Maria Eagle]

stamped out. I very much hope that the Disability Rights Commission will do its utmost to take up such cases.

Mr. Boswell: I have not looked at the details of that case since the hon. Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) referred to it earlier this evening, but I was under the impression, from a communication that I received some days ago from a colleague, that it had been sorted out. I do not condone the decisions that were taken and entirely agree that it should never have happened, but the important point is that a framework now exists for dealing with such a case, as well as a readiness on the part of management and that of the Disability Rights Commission, to ensure that such practice is stamped out.

Maria Eagle: I hope that that is the case.

Mr. Edwards: I have heard from the managing director of WH Smith, who has condemned the case. That is not company policy and was an isolated incident. Nevertheless, it constituted discrimination and is being investigated.

Maria Eagle: I need not say any more on that, except to add that it indicates why we need the law to back up whatever we try to do by exhortation.

The hon. Member for Daventry made some references to advocacy and better pathways, all of which I agree with. We need to work on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Ann McKechin) made some interesting points about Glasgow, indicating that, like many cities, it has particular problems, but also illustrating powerfully that it seems to have more of a problem than some comparable cities. That illustrates how thorny, deep-seated and complicated the issue is; clearly, it has cultural aspects.

My hon. Friend was able to give us some hope that Glasgow is on its way back in terms of regeneration. She also gave us some good news about falling unemployment. I agree with her that if we got to where we are by way of a certain culture and welfare benefits advice that told people that they were incapable, we must reverse that. I welcome her comments about the Green Paper, because we are trying to make a cultural change. I was in Glasgow recently to visit the Royal Strathclyde Blindcraft factory. I would be happy to come back to visit that fine city at any time at my hon. Friend's invitation.

My hon. Friend also made some points about the culture of social security offices, and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South stressed how different Jobcentre Plus offices are. The Glasgow Jobcentre Plus roll-out will start this April, and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Maryhill, her constituents and colleagues will then see the massive difference between Jobcentre Plus and social security offices.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South made an extremely valuable contribution, and clearly has a passionate approach to the issue. Who better than my hon. Friend to tell us the truth of the matter from the other side of the fence? She is passionately in favour of making sure that disabled people can work, and I agree with her. I also agree with her about targets; I have replied to what the hon. Member for Daventry said on the subject. We do not have targets for getting certain numbers of people off the benefit. That is not how we are dealing with the issue. I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South that the new deal for disabled people works when people pluck up the courage to go along to the Jobcentre Plus.

I agree that people who have gone through the process and gained employment are by far the best advocates of the quality of the system. I often speak at conferences and events about the new deal for disabled people. Usually, my speech is irrelevant, because someone will have stood up and spoken about their personal experience, and that is much more powerful than anything that I, as a Whitehall Minister, might say. Instead of suggesting that I know the way forward, it is much better to get someone who has gone through the process and succeeded to stand up and say so—they are much better advocates that I am.

My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (David Cairns) clearly wants a pilot, and I have twigged that he would like one in his area. I shall see what I can do, as consideration of such matters is ongoing. However, I cannot promise him anything, so I hope that he will not take too much encouragement from what I say. It is absolutely true that we must consider and tackle the fact that almost 39 per cent. of his constituents are economically inactive.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield, who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, made a number of points that I shall take up briefly. I do not agree that compulsory work-focused interviews are not the way forward. One of the problems with voluntary schemes such as the new deal for disabled people is that getting people to come along to a Jobcentre Plus in the first place can be a big barrier. I agree that it would be a major concern if further participation beyond the first contact were compulsory; some of his points might then have some validity. However, I do not believe that it is negative to encourage those who are just coming on to the benefit to receive the intensive help by saying that there will be a sanction. That is one of the ways in which we can make sure that we offer help to those who most require it.

The hon. Gentleman also said that it would be sensible to focus on those claimants who want to go back to work. We have survey evidence on numbers, but we do not know who all the claimants are. We sent out letters about the new deal for disabled people in respect of the stock of IB claimants, and one reason why there have been only 8,000 "outputs" of sustained employment is that not everyone comes forward. One reason for that is the voluntary nature of the scheme. We need to try different approaches. I am very much in favour of the compulsory element if the support that is then offered is not coercive or backed up by targets to get numbers of people off benefit. I believe that that is a perfectly defensible and sensible way of approaching the matter.

It seems that the hon. Member for Chesterfield is against pilots. I do not believe that it is possible, on this complex issue, to devise a system that will work for our diverse, different and complex set of clients without rigorous evaluation and pilots. It would be easy for us, with our prejudices, to sit down and discuss what we think would do the job, and then spread that across the country. In respect of what is a difficult problem, we should try out different approaches, do our best to find out what will work and spread that good practice around the country.

I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's comments on our alleged failure to address discrimination against disabled people. When the Government took office, the only thing that was unlawful was direct discrimination against disabled people in employment, in large firms and in service provision. Those were the only aspects of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to have been implemented. There were other provisions, but they had not then been commenced. If, by the end of this Parliament, we can meet the commitments that we have made, including the Bill that was announced yesterday, discrimination against disabled people in employment and in service provision will be completely outlawed. We shall have taken major steps to get rid of discrimination against disabled people in every part of society. If we can achieve that, it will be the biggest step forward in disability rights that the country has ever seen. Since the announcement yesterday, I have had a good reaction from many members of the disability lobby, who can be cynical sometimes, although one understands why. I am determined to make sure that we carry through that commitment, notwithstanding the general cynicism and negativity of the Liberal Democrats.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): From the Chair, I thank the Minister for her reply and congratulate hon. Members who have taken part for the physical and mental stamina necessitated by our experiences today.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-four minutes to Seven o'clock.

Question Not Answered Orally

Obesity

12. **Mr. Hopkins:** What plans the Government have to tackle obesity among young people through the promotion of sport. [91816]

Jacqui Smith: We already have in place major cross-Government programmes of work to increase levels of physical activity among children and young people. The Departments for Culture, Media and Sport and for Education and Skills are investing £459 million to transform physical education, school sport and club links over the next three years. The funding will help deliver a joint DFES/DCMS public service agreement target to enhance sports opportunities for five to 16-year-olds by increasing the percentage of children who spend at least two hours a week on high quality PE and school sport—in and beyond the curriculum—to 75 per cent. by 2006.

At a community level, the Department is setting up a new programme of local exercise action pilots led by primary care trusts to test out different approaches to increase access to physical activity among priority groups, including children and young people.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 28 January 2003

[Mr. Frank Cook *in the Chair*]

Film Industry

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Derek Twigg.]*

9.30 am

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce this debate on such an important subject. I am interested in films, but I do not claim to have any expertise in such matters. I know the films that I like, but I shall not engage in a subjective examination of various films or the artistic merits of the British film industry compared with others. When we debate the film industry we usually discuss the artistic merits of respective talents in the industry, rather than concentrate on the character of the industry, which I want to do today.

I come to the debate not so much as someone who is interested in films, but as someone who is interested in the industry and how public policy supports it. I am a member of the Trade and Industry Select Committee and the film industry is not part of our remit. However, we have been examining biotechnology and the way in which British industry is changing and adapting. This country trades not on the basis of historical patterns of industrial activity, but on new patterns that are based on comparative advantages, especially creative and innovative talents. It is desirable to study the film industry in that context.

The Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee is now discussing the film industry, which it has not done for some considerable time. A few weeks ago, Sir Alan Parker set out the Film Council's changed strategy, which is why it is appropriate to focus now on how the film industry is supported. When talking about the film industry, there is a temptation to refer to current events. For example, we could wax lyrical about the British Academy of Film and Television Arts nominations, the extent to which "The Hours" did well at the Golden Globe awards or the prospects for British films or talents to do well at the Oscars.

I turn now to the creative business supplement to the *Financial Times* in which Alistair Owen quoted Bruce Robinson, the writer-director of "Withnail and I", who helpfully set matters in context when he said:

> "The British film industry is like the British weather . . . You get one hot day and papers say, 'Phew! What a scorcher! Hottest day on record!' Then next day it's raining again."

That must be what if feels like to the film industry. Only a few weeks ago there was doom and gloom and talk of how difficult it was for the film industry, after which there were newspaper reports saying what a good year 2002 was and what a big increase there had been in the number of films doing well at the box office as well as in attendances at cinemas. There was also talk of new talents in production and so on. However, they are not necessarily long-term issues, and public policy has to avoid being subject to short-term enthusiasms, however great they may be. We must set up a framework within which the film industry in Britain can succeed. I do not want to engage in a romantic revisiting of Ealing Studios—however desirable it may be for Ealing Studios to be reborn—but to think about the structure of the industry and how public policy should relate to it.

Sir Alan Parker's speech on behalf of the Film Council last November was a substantial and positive step forward. He was arguing that the renewed strategy for the film industry should be built around three objectives: the first was that the industry should be distribution-led, rather than production-driven; secondly, that support for the industry should be orientated towards skills; and thirdly, that we should have the right infrastructure, particularly for studios and technical facilities. I do not disagree with those objectives. He made a powerful and persuasive point when he said:

> "Now is the time to recognise that our industry's obsession with public funding for production is taking us nowhere."

Sir Alan Parker was criticising, and rightly so, what had previously been a tendency, particularly of the Arts Council—prior to the establishment of the Film Council—to put money into films, not least through the premier fund, on the basis of subjective judgments about their merits rather than with any market-led anticipation that they would be successful films that would gain release and reach a substantial audience. We have to think again about the way in which we structure public policy; it should not be designed around a concept of what is a British film. The Culture, Media and Sports Select Committee is asking, "Is there a British film industry?" The proper question to ask is to what extent there is a film industry in Britain and how we can help it to grow.

I am not being pedantic, but if we are not careful we will once again be trying to define the nature of a British film, as distinct from anything else. We should not do that. The recent film "Cold Mountain" is a good example of my argument. It is an American-funded film; it had a British cast and crew of 150, who conducted their work in Romania. Is that a British film or is it not? To me, in public policy terms, that is not the main question; the question is to what extent there is British content. When Nissan came to the United Kingdom, we did not say that the cars must be British; the market was concerned not with whether they were British, but with their quality. We were more bothered at the time with their British content than we would be now. It was content that mattered.

A year or so ago, the first Harry Potter film, "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone", was a tremendous showcase for British talent, but it was an American film. We need to be concerned not with matters as set out by the Select Committee, but about stimulating British content. I do not want the British film industry to be put into a secret garden, where others do not enter and where we engage in positive artistic activity for our own benefit but find that the rest of the world simply ignores us and moves on. The British film industry will not profit by such action.

We must distinguish between public policy purposes. There is a risk that because we are dealing with something that has substantial artistic content, we treat that artistic content as if it were indistinguishable from

[Mr. Andrew Lansley]

our approach to industrial policy, but we can clearly separate the two. The separation partly involves public funding streams. For example, the Film Council has access to funding streams intended to support the artistic elements of the industry, such as the reconfiguration of the national film and television school, and the first light scheme which offers initial funding for first-time directors. Those are important and desirable developments.

I hope we will soon hear more from the Film Council about the proposals that were the subject of consultation last year. The proposals related to support for British cinema education for the specialised distribution of British films with an artistic and creative character, as well as support for those in exhibition. The number of screens in the United Kingdom has increased by approximately 50 per cent. in the past five or six years. Cinema attendance has also increased by more than 50 per cent. There are a substantial number of art-house theatres, and with the opportunities offered by multiplexes there can be a significant place for films with an art-house character. That is important for the development of United Kingdom creative activity.

The Film Council is right to contemplate using part of the capital fund to try to secure the physical presence—through the purchase or lease of screens—to establish places where art-house pictures can be seen. Some of the print and advertising that supports the distribution and awareness of those films is valuable. All of that is part of a context of support for the industry as an artistic activity. It would be no different if we sought to support music in its creative activity and the contribution that the music industry can make. They are simply two different types of artistic activity.

We must consider the nature of the industry as a whole, as Sir Alan Parker is doing. What is the role of the public sector in the industry? It is not to try to second-guess the market. Over recent years, we have seen comprehensive efforts put into trying to guess what type of films people want to see and to get the British film industry into the marketplace through subsidisation. Subsidy has not worked any more effectively in this case than it has for any other industry. We need something different, something market-led, something that recognises that the role of the public sector is to try to deal with what would otherwise be market failures.

Public policy should respond to competitive pressures. For example, although countries throughout the world offer tax concessions that are designed—I suspect Canada is the classic example—to secure a physical presence for their film industry, the same competitive situation applies as for the trade support or export promotion of any other industry. The same contest applies to inward investment as would apply to Nissan—bringing a large film to this country can have the same beneficial consequences as bringing in a large manufacturing plant or service industry. The economic spread-out is equally important.

Let us look at where we need to act to sustain relative competitiveness. We must understand where our comparative advantages take us. In the context of public policy, we must consider where there are externalities that will not be re-appropriated by those in the commercial sector who would spend their own money. There is, therefore, an underlying rationale for investment by the public sector, because it would create the correct context for the whole industry. Let me start with one or two examples regarding training and skills.

I have already mentioned the National Film and Television School and the role of the Film Council in working with Skillset to bring forward a strategy to promote training and skills for the film industry and the audiovisual industries. That is important. We cannot expect there to be spontaneous training activity by commercial organisations to the extent that is necessary in the whole industry. It is a normal expectation that some organisations will train, to the extent that they need trainees, and that others will have a wider training role, but we need some degree of public sector support for the industry, especially as it comprises many small operators and firms. We need to get behind the industry. I hope we shall see a substantial push from the Film Council in redirecting some of its resources to get behind Skillset—I hope that that was its intention—and ensuring that there is substantial training activity in the film industry.

I raised the question of script development with the Minister's colleagues about a year ago. It could be said, in terms of the return for the money that is spent by the public sector, that script development should also be considered to be commercial. This country does not have the distribution-led companies—the majors—that exist internationally and in the United States. Those companies expect to have a couple of hundred scripts in development at any one time and they know that only a small fraction of those will come to fruition. Such companies have the resources and they put them into script development. However, the resources involved are not very dramatic. As companies would usually work only with individuals who are trying to develop scripts, £1 million spent on script development would go a long way.

A small sum of public money could also go a long way in generating much United Kingdom content. For example, let us consider UK writers, such as David Hare in relation to "The Hours", Julian Fellowes in respect of "Gosford Park" last year, or Ronald Harwood's scriptwriting in relation to "The Pianist". The quality of script development and the screenplays that are produced by UK writers are exceptionally good. We must trade on that and ensure that the US majors do not overlook much of the positive writing in the UK simply because there is so much scriptwriting activity in and around Hollywood. As we can see in respect of, for example, the Harry Potter series, which is set in Britain, writing can make Britain a desirable location in which to undertake a film. Many benefits have flowed from that series in terms of UK marketing, tourism promotion and so forth.

Training and skills are the first part of the strategy, and script development is the second. Sir Alan Parker was right to focus on the key issue of understanding the nature and structure of the industry. If we are going to influence the industry, we must work with it rather than contrary to it and in conflict with it. I do not dispute what Sir Alan Parker said—I am sure that he is right—which is that the industry is essentially distribution-led. If we were to ask the major companies what business they are in, they would say, "The business of distributing films and responding to markets." The key factor is that distribution is the linchpin of the market. Even large production operations with large portfolios are burning money in order to produce films. They are taking substantial risks at the production end, and even if they produce a portfolio there is a risk that companies will not produce enough successful films to make an overall profit. Companies have to do two things: generate cash to support production activity, and spread their risk. One way for a company to spread risk in distribution is to distribute not only its own films but everyone else's. That way, even a vertically integrated company would have the risk associated with production, but also the certainty of gaining from distribution activity when the industry is prospering. Distribution is the linchpin and is absolutely critical to the industry, so how do we deal with that?

In his speech, Sir Alan Parker said that we needed to reflect on the character of the tax relief offered. Some form of tax relief is essential for the long-term competitiveness of the British film industry. Certainly, that is the course that other countries are taking. International competition will get tougher now that New Zealand is on the scene and central eastern European countries are getting stronger. What is the character of the incentive that we want to give? When I read the speech, I was interested in—and thought I understood—the argument about the importance of distribution in the industry. It was argued that a tax concession should be related to distribution, because the incentive for the industry should be pulled by distribution, rather than pushed by production, which has simply failed to meet the market. What would the result be? We do not know; we have had no suggestion, and one of my purposes in securing this debate was to allow us to think about that.

I suggest that we take a step back and ask, "What is the character of distribution?" Distribution stands between two activities. The first is cash-generative activity, such as the distribution of films, their exhibition and cinema attendances. There is $1.2 billion dollars' worth of such activity in the UK. We have a big cinema audience—I read in the newspapers that it is now the largest in Europe—and have bigger box office takings than Germany. We are a big market, and a lot of cash is being generated. There is also production activity. The latest figures suggest that UK production has picked up again after a difficult period—difficult not so much for the British element, although it had its consequences for us, but because of the actors' strike in America and the reduction in American activity. There are also quite a lot of co-productions, as they, too, have picked up in the UK.

At the centre of the argument for being distribution-led is the ability to mesh cash generation with the burning of cash because of vertical integration in the industry. Should any tax concession not relate directly to that key element of the industry? Instead of focusing tax relief on writing off costs of production until 2005, would it not be better to be specific about promoting the UK as a place with strong cinema audiences? There is a powerful incentive to come to the UK for creative and technical reasons associated with the quality of our film industry and activities.

I am not a tax expert, and some might be able to give reasons why my argument is flawed, but as a starting point for discussion I believe we should consider not tax concessions that are ring-fenced for British films but tax relief incentives designed for film production activity in the United Kingdom. We should relate that directly to the cash being generated in the UK. Vertically integrated companies are the ones that matter most.

If I remember rightly, the five largest cinema exhibitors consume something like 75 per cent. of the box office. Those five exhibitors are all directly related to major US production companies. They generate a lot of cash in the UK and they pay tax on it; they have various reliefs and concessions, but they pay tax. The companies are not British but international, probably US, companies. Should we not say that in the UK those companies should be able to offset the tax that they would otherwise pay on their cinema-related receipts against the costs that they pay in the UK in relation to film production? Should we not offer a tax concession that is directly related to that connection? We should say: "Come to the UK, where you will generate cash in cinemas. You need cash and you want a cash flow. The extent to which we relieve you of tax affects your cash flow. Let us enhance your cash flow through tax concessions so that you can fund films better in the UK. Come to the UK, where your qualifying expenditure will be matched with tax concessions." That qualifying expenditure would be film production expenditure in the UK, and it would be the basis on which tax relief could be offered on cash generated by film distribution. Technically, it would not be a tax concession for distribution; it would be a tax concession for the underlying economic rationale of being a distribution-led industry.

I freely confess that one of the advantages of being an Opposition Back Bencher is that one can fly kites and it does not do one too much harm if one is not successful. One can think about public policy and try to stimulate debate and a response from Government. In that respect, I have had some entertainment over the past few months with the Communications Bill. I have also had some fun with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Happily, it has been sporting about it; the Minister for Sport is here and I am happy to pay tribute to his Department. I do not know whether this sort of debate is his sport or not.

I should be attending Standing Committee E at the moment talking about the Communications Bill, but instead I am here talking about it, making two points that I feel are relevant. First, a provision in the early part of that Bill gives Ofcom a power to support training in the broadcasting industry. Skillset is the training organisation in the sector; it would be sensible for Ofcom to have a power to support Skillset training that is relevant to the audio-visual industries. There is substantial read-across between the technical requirements of broadcasting and film, although there are differences. The film industry would benefit from Ofcom having that power and being able to consider wider issues than the requirements of the broadcasting industry.

Secondly, clause 256 of the Communications Bill contains a provision that some hon. Members will recall. It relates to Ofcom's regular, probably five-yearly, review of the public service broadcasting remits—the ecology of public service broadcasting. As we know, public service broadcasting potentially has a significant role to play in the film industry. FilmFour is

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an instructive case. It was a brave attempt to create, off the back of the resources of a public service broadcaster, something akin to a UK integrated film production and distribution company. It was not on the scale of Polygram, although, as it turned out, even Polygram was not large enough to survive as an international company. FilmFour is a similar example: the volume was not there, and the range and size of activities were not great enough. One could argue about the relative merits of "Charlotte Gray". I am told that it did not lose money, but that is not the point. One should never reach, and one cannot survive in, a situation such as this when everything hangs on the success of one film.

The demise of FilmFour, in its previous form, shows that we cannot achieve a UK distribution activity on our own; we need to be part of an international context. About 80 per cent. of the revenue from a successful film will be derived from overseas box offices rather than from the UK's.

That is not to say that FilmFour will not carry on. Channel 4 may continue to put money into 10 or a dozen UK films a year, and the BBC puts money into films—after "Mrs Brown" we have "The Lost Prince". The BBC is quite well funded at the moment, all things considered. Things have moved on since the Edwardian era, and in the 21st century the BBC is the only organisation in Britain that can afford to put red carpets on a beach. If the BBC can afford to engage in the production of quality drama, which it does well—I did not mean to be disparaging; I thought "The Lost Prince" was very good—I hope that it does so not only for UK broadcast but for distribution to broadcast companies and channels overseas, and perhaps for wider distribution to cinemas and exhibitions, having regard to associated and ancillary rights.

Under clause 256 of the Communications Bill, when Ofcom considers public service broadcasters and the way in which their remits are fulfilled, it will have no regard to Channel 4's film making, except the part that is directly related to broadcasting in the United Kingdom. Ofcom will have only the same regard to the BBC's film production. That is wrong, and our experience of industry regulators tells us that if something is not mentioned in statute—as film is not mentioned in the Communications Bill—the regulator will not have regard to it. A regulator will not extend beyond its powers in legislation because of the risk of challenge and matters being ultra vires. In any case, Ofcom will have a great deal of work to do.

I do not suggest that Ofcom should become the film industry regulator, and I suspect that the film industries would hate that to happen. However, as Ofcom will examine public service broadcasters and their activities, I have no doubt that it should examine the way in which broadcasters interact with film industries because the broadcasters could be a substantial source of activity for the film industry.

I shall draw the threads of my arguments together. The Film Council has performed a great service by starting to redefine the public policy response to the film industry. It is important to distinguish between where and how support is given, although perhaps Sir Alan Parker's speech did not do that sufficiently. The support given to the art-house and creative side, per se, of the industry is similar to lottery-funded support given to artistic and sporting activity on its own merits. Good ideas relate to getting such productions into multiplexes and giving more support for subtitling, advertising and print promotion, all of which is excellent. However, that should be distinguished from the strategy for the industry as a whole, which is more about tax concessions, training and the development of the underlying industry.

I have proposed an idea about the way in which tax concessions could be implemented, but time is pressing. We are reaching a point when films that might benefit from existing tax concessions before they conclude in 2005 are going through production. Anybody who is presently contemplating making new films is probably not anticipating tax concessions from the UK Government. Decisions will be made quickly, which is why time is pressing. I hope that the Government will examine the form that tax concessions should take when they consider how to support the industry. I hope that they will also consider that public service broadcasters and Ofcom, through the Communications Bill, should be encouraged to work with the film industry as a joint venture to stimulate the UK audio-visual sector as a whole.

I hope that I have made some contribution to thinking about film policy, if from a somewhat amateurish standpoint. I hope also that people in the film industry will recognise that we understand that we have a role to play in helping them. The industry will rest not just on the creative talents of such people but on the public policy framework that we put in place. It has been nearly four years since the House of Commons held a debate on the film industry. The time is absolutely right not just for a debate but, through the Government's initiatives, for a substantive debate about film policy, perhaps in the context of the Budget.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps it would be helpful if I were to remind the Chamber that it is the established practice in these 90-minute Adjournment debates to commence the first of the three winding-up speeches 30 minutes before conclusion, which means that we now have 25 minutes left for general debate. I ask right hon. and hon. Members who seek to contribute to bear those conditions in mind.

10.5 am

Mr. Chris Smith (Islington, South and Finsbury): I begin by reminding the Chamber of my declaration of interests in the Register of Members' Interests and by recording my honorary life membership of BAFTA. In that context, I am extremely pleased that the three films that have received the most nominations for BAFTA awards this year—"Gangs of New York", "Chicago" and "The Hours"—all contain significant elements of British talent.

I congratulate the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) on raising this very important subject. I agree with much of what he said, particularly his final remarks about the necessity of ensuring that Ofcom, in its overall role in the communications world, considers the relevance of film in the broadcasting environment and in other respects, too. I shall return to that in a moment.

My first point is about the tax incentive regime. The hon. Gentleman described an intriguing scheme for developing Sir Alan Parker's comments on the way in which the tax regime could support distribution rather than just production. I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman's scheme would work, but it certainly merits some attention.

However, I hope that in accepting Sir Alan Parker's absolutely sensible analysis that it is not just production but distribution and scriptwriting—the two ends of the film-making process—that matter, we do not throw the baby out with the bath water and remove entirely the measures in the tax regime to encourage investment in UK production. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor introduced the tax incentive regime in his first Budget in 1997. Its term has since been extended on a couple of occasions, but its effects were restricted in the most recent Budget because considerable abuse was occurring, particularly in the television sector. The regime is still in place, however, and I very much hope that it will remain. It has been instrumental in ensuring substantial investment in the UK film industry from British and other companies. Such investment would not have been made without the tax incentives.

Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor should go further. At the moment, the tax incentive is limited to movies that have an overall budget of £15 million or less. It might be sensible to change the provision to bring larger budget movies into the tax incentive regime, which could cover the first £15 million of expenditure. Instead of saying that only movies with a budget of £15 million or less should qualify for the incentive on production, the first £15 million of expenditure on any movie made in the UK, which has significant British content, should be eligible for the relief.

If we made that change, it would have one very significant effect: it would become even more attractive for big-budget movies, particularly those generated by American studios, to be made in Britain. As the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire rightly observed, we are in a competitive market, particularly across the English-speaking world. Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are attractive locations for film making. They all have tax regimes, some of which are more attractive than ours. We have an advantage given the quality of the skills, personnel and technical expertise based in the UK, but that is not enough to make the UK the premier location for making large American movies. If we can put in place a tax incentive of the kind that I have suggested, it would have a positive economic effect. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Sport can take that idea to his discussions with the Chancellor over the next few months.

The second issue I want to touch on is the looming problem of the piracy of moving image material. It particularly concerns film but it applies also to television. The issue of piracy—the counterfeiting of material, particularly in a digital format—has bedevilled the music industry for many years. The music industry loses millions of pounds every week because of the unauthorised, illegal digital transmission of musical material, and the issue is beginning to affect the film and television industries in a major way. We know, for example, that there are already 40,000 illegally copied editions of "The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers" in circulation around the world. We also know that many movies get pirated before they have been released in any location and are transmitted from computer to computer across the world well before they are issued for general release. It does not take a genius to understand that if that sort of illegal copying and distribution of pirated material expands, it will strike at the heart of the economics of the movie and television industries, in which case we will all be poorer because movies will not get made.

There are ways in which we can try to combat piracy. Technical solutions such as digital watermarking and signature systems can be included in material. Pirate copies can be traced back to the person who is doing the copying, but one can take action against them only if all parts of not only the content production industry, which includes the film industry, but the transmission industry, which includes servers and telecoms companies, co-operate in trying to stamp out such illegal activity.

Two things are necessary for that to happen. First, there has to be proper copyright protection in law. The European copyright directive, which was agreed in principle about a year or so ago, has recently completed its consultation process for inclusion in United Kingdom law. Something is expected from the Department of Trade and Industry on that, possibly in about a month's time. It is important that that is done, and that it is done quickly and in the right way.

Secondly, all parts of the relevant industries need to be encouraged to come together and agree common procedures and standards in order to combat the problem of piracy. Ofcom is ideally placed to carry out such a ring-holding exercise. Specific statutory powers are not required for Ofcom to do that, but I hope that Ofcom can be encouraged to do it. When the Communications Bill is on Report, perhaps the Government might view with some sympathy an amendment to give Ofcom the authority to engage in combating piracy. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will take that suggestion back to his ministerial colleagues and that that is something that can be done.

We have a film industry of considerable strength and importance in this country. It has made a very important contribution to our economy and our culture over a number of years. We need to play to that strength and to nurture it and I have described two ways in which we might be able to do so.

10.16 am

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) on securing this debate. If it has indeed been four years since the previous debate on the film industry, that debate took place approximately three years before I was elected to Parliament. I declare my interest, which is mentioned in the Register of Members' Interests. I am proud to have supported the film industry in the past through my membership of the board of Edinburgh international film festival and the Lothian and Borders screen industries office. Like many others, I have also enjoyed many evenings at the cinema and I am glad that we have had a wide-ranging debate on the importance of the industry.

The industry is important for several reasons. To most people in this country, the film industry means a good night out. Once a year they see a lot of glitz and

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glam at the Oscar ceremony or the Cannes film festival. However, the fact that there are many more column inches in the press about the lives of celebrities than about the industry itself means it is not surprising that often the industry feels left out in the cold. The film industry is important, both in the UK and worldwide. Earnings not only provide jobs and income, but add a diverse cultural dimension to life. We all benefit from cultural diversity and from enjoying the talents of others. Film allows us to see around the world and into the lives of some and the imagination of others. One of the most memorable descriptions of cinema and film television that I have heard was from Bernardo Bertolucci talking about his work in Edinburgh. He said:

> "In the cinema we dream with our eyes open."

Many individuals and organisations are doing good work on behalf of the industry, and cries for a level playing field with other countries are often heard. The tax regime has already been well explored this morning and I hope that the Minister will take on board what has been said. We must support the industry to stop jobs going elsewhere and being lost to this country. Certain films belong in this country. I hope that the Minister will explore not only the alterations to the tax regime raised this morning, but any other options raised by experts in the industry. Sir Alan Parker has already been mentioned and there are also a number of experts and people working in the industry worldwide who would like to film in this country. However, for financial reasons, films are sometimes made elsewhere, or made partly here and partly elsewhere. It was ironic that, as a Scot, I should watch a film called "Braveheart", knowing that part was filmed in Scotland and part in Ireland.

There are many jobs in the industry, and Britain has a reputation for world-class skills, both traditional and high tech, in film making. Those skills have not only resulted in productions being brought to this country but have provided jobs abroad for people from Britain, who have gone on to perfect their skills with top international companies, such as Industrial Light and Magic.

Although the names of those in the spotlight are the ones that come to mind, there are many workers behind the scenes. Names like Sean Connery and Ewan McGregor, both from Scotland, trip off the tongue, but possibly more important than the few with a high profile are the many writers, directors, producers, camera operators, lighting and sound technicians, wardrobe and set designers and those involved in the finance, right down to those who provide the catering on sets. They all contribute to an industry from which we all benefit, if it thrives.

Schoolchildren ask me who is the most famous person I have met. I tell them that it is not the Queen or Tony Blair but that some time ago I met the current James Bond, Pierce Brosnan. Films and television make a big impact on their lives. Although I have had the pleasure of meeting some of the celebrities in the industry, what has stuck most in my mind was a documentary called "This Mine is Ours", which I worked on some years ago with the miners of Monktonhall colliery outside Edinburgh, 3,500ft underground. I was a minor part of the crew, but the film won a BAFTA award for best documentary of the year. It was a privilege to gain an insight into that workers' co-operative, which struggled to regenerate a mine closed by the National Coal Board, and to see the story shown on a television screen and shared with an audience throughout the UK and possibly the world. We must not undervalue the importance of the documentary in the film industry.

Some years ago Michael Winner was asked by a budding young film maker for advice on how to progress in the industry. The answer was stark. He was told to leave the country and go to the United States: British films did not make money, there was little or nothing left of the industry and the future was not here. We must ensure that what is left of the industry is encouraged to grow.

One way to realise the full potential of film is to acknowledge the impact that the right film can have on tourism. Tourism is accepted as a major employer, with thousands of jobs depending on the promotion of a quality service, yet advertising budgets for tourism authorities often cannot provide the profile that would bring financial rewards and result in more jobs.

I have no doubt that there will be a huge spin-off for New Zealand following the production of "The Lord of the Rings". Not only did tourist attractions in Scotland record significant increases in visitor numbers when "Braveheart" was released in the cinemas, but the numbers increased again when it was released on video and when it was shown on television. There is widespread acceptance of the importance of tourism, and there is much evidence of the importance of the publicity generated by a television programme or film in that connection: film maps of regions where productions were made are now common, as are tours of film and television locations.

Whenever public money is linked to the film industry, there are stories of financial disaster waiting in the wings. As I said, I shall not go into the problems caused by the changes in the tax regime or into those of films funded through the lottery, except to say that the successes of most film studios are based on a large slate of productions and that disasters are the norm. Usually, one blockbuster will not only pay its way but will cover the cost of the turkeys. In this country the volume of production does not enable that to happen. Therefore, large-scale productions such as those made by the Hollywood studios are not the way forward.

There has been discussion about whether we should support only British films, but it is difficult to say what constitutes a British film. There have been many memorable ones—the Bond series, the Harry Potter films, "Bridget Jones's Diary" and "Trainspotting", part of which was based and filmed in my constituency. One might not have thought that that kind of film would produce tourists for Edinburgh, but I am assured that Japanese tourists want to see what happened where.

The industry has a long and proud track record of participation in world film festivals. I have been involved in the Edinburgh international film festival, which is the longest continually running festival in the world. Film festivals provide shop windows for important but less glamorous aspects of the industry. Apart from feature films, there are documentaries, short films and animation, which often provide a good introduction to the industry. Recently, many films have been produced using high-tech special effects, but we saw what Wallace and Gromit could do with plasticine alone when they came to life on the screen. Even pop videos can be at the cutting edge of film production.

Some of the most dynamic and creative people in the world work in the industry. We have made a significant contribution to it in the past; I hope that the Minister will assure us that we shall do so again.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The two previous speakers quite properly drew attention to their entries in the Register of Members' Interests, and I am grateful to them. As approved moderator of our proceedings, I have the benefit of having a register before me to which I can refer, but other Members do not have that privilege, unless they have had prior notice. In the most polite way, I must point out that it would have been helpful to other Members if those two Members had spelled out the range and nature of their interests.

Mr. Chris Smith: On a point of order, Mr. Cook. I apologise for having been too brief in my introduction. The register records that I have a position as an adviser to the Walt Disney company.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am sure that no apology is necessary.

10.27 am

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) on securing the debate and on introducing the subject in a non-partisan and extremely helpful way. The quality of debate has been high—although it will go downhill from here.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Sir Alan Parker, who effectively drew three conclusions in his recent speech—the industry should be distribution-led, there should be an emphasis on skills, and more needs to be done about the infrastructure. I took the hon. Gentleman to agree with Sir Alan, and so do I. The hon. Gentleman posed the old question of what is a British film. The debate has shown that we cannot define it, but we can say that Britain needs to be involved in the industry in any way it can.

The right hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith) suggested a change to the tax regime, giving concessions on the first £15 million of production costs rather than a concession for productions that cost under £15 million. That sounds like a bright idea and I shall be interested to hear the Minister's response. The right hon. Gentleman also raised concerns about piracy, a global problem that requires a global solution. Will the Minister say what has been done at European Union level to help tackle that problem?

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett) referred to the people behind the media spotlight—those who earn their living in the industry and are important to it. He also mentioned the importance of documentaries. He probably does not know that I have visited Monktonhall colliery, and I shall talk to him about it after the debate. Not many people will remember the struggle of the Monktonhall miners' co-operative but I had some involvement in it in my previous life.

The film industry's impact on tourism is vital. Harry Potter has done a marvellous job in creating a map of places around the United Kingdom. Indeed, King's Cross station has visitors looking for platform nine and three quarters. My constituency has a connection with Agatha Christie, but we may not have exploited that enough. The films have not been made there, but the scripts for many movies originated in the work of Agatha Christie and that gives us a movie connection. I am sure that all of us can find some such connections in our constituencies.

The Film Council takes the lead in enhancing Britain's film-making credentials. Britain markets itself as a highly skilled place for film making with lots of people in production, location work, special effects and technical aspects. Many US companies use Britain to make films, bringing in American money. However, the success of those Hollywood films often means that profits leave the United Kingdom. Sadly, Britain cannot compete with Hollywood.

Sir Alan Parker, as chairman of the Film Council, recommended in his speech in November that Britain should focus on improving infrastructure, developing a highly skilled and flexible work force, developing ways to counter the effects of studios moving shoots to cheaper locations, and revising the definition of what constitutes a British production so that more money may remain in the UK economy.

Given high British costs, the danger is that our film industry will suffer unless what we can offer is "value added". That point is echoed in the Relph report, which suggests that British bargain budget production facilities are not bargain enough. There is a risk that if the UK trades on high-quality facilities, it will lose business elsewhere.

In 2001, the British film industry suffered as a result of many films not gaining a high return on production costs. That was exacerbated by the strike in the US film industry, which reduced work opportunities, and by the decision of many Hollywood studios not to locate productions outside the US after 11 September 2001. However, recent figures suggest an upturn in the industry's fortunes. Although only 43 films were made—many co-financed rather than solely British—the Americans are back. In 2001, American studios spent about £230 million in the UK; last year, they spent about £270 million.

Other areas of concern cited in the past include the amount spent on films in Britain through lottery funding. The criticism has been that those films have not seen a return on the £100 million spent on them over the past five years or so. More generally, the Film Council shows that in 2001 the average solo British production cost £3.5 million but netted £755,000 at the box office. In 2002, FilmFour was closed by its parent company, Channel 4, for not being viable.

My party, like all parties, wants a strong and comprehensive film industry that uses all the skills, trades and talents that go into film making. Policies could be developed to ensure that existing talent is used and that the available money goes further. We still produce great film makers. Our technicians and actors

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still feature in successful major films made here and overseas. What is lacking is a comprehensive long-term plan for the UK film industry. We can attract new money. For example, we could build on the great support that exists among the public for British film making. Have the Government considered how many members of the public might be prepared to invest small amounts in the film industry, knowing full well that they are not likely to see a return, but hoping that their investment would mean that films were made and that there might be a small percentage chance of one of those films turning out to be a blockbuster?

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire had the interesting idea of having tax concessions on cinema seat receipts to help UK production. We have talked a great deal about distribution problems, but it was not clear from the hon. Gentleman's comments how those tax concessions would relate to those problems. However, in terms of providing extra revenue to help production, his idea seemed a good one.

I hope that the Minister will explain what more the Government can do to attract investment into film. I would like to know his long-term vision, and that of the Government, for the UK film industry.

10.35 am

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) on his success in securing this debate. It was mentioned earlier that we had not had such a debate for some four years, so this one is long overdue.

As many contributors have said, there is some perplexity over what actually constitutes the British film industry. Sir Alan Parker, in the well-documented speech that has been referred to this morning, said that we should not be thinking about a British film industry but about British film industries, in the plural.

The right hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith) established the Film Council and a great deal of credit must go to him for having had the foresight to make that move. It is now easier to focus on the areas in the British film industry that need to be focused on. If it considers Sir Alan Parker's speech, and the aspirations behind it, the Film Council will offer extremely good leadership. Speaking as an outsider, I think that it will carry the industry kicking and screaming into the realities of the 21st century.

The UK has a successful film industry, as can be measured by the number of people who visit cinemas to watch films—films made here and films made elsewhere in the world. The latest figures show a 13 per cent. increase in cinema admissions last year and a 10 per cent. increase in box office takings for the exhibitors. If cinemas are to grow and develop, we need them to show American mega-movies and blockbusters, but we still need them to show films that are made in the UK and reflect our culture in stories about us.

In the past 40 years, we have been obsessed with public funding for our film industry. That funding has been concentrated on production. Many people contend that the funding has not taken us very far. Over the past seven years, we have had lottery subsidies, and over the past five years we have had production-focused tax breaks, which the right hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury introduced when he was Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. Those subsidies and tax breaks have been successful in some ways, but it is questionable whether either of those sources of funding has delivered the fundamental structural changes that will be needed if the film industry is not to continue to suffer recurrent crises every five years or so.

If the present structure has not worked, what solutions will sustain a successful film industry in the future? The debate has recently been opened up within the industry. As we all know, the industry needs to embrace significant change, but the debate has also covered the future role and influence of Government. The Government have an important input into a large range of issues. As has been mentioned many times this morning, perhaps the most important input is in fiscal policy. The existing tax breaks have been extremely helpful. The 100 per cent. first-year write-offs were introduced under section 48 of the Finance (No. 2) Act 1997. That has certainly generated employment and delivered successful films. It is due to end in July 2005, which seems to be some time away, but in terms of film production it provides a window of opportunity of only another 18 months. It is important that, when the Minister responds, he informs us how the Department for Culture, Media and Sport regards the matter. If only 18 months of active space is left within which the film industry must operate, some consideration must be given to how to extend that period. Section 42 of the 1997 Act continues to attract the big American productions to our shores and keeps both Shepperton and Pinewood studios open.

However, although tax breaks have been useful and helpful, they are considered in some quarters to be inefficient. There is a view that the underlying philosophy of sale and leaseback is not helpful, and is rather flawed as regards the film industry. In his winding-up speech, will the Minister explain the Government's thinking on tax breaks? The way forward, as envisaged in a recent speech by the chairman of the Film Council, is on three fronts, which were well covered by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire.

Sir Alan Parker believes that distribution, not production, should be the leading force. In his words, there should be a pull factor, not a push factor—which means that the industry should be market-led. That is how most businesses and industries operate throughout this country and the world; they look at the market and they produce things that people want to use or to see.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): On the creation of a market, particularly a greater market for UK-based films, what value does the hon. Gentleman place on festivals? For example, yesterday was Wales cinema day; three quarters of cinemas in Wales took part in it. Since it was introduced two years ago, the numbers attending have doubled year on year. Surely there is a role for festivals to play in creating the market, but can there be that pull factor for the industry as a whole?

Mr. Moss: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. He more or less answered his own question by saying that Wales cinema day has been a tremendous success, and I have no reason to doubt that. I think that it was a point well made and the Minister will no doubt take it on board.

The other two matters listed by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire were skills and infrastructure. The film industry needs to examine how it does things and its internal structure. There is a particular problem with low-budget films, particularly low-budget British films, whose principal, or only, market is the United Kingdom. The Relph report, commissioned by the Film Council last year, concluded that, unless there were fundamental changes, British film making at that level could cease to exist in a few years' time. The report showed that film makers in France, Denmark and Germany all made films more cheaply than we can in this country and that the essential need is to make films whose budgets reflect their market value.

As for skills and training, the film industry—as we all accept—is a people business. In this country, we have a good record of producing people with great talent, but there is now a dearth of skilled people. The Film Council admits that there are not enough good writers, new editors, cinematographers and production designers. Training is now a critical consideration and the Film Council needs to work more closely with the Government to develop a strategy for the future. Perhaps more lottery money should be diverted into training, as well as contributions from the industry itself. It is a surprise to learn that until now the film industry itself has not invested in training as a way forward. Training should be developed across the board, and that includes script development, production, distribution and exhibition.

On infrastructure, it is obvious from the comments we have heard this morning that film production is extremely mobile—New Zealand was mentioned in that context. Many Governments are dreaming up tax incentives to attract big-budget Hollywood film productions. Investment is pouring into new film studios in countries as diverse as South Korea, Thailand and Australia as well as New Zealand. We must establish working partnerships with those countries as well as develop critical financial incentives for the home-based infrastructure. The trend will not be reversed. As traditional trade barriers come down and digital technology frees up film production, it will go, literally, anywhere in the world.

Serious challenges face the film industry. However, we have a good record and immense talent. Working in partnership with the Government and the DCMS in particular, the British film industry should have an exciting future ahead.

10.45 am

The Minister for Sport (Mr. Richard Caborn): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) on initiating this morning's debate, which has been constructive and excellent. I will make sure that comments are conveyed to the powers that be in the Treasury and other Departments. I convey the apologies of my hon. Friend the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting, who would normally be present for such a debate. He is in a Standing Committee this morning. I have drawn the long straw while he has drawn the short one.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith) for his contribution. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire tried to highlight how the sector is a major contributor to wealth creation that has a strong industrial base, and how it should be evaluated against those criteria. My right hon. Friend took that on board some years ago when I served under his leadership on the creative industries task force, which brought together several Government Departments. The Film Council and other initiatives came out of that task force, which was driven by two factors: new technologies—information technology and computerisation—were converging with the arts in ways that needed to be managed, and a tremendous amount of talent was domiciled in this country. My right hon. Friend also understood that globalisation was on the agenda in ways that we had never envisaged because of the ability to move information at the drop of a switch. The technologies interfacing with the arts and creative industries needed to be directed in new ways.

The comments of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire about the film sector were of particular relevance to the way in which we should develop future public policy. If we do not proceed in the way in which he described, which the Film Council supports, we will not be able to capitalise on this major industry. I must admit that I checked my notes when he mentioned the extent of the film industry. The global market for film is worth approximately $50 billion, of which we have approximately $4 billion. More importantly, some 44,500 people are employed in film and video production in this country. Those are quality, skilled jobs, and that underlines their importance to the economy and to wealth creation.

To home in particularly on the UK film industry, it is quite successful. If we consider how far we have come, such success is pretty impressive. For example, last year British productions were nominated for no fewer than 20 academy awards. Three of those nominations—best supporting actor, best original screenplay and best make-up—show how the industry is coming on. In 2002, 175 million cinema tickets were sold. That is the highest number since 1971, which shows how much growth there has been. Total spend on film production in the UK in 2002 was up by £22 million on the previous year, rising from £410 million to £433 million. That represents an increase by a factor of four since 1992, when total spend was at just less than £98 million. The Government believe that a successful film industry is good for Britain in various ways. That has been clearly outlined in this debate.

The impact of film on tourism and related developments, which was picked up by the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett), is an important consideration, but what have we done to encourage the industry? Sustainability is a word that has not been used this morning, but it encapsulates much of what has been said. Sustainability is important, particularly in respect of the recent history of the film industry. We are trying to ensure that the industry is sustainable in respect of intellectual property and that it is focused. We introduced tax incentives in 1997, which to date have provided the industry with more

[Mr. Richard Caborn]

than £100 million-worth of direct benefits to film production. That tax relief was due to end in 2002, but it was extended until 2005 by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Section 48 of the Finance (No. 2) Act 1997 allows producers of films that cost less than £15 million to claim relief in one year of 100 per cent. of the production costs. That relief is used primarily by UK producers who make lower-budget films, and it will remain in place until July 2005 for films that are intended for cinema release. Section 42 of the Act allows producers of films with budgets of any size to claim relief over three years on 100 per cent. of the production costs. That relief is often claimed by the larger US production teams. It is not unlimited, but it remains in place for films that are intended for cinema release.

The tax regime has been central to this debate. The issue was sparked, to some extent, by Sir Alan Parker's speech in November 2002. Where are we taking tax and how can it be used more creatively to become a pull-through factor in distribution? The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire and my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington, South and Finsbury made some valid points about that.

This year, Film Council officials are planning to discuss such issues with my Department, the Inland Revenue, and possibly the Treasury, with a view to firming up their thinking and developing it into hard proposals. I will ensure that this morning's contributions are fed into the early stages of that discussion along with Parker's suggestions on strengthening distribution rather than focusing on the production side. A balance must be achieved. I am far from expert in this area, but Parker's speech last year opened up the debate and we want to move it forward.

The question of skills has also been covered. People will know that the Film Council has established a programme to improve skills throughout the industry and to deliver training on film business skills. The council has co-financed new development agencies in each of the English regions in order to improve the co-ordination and growth of the film industry across the country. I speak from experience of my city of Sheffield, which now has a strong cultural industries quarter.

We have not yet mentioned, and should factor in, the role of our higher education structure. Sheffield Hallam university, which has a major faculty on the subject, is now linked to the creative industries quarter. There are more than 2,000 quality jobs in that area, and that number is growing. Together with the regional development agencies, we are trying to increase access to venture capital, as that was another of our major problems in developing the industry.

The Film Council has taken the issue of training seriously. To ensure that the younger generation is enthusiastic about film making, it has set up the first light scheme, which encourages young people to learn the practical skills of film making. Children from across the country have benefited from what is proving to be an extremely popular scheme. The Film Council funds the British Film Institute, which provides education about, and access to, the moving image; it, too, is quite successful. The BFI promotes greater understanding and appreciation of, and access to, film and television culture and is renowned worldwide for its work. The BFI also operates the world's most extensive film and television archive with the National Film Theatre. There is also the Regus London film festival.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) referred to what happened in Wales yesterday; such events about the promotion of films are to be welcomed, wherever they take place. The subject of film studies is now on the national curriculum, and there are special programmes for the further understanding of films. With the aim of providing a focus for encouraging foreign production companies to come to the UK, and to build relationships abroad, the Film Council funds the British Film Commission and the British Film Office in Los Angeles. When I was Minister for Trade, I met several people from that office, which has been extremely helpful in stimulating inward investment into the UK. That in turn feeds into the UK production infrastructure and nurtures a more richly skilled work force. Such cross-fertilisation is necessary in this global industry.

It is worth noting that inward investment from international film makers locating productions in the UK increased by some 16 per cent. from £230 million in 2001 to £267 million in 2002. That is more than four times the £58 million spent on inward investment in 1992. That is the background of our achievements to date.

If I have time, I will set out further plans for the film industry, but I should now like to concentrate on aspects of the film industry that the Government are supporting. The Government, working with the industry, set up the skills investment fund to support a number of priorities identified by the industry, including new trainees and a health and safety executive. All British productions are asked to contribute to that fund, and public funding for training through the Film Council now more than matches the contribution from industry. I welcome that partnership, which is now tangible, and can be measured.

The Government have also significantly increased investment in Skillset—the sector skill council for the audiovisual industry, which has already been mentioned—and that has been welcomed across the board. Skillset and the Film Council are mapping the key training needs for the film industry, and plan to develop a comprehensive training strategy this year. We look forward to the outcome, and to working with them and taking forward their conclusions. We also fund the national film and television school, which provides high quality post-graduate education opportunities for those entering the industry.

The Government are keen to ensure that the industry takes full advantage of the new digital technologies. My Department, which works with the Film Council, commissioned a research study to identify the implications of digital technology for the film industry with the aim of provoking discussion. That information can be accessed on the DCMS website.

There is much to be proud of, but we cannot afford to be complacent. The number of UK film productions fell in 2001–02 after the record in 2000. The reasons why that happened, which include foot and mouth and the problems with the Screen Actors Guild in the US, have been articulated today. Nevertheless, many in the industry recognise that the fall in production does not represent a return to the industry's recession of the 1990s. As I mentioned earlier, inward investment by international film makers increased by some 60 per cent. in 2002, which was a vote of confidence in the industry.

Alan Parker, the chairman of the Film Council, made it clear in his speech to the industry on 5 November that the UK film industry—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Religious Persecution (India and Bhutan)

11 am

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire): I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to raise this important issue.

As a secular republic since it was granted independence, India has committed itself to religious toleration. Events over the past few years have, however, threatened to tarnish that reputation. Bhutan has a reputation as a remote and isolated country, which is slowly opening up to outside influences. Its treatment of ethnic and religious minorities, however, leaves a great deal to be desired.

India is governed by a coalition called the National Democratic Alliance. The Bharatiya Janata party, a Hindu nationalist party linked to militant Hindu groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal, is the leading party in the coalition. Since the BJP came to power in 1998, persecution of Christians and those of other faiths has risen enormously in certain parts of the country. Such persecution usually emanates from militant Hindu groups and state and local governments rather than directly from the national Government. However, the BJP's emphasis on Hindu expansionism has helped to create a climate in which the persecution of Christians in particular can flourish.

The BJP's close links with the VHP and the Bajrang Dal are of great concern as those groups have been implicated in many attacks on both Christians and Muslims in which the attackers usually escape justice. Page 1 of the United States State Department's annual report 2000 on international freedom states:

> "ineffective investigation and prosecution of attacks on religious minorities is interpreted by some extremist elements as a signal that such violence is likely to go unpunished".

That is partly due to weaknesses in the legal system, although many observers attribute it in large part to links between those groups and the BJP.

Over the past four years, many Christians have been killed or wounded by Hindu militants, although most of those attacks go unnoticed by the outside world. Occasionally, an incident comes to the world's attention: in January 1999, an Australian missionary, Graham Staines, and his two young sons were burned to death in their camper van by a mob of extremists, which made headlines around the world.

More common are attacks and murders, which go largely unreported. At the end of September 2000, a Christian woman in a remote part of Tamil Nadu state was burned to death in an attack by local extremists on Christians in a village. In February 2001, a gang of Hindu extremists beat to death a young Christian evangelist, Riyaz Augustin. In the same month, a Catholic priest, Father Tommy Manjuli, was shot dead by an unidentified gunman, who was believed to be a militant. Sometimes, the name of the victim is not recorded for posterity. In December 2000, the body of a 35-year-old man involved in Christian missionary work was found in a remote part of Orissa state. Extremists who were angered by his evangelistic work had apparently murdered him. His body was found only after he had been missing for some time.

[Andrew Selous]

Hindu militants particularly target evangelists, missionaries, religious orders and Christian leaders such as pastors and priests, who are subject to the biggest threat because they are active in living out their faith. Those people are also easy targets because they make long journeys in isolated areas as part of their work, and many of them have been killed and attacked in recent years. Churches are regularly attacked by mobs of Hindu militants, who are often armed and shouting anti-Christian slogans. Many Christians have been injured in those attacks, and Church property is frequently destroyed.

Other campaigns of intimidation may be more subtle but still have malicious intent, such as the campaign in the summer of 2001 to close down some Christian orphanages. Bishop M. A. Thomas, who runs such an orphanage, received death threats. Last year, in a widely circulated e-mail, a prominent Hindu militant made a thinly veiled death threat against a Christian leader, Dr. John Dayal, who is the secretary-general of the All India Christian Council. Dr. Dayal has campaigned vigorously on behalf of Christians and other minorities, especially the Dalits, who were formerly known as the Untouchables. His effectiveness is probably the reason why he has been targeted.

We know from recent surveillance in Gujarat, where the Muslim community was targeted, that more than 2,000 people have been killed. There is evidence of complicity of the state authorities in that carnage. Indeed, there are rumours that Hindu militants are planning to rise up against the Christian community in Gujarat in the same way that they rose up against the Muslim community last year.

Those are not the only incidents of threats and intimidation. Recently, a confidential circular from the umbrella militant Hindu organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, was discovered. It was sent from RSS headquarters in Nagpur, Maharashtra state, to local RSS officers. Although only recently uncovered, it is believed to have been in circulation for some two years. One commentator notes:

> "the circular contains a total strategy for persecuting, weakening and marginalizing the Christian, tribal and Muslim communities through economic boycotts, media onslaught and conflict provocation."

It advocates waging a terror campaign against various minorities, including tribal peoples, lower castes, Christians and Muslims. Article 11 calls for

> "mass rapes of Muslim/Christian women during riots".

That is a sinister precursor of what actually happened in Gujarat last year when Muslim women were gang-raped by Hindu militants.

Shockingly, article 4 of the e-mail suggests that doctors sympathetic to the aims of the RSS should inject newborn Christian babies with diseases that would handicap them, and should prescribe dangerous drugs to Christians, tribal peoples and Muslims. Article 32 urges the killing of "anti-Hindus", and article 26 discusses a plan to starve non-Hindu groups in areas where there are food shortages. It discusses continuing the malnutrition of Christians.

Article 12 recommends lies and deceit as a means of discrediting minorities:

> "Place images/idols under the ground near non-Hindu religious structures . . . new literature to be fabricated to prove all old churches . . . are old Hindu structures."

The tactic was used very successfully against Muslims by the RSS and the VHP in a notorious incident in 1992. A mob of Hindu militants stormed the mosque of Babri Masjid on the dubious grounds that it was built on the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram. Indeed, as the BJP owed its subsequent electoral triumphs at least partly to the incident and the way in which it was manipulated, the tactic proved successful beyond all expectations.

The close links between the RSS and the governing political party, the BJP, become all the more sinister in the light of the RSS document. One Indian commentator stated:

> "It frightens me that the leaders of our country, while telling the world that they respect freedom of religion, are really working for an organisation that has no problem killing, raping and poisoning those of other religions to advance their agenda of Hindu extremism."

The circular is far from unique. Typical of other threatening literature is an e-mail from a supporter of the RSS concerning a series of planned evangelistic meetings in Sikkim, which were to be conducted by a Christian, Dr. Paul Dinakaran. The writer encourages fellow militants

> "to disrupt the proceedings and if possible intimidate and threaten"

Dinakaran, and urges:

> "If he does not vacate Sikkim in three days time an attempt should be made to kick him out and set his residence on fire."

There are general as well as specific threats. An e-mail from a Hindu militant a few months ago, which was intended for wide circulation, states:

> "On the other hand, if Muslims and Christians use perfidy and force in conversion, as they frequently do, we have to act with merciless ferocity and militant determination",

using

> "unwavering force without quarter, delivered calmly without passion or attachment."

The following example, which was reported by a western missionary who was in India with her husband but who has since returned to Britain, shows the threats and intimidation that Christian and other faith leaders face:

> "The local community had had visits from the police and had been told to inform on us . . . Our Hindu friends came to us and told us that we were on a killing list. The local Catholic priest was, as well. It had been passed to all the local shopkeepers who had been told to inform on us. Everything we did or said was thereafter re-hashed until we had assumed sinister, subversive roles and were [seen as] a danger to the community".

The reference to the role of the police in that example should set alarm bells ringing. Elements in both local and national Government are unsympathetic to the plight of Christians, Muslims and other minorities. Officials and police are often reluctant to register or investigate attacks even when they are reported to them and the Indian Government refuse to denounce the activities of militant groups such as the VHP and the Bajrang Dal. Given the close links between the BJP and such groups, that comes as no surprise.

Other significant instances of persecution are occurring in India. The state of Tamil Nadu has just passed a law that claims to ban conversions "by force or fraud". However, it has been widely seen as an attempt to prevent all conversions to Christianity in the state. It is the culmination of a campaign by militant Hindu groups against Christian conversions. They allege that all conversion to Christianity is "by force or fraud". The leader of the RSS recently claimed:

> "No-one converts voluntarily. It is motivated by greed".

The law is also aimed at stopping Dalits converting from Hinduism to other religions, such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Many Dalits see Hinduism as an oppressive religion that keeps them at the bottom of the caste system. Over the past couple of years, a number have converted to other religions, saying that they find greater freedom that way. State authorities vigorously opposed a recent conversion rally in Tamil Nadu, at which a number of Dalits converted to Christianity and Buddhism.

Christians and Dalits in India fear that the law will spread to other states. There is even a similar Bill pending in the national Parliament. Such laws will make it easier for militant Hindu organisations such as the RSS to harass and obstruct Christians witnessing to non-Christians, and they will give the mobs an excuse to attack evangelists on the pretext that they are breaking the law. The laws would also be a means of stopping the Dalits converting to other religions.

Will the Minister tell me what action Britain is taking to raise those issues with the Indian authorities? Our strong economic and cultural ties with India are likely to give Britain added opportunities to raise such issues. I realise that India is notoriously prickly concerning what it sees as outside interference, but there are ways in which such matters can be raised sensitively and appropriately.

The Indian Government need to crack down on the activities of Hindu militants. Those carrying out attacks on Christians, Muslims and others need to be caught and punished; justice needs to be done and to be seen to be done. The Indian Government need to be reminded of their international obligations, having ratified the international covenant on civil and political rights in 1979, as well as similar covenants and conventions. Above all, the Indian Prime Minister, Mr. Vajpayee, needs to be told that strenuous statements asserting India's commitment to secular, pluralistic government need to be backed up by strong action to demonstrate that.

Our Government can also take action closer to home. The VHP has an active British branch. Despite the repeated involvement of the VHP in atrocities in India, the VHP UK branch has charitable status, with all the advantages that that brings. Will the Minister ask his counterpart in the Home Office to launch an investigation into that? We need to be sure that money raised in this country under charitable pretexts does not end up funding the dubious activities of a militant organisation in India.

I want to consider another example in the same part of the world: the country of Bhutan. Bhutan has the only Buddhist Government in the world and Christians in the country face growing discrimination and persecution, which, unlike in India, comes directly from the national Government. In parts of the country, state officials, such as district administrators, apply huge pressure on Christians to force them to renounce their faith. That intimidation includes severe beatings, imprisonment, verbal threats and forced participation in de-Christianising rituals. Census officers sometimes mark the names of Christians in the register and threaten to delete their details if they do not renounce Christianity. Some observers believe that there is a strong possibility that, if current trends continue, Christian communities could be evicted altogether from Bhutan within a few years.

The British Government need to make strong representations on those points to the Government of Bhutan. I realise that Britain does not have formal diplomatic relations with Bhutan, but our high commission in India has a section that deals with Bhutanese issues. Britain also trades with Bhutan, and is an aid donor to the country. That should provide a useful context in which to raise issues of religious liberty.

Last year, the hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Andy King) tabled a series of written questions on the persecution of Christians in Bhutan. As part of his reply, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), declared that the Government had no reason to discuss the issue with fellow European Union member states. That is simply not good enough.

The Government claim to put human rights and religious liberty at the heart of their foreign policy. Various former Ministers, including the present Secretary of State for Wales when Minister for Europe and the hon. Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle) when Minister of State at the Foreign Office, have reiterated that. The situation in Bhutan warrants a higher priority in discussions with other EU countries. That is especially true given that the EU has some links with Bhutan that are independent of Britain. Also, I gather that the EU is considering increasing development aid to Bhutan. If that is so, it should provide a good opportunity for the UK Government to raise human rights issues with their EU counterparts.

The Under-Secretary also declared that the form and content of a proposed Bhutanese constitution is a matter for the Government and people of Bhutan alone. However, that is not entirely true. The drafting of the constitution is not purely an internal matter, because Bhutan joined the United Nations in 1971, and by virtue of its UN membership has pledged itself to bring its law, including any constitution, into line with the universal declaration of human rights. Article 18 of that declaration upholds the right to freedom of religion. The international community has every right—indeed, an obligation—to ensure that article 18 is upheld and respected in Bhutan.

These are important issues, which I say again I am grateful to have had the opportunity to put on record. While I have been speaking in this half-hour Adjournment debate, it is very likely that somewhere in India or Bhutan, or in both countries, someone has been attacked purely because of their adherence to their faith. The Minister, whose Government claim to put great emphasis on religious liberty, should urgently address that. Taking the steps that I have outlined today would be a good start.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Bill Rammell): I congratulate the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on the clarity of his arguments. In the short time available, I hope to address many of the points that he raised.

I start by making it clear that religious intolerance is deplorable in the United Kingdom, India, Bhutan or wherever it occurs. The close links of many British people of Indian origin with their families in Gujarat, Kashmir, Punjab and elsewhere in India mean that Britain has an especial interest in and responsibility to human rights issues in such areas.

The Government have put the promotion of human rights at the core of their foreign policy. The United Kingdom has a long-standing tradition of raising religious freedom issues around the world. In doing so, we take the 1948 universal declaration of human rights as our starting point. Article 18 of that declaration is clear and unambiguous on religious issues:

> "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observation."

We take that very seriously.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), the then Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, made abundantly clear in July in replying to an Adjournment debate on violence against Christians in Asia, the Government unreservedly condemn the persecution of individuals because of their faith, wherever they are and whatever religion they practise. We certainly take every opportunity, both on our own and in conjunction with European partners, to urge states to pursue laws and practices that foster tolerance and mutual respect, and to protect religious minorities against discrimination, intimidation and attacks.

Wherever possible, we work with officials, religious leaders and non-governmental organisations at international and local level to promote mutual understanding and tolerance. Indeed, at the United Nations General Assembly in New York last year, we co-sponsored a resolution that made clear our determination and that of the international community to work towards eliminating all forms of religious intolerance.

The FCO's work is done not only through the European Union and the United Nations; we believe that it is vital to work with and alongside non-governmental organisations. I was pleased when the FCO restarted the religious freedom panel in December 2001. It is an informal contact group of NGOs based in the UK which are concerned with religious freedom worldwide. The panel's purpose and aim is to share information, to discuss strategies and to promote international religious freedom. I welcome the fact that most faiths are represented, including Christian Solidarity Worldwide, with which I know the hon. Gentleman has links.

Let me turn to the hon. Gentleman's specific worries about religious freedom in India. It is worth starting by saying that India has been seen as a model of a successful religiously diverse and democratic state for many years. It has won high standing throughout the world because of its respect for, and celebration of, religious diversity. India is a vast country with a population of more than 1 billion people and it is true that diversity is, and should be, inherent in its identity. Although the majority of the population are Hindus, people of all faiths—including Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists—live largely peacefully together in Indian society. The concept of an Indian state in which all religions flourish was central to Mahatma Gandhi's thinking. He wrote:

> "Indian culture is neither Hindu, Islamic or any other, wholly. It is a fusion of all."

That is absolutely right.

The vast majority—82 per cent.—of India's population are Hindus. However, the population contains a substantial minority of Muslims. Owing to the size of India's population, that represents 120 million people. Although the Christian and Sikh communities are small minorities that each represent 2 per cent. of the population, more than 20 million Christians nevertheless live in India, which is a substantial number.

The right to the freedom of religion is enshrined in the constitution of India. Article 25 of the constitution states:

> "All persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion".

That is one of the clearest and least ambiguous statements of commitment to be found in the constitution of any country in the world. The Prime Minister of India, Mr. Vajpayee, reaffirmed in his new year message this year that India had been

> "secular since the beginning of her known history".

He rightly defined secularism as

> "the duty to show respect for all faiths and to practise no discrimination among citizens on the basis of their beliefs".

The founding principles of India and the words and commitment in the constitution are very strong. However, tensions between Hindus and Muslims and Hindus and Christians increasingly pose a challenge to the concepts of secularism, tolerance and diversity on which India was founded. We have heard disturbing accounts, especially about attacks on Christians and Muslims, and I verify that concerns are well founded.

Violence against Christians in India increased significantly between 1998 and 2000. The Indian United Christian Forum claimed that the number of attacks against Christian institutions in 1998 alone was more than the total number of attacks between 1964 and 1997. Although the Catholic Bishops Conference of India reported in April 2001 that attacks had decreased since then, violence and the threat of violence remain a serious problem. The hon. Gentleman referred to the recent attack on Joseph Cooper, an American missionary, in Kerala, which was a particularly shocking example. That is not the only example of attacks on Christians, and the hon. Gentleman referred to many of them.

We welcome the fact that the Chief Minister of Kerala responded with a clear denunciation of that attack and we welcome the swift action of the Keralan police to arrest several people who were suspected of being involved in the assault. We hope—and urge—that the perpetrators will be quickly brought to justice, and our high commission in Delhi will continue to watch the situation closely.

The attack on Mr. Cooper was reminiscent of the brutal murder in January 1999 of an Australian missionary, Graham Staines, and his sons. Mr. Staines had worked with leprosy sufferers in Orissa for more than 30 years and had devoted himself to alleviating their suffering. That was one of several vicious assaults against Christians and Muslims that took place in 1999 and 2000. We have expressed strong worries about the attacks.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to the situation in Gujarat. The violence that engulfed Gujarat between February and April 2002 was the worst outbreak of religious-related violence that had occurred in India for more than 10 years. Christians suffered badly but Muslims were the main victims of the atrocities. We have expressed our concerns and we welcome the fact that the Indian Government have publicly condemned the violence. Prime Minister Vajpayee called it a "blot on India", and I agree with that assessment. We are worried by reports that the state Government of Gujarat did not do as much as they could to stop the violence. The National Human Rights Commission of India has accused the Gujarat Government

"of a complicity that was tacit if not explicit".

Nevertheless, we welcomed the Government's quick response in October to stop further violence after the terrorist attack on a Hindu temple in Gujarat.

We remain concerned about the welfare of many in Gujarat, especially Muslims and Christians. We welcome the Government of India's assurances that they will take action to bring to justice the perpetrators of violence, but we understand that, to date, there have been no prosecutions. We have repeatedly voiced our concerns with the Indian authorities about such matters. We have also rightly offered practical assistance. The British Government have provided immediate relief assistance to victims of violence. We are now considering whether we can support practical measures under the human rights project fund to encourage reconciliation between the communities in Gujarat.

Andrew Selous: Will the Minister speak to his counterpart in the Home Office about the United Kingdom charitable status of the VHP?

Mr. Rammell: The hon. Gentleman has anticipated my next remarks. We are aware of the concerns about the links about the VHP and the BJP. It is worth saying that the BJP-led national Government have criticised the VHP's extremist rhetoric. Nevertheless, as for charitable status, the Charity Commission is keeping the activities of VHP-UK under review. If the hon. Gentleman has specific evidence about the VHP-UK's activities, I am sure that the Charity Commission would be interested to receive it.

I turn now to Bhutan, which has a population of almost 2 million. As the hon. Gentleman said, it is predominantly Bhuddhist. Its law allows for religious freedom, but Bhutan has not ratified the international covenant on civil and political rights. None the less, the international community expects Bhutan to observe the internationally agreed standards that it sets out. The hon. Gentleman referred to his concerns about the work of the European Union. We have certainly voiced our worries about it. The EU is providing assistance to Bhutan and, as is traditionally the case with its programmes of assistance, it is taking a carrot and stick approach. We shall push it further.

There are concerns; we have raised them, but I hope that the hon. Gentleman agrees that there remain grounds for hope in India and Bhutan. It is crucial that progress is made. The values of human rights and religious tolerance are values that we expect in this country, in India, in Bhutan and throughout the world. Within the Government, we will use our best offices to ensure that those values are upheld.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended until Two o'clock.

Voter Participation

2 pm

Jim Sheridan (West Renfrewshire): I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me time for a debate on voter participation. I genuinely believe that the problem of apathy among the electorate throughout the United Kingdom is of the utmost importance not only to my party, but to all political parties in Britain. If we do not deal with it, there is a distinct possibility that the country's whole democratic process will be in danger of collapse or near collapse.

Like many other hon. Members, I become frustrated when people do not vote. We all know of the tremendous fight people conducted over the years so that others might have the right to vote. I want to draw attention to several reasons why people choose not to vote. I hope that other hon. Members will share their experiences of why people do not participate in our electoral process.

There has been a worrying increase in the number of people who fail to take part in our electoral process. We are in grave danger of taking democracy for granted in the United Kingdom. As politicians, we should not be paranoid and believe that apathy exists only in politics. I am sure that hon. Members can describe other forms of apathy in their communities, whether it is in respect of community councils, churches, youth organisations and so on. Persuading people to become involved in organisations that affect and influence their lives is becoming more difficult.

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence for why people choose not to vote. We must make all the necessary changes to the voting system to encourage people to come out on polling day and ensure that they are an integral part of the electoral system. The use of electronic online voting would increase the number of younger voters. Making use of as much of today's technology as possible is certainly worthy of consideration. As politicians, we should mount an awareness campaign showing first-time voters the importance of using their right to vote and how that keeps alive the notion of democracy. There is a worrying trend of young people showing no great interest in the world of politics.

Recent surveys commissioned by the Electoral Commission noted that 40 per cent. of the electorate did not turn out to vote at the general election. Such figures are replicated at both local and regional elections throughout the United Kingdom and indeed throughout Europe. There was an abysmal turnout in the European elections. Equally worrying was a recent survey carried out by the children's BBC "Newsround" programme, which showed that only 27 per cent. of 400 seven to 15-year-olds would be concerned if they lost their right to vote. Two thirds of our youngsters do not believe that voting is important or relevant, and that rings alarm bells, at least in my mind. We must never forget that those seven to 15-year-olds are tomorrow's voters.

On the subject of young people and their participation in the voting system, it may be appropriate to refer to the voting age. I have an open mind on that, and I welcome the views of other hon. Members. Regardless of the voting age, however, we must all work hard as politicians to engage young people in politics and to convince them that they can and will influence their own lives and those of others if they participate in the voting process.

Anne Picking (East Lothian): Does my hon. Friend consider that there is a case for compulsory voting? Does he share my view that if people do not participate in the voting democracy of the country, they do not have a say in what the Government do?

Jim Sheridan: My hon. Friend raises an important point about compulsory voting. When people choose not to vote, they should not be allowed the same opportunity as others to participate in the complaints procedures of national and local government. Moreover, I share her view that compulsory voting is worth considering. Perhaps the Minister will say whether there is any evidence that compulsory voting encourages people to vote?

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Will the hon. Gentleman reflect on the fact that in a country where there is compulsory voting—which I believe is the case in Italy—there have been since 1945 as many Governments as there have been years. Although there have been enormous turnouts, by some standards the country has a less than satisfactory democratic system.

Jim Sheridan: I bow to the hon. Gentleman's knowledge of Italian politics, which I do not share, although my understanding is that the problem with the political process in Italy has more to do with proportional representation than with any other voting matter. I do not believe in proportional representation. It does not enhance people's wish to vote.

Martin Linton (Battersea): Does my hon. Friend accept that international figures show that turnout in countries that have proportional systems is 10 per cent. higher than it is in countries that have our system? Does that not show that there may be some benefit in a system that is more proportional—not so much because of proportionality, but because everybody has an incentive to vote when a vote is certain to make a difference?

Jim Sheridan: The figures that my hon. Friend has cited may be right, but that does not necessarily mean that PR or any other exercise leads to better government, although it enhances people's choice.

As a citizen of the United Kingdom—a normal Joe Bloggs, not an anorak—I ask what would encourage me to vote? Compulsory voting is not worthy of active consideration, although I would be keen to hear the Minister's and hon. Members' views on that. What is wrong with asking people to take time out to register their vote? If a person is too lazy to go to a polling station or cannot be bothered to do that, why should that individual be free to participate in any other aspect of governmental or local authority policy? I understand that situations arise when people cannot reach polling stations for various reasons, and measures such as postal voting or increased access for disabled people are in place to accommodate that.

Perhaps we should consider the time scale in which voting takes place, and whether it should be the current one day or whether voting should be spread over several days, including weekends. Where should people vote? Perhaps the general public should be able to vote in places that they frequent, such as supermarkets, libraries or workplaces. It would be extremely interesting if we could create a way for employers to allow their employees to vote at their workplaces. We should make use of new technology, such as electronic online voting, given that many everyday activities such as banking and shopping are carried out online with ease. Those are only several practical measures that are worthy of further consideration and debate.

We must examine how we politicians portray ourselves and how the press and other media portray us. Although I accept that journalists and television presenters have an important role in today's society, I think that they would recognise that they have a fundamental responsibility to report accurately the work of elected politicians. There is over-concentration by the press and other media on what politicians do in their private lives, and insufficient concentration on what they do in their working lives. That is somewhat regrettable. I firmly believe that the electorate are completely turned off by such trivia and are more concerned about what politicians can, and will, do to influence their lives.

That is not always the journalists' fault. There are many examples of the press and other media being used by our fellow politicians to spin and to undermine each other, which feeds the frenzy for trivia. Although the press and other media have a responsibility to report accurately, they are not helped by such unacceptable behaviour by politicians.

I turn to television presenters and commentators. It now appears to be sexy to hear or see the aggressive interviewing of politicians by commentators who are more interested in their own ego than in conducting a mature interview and getting mature answers. We all know who the aggressive presenters and commentators are. I find it strange that fellow politicians volunteer their services on those programmes when they know that the presenters are interested only in promoting their own egos. Some presenters treat politicians with utter contempt, and politicians who give succour to such aggressive interviewing should perhaps reconsider their attitudes.

I recall Brian Walden of days gone by, who was one of the best interviewers at getting a response from politicians. I long for the day when the Brian Waldens of this world return to the political scene and hold politicians to account instead of discussing trivia. That is not to say that journalists and television commentators should not pursue all issues of public interest with vigour and hold politicians to account for their actions.

We must consider how the public can come to perceive us, the politicians, through our good work. Politics is about opinion, but the negative campaigning becoming more prevalent in the political world contributes greatly to turning voters off politics and politicians. It is unfortunate that no Members from the Scottish National party are present. Perhaps they do not have an interest in what the people of Scotland think of their politicians. The SNP's negative campaigning is a perfect example of how to turn people off, particularly in the run-up to local and parliamentary elections in Scotland. Last time there were elections in Scotland, turnout was pathetically low. Unfortunately, parties such as the SNP concentrate on the personalities of individuals, and that reflects the lack of substance in their policies.

It is vital that, in future elections, every party—in Scotland and elsewhere—should promote the importance of voting, and that there is none of the usual petty and at times spiteful campaigning. I shall certainly urge my party to avoid any kind of negative, personalised campaigning, as I firmly believe that the general public do not wish their politicians to behave in such a frivolous and contentious manner. Perhaps we all should remember that, particularly at Prime Minister's Question Time, when we sometimes behave like bears in a trap.

British voters have, for some time, been disenchanted with the electoral system, and are now sympathetic to the notion that they have no control over their destiny or direction in life. We will never improve our notion of democracy and debate if the electorate has such a low opinion of our system, and we must encourage greater constituent interaction in all our communities to reflect people's interests and, more important, regain their trust.

We are in danger of going to war in the middle east with Iraq, and that could have massive ramifications for everyone in this country, as was more than adequately pointed out recently by the Prime Minister. He reminded us that we live in a time when citizens face extreme danger from terrorists, many of whom ignore or undermine legitimate democratic processes at every opportunity. We should remain vigilant and focused to protect our hard-fought-for and hard-won democracy. We should hold it dear.

In conclusion, we live in a country that is proud of the history of its democratic process. Over the years we have influenced other countries to follow suit, and we should be extremely proud of that. We must not allow ourselves to take our eye off the ball by allowing our own democracy to be undermined or undervalued by voter apathy. I look forward to hearing the views of the Minister and other hon. Members because this is a vital issue, not only for the current generation of politicians but for those coming behind us. We must ensure that the public genuinely believe that we have a job to do and that we get on and do it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. I notice that six hon. and right hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye, only three of whom have given prior notice—*[Interruption.]* Do we have a percussion section in the orchestra? Can the Control Room sort out that noise please?

I want to explain to those who are unaccustomed to established practice in the Chamber that we commence the first of the three winding-up speeches 30 minutes before conclusion of the debate. That means that we have 39 minutes in which to try to fit in six people's speeches, so I ask all hon. and right hon. Members to make their comments pertinent and concise and not to accept or make interventions that could be covered in another way at another time.

2.21 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Renfrewshire (Jim Sheridan) on the thoughtful, measured and comprehensive way in which he introduced this extremely important debate. I agree that Brian Walden was an exception to the rule. The fact that he was previously a Member of this House and had real contact with real people may be why he had more idea of what they were interested in than do many of the commentators and interviewers that we suffer from in the media.

I listened to your very proper admonition, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I want to be brief. I will refer to the written statement made by the Minister for Local Government and the Regions last Thursday about electoral pilots. That referred specifically to the May 2003 local elections, so it is strictly outwith the subject on the Order Paper. Nevertheless, this year's experience will be extremely important when it comes to deciding what it is sensible to do in relation to the general election, whenever it is held. The Minister said:

> "I have now accepted 61 applications, covering 6.5 million electors."

That means that a very large percentage of people are taking part in the experiments. At the end of his statement, the Minister said:

> "The pilots are an important step towards our aim of holding an e-enabled general election sometime after 2006."—[*Official Report*, 23 January 2003; Vol. 398, c. 18–19.]

So there will be a period during which we can take careful stock of the situation and decide whether the lessons learned will be useful for a general election. A number of the new applications accepted from local authorities refer to all-postal ballots. Many Members have some concerns about all-postal ballots and the opportunities for fraud and intimidation and therefore for distorting the result. Ministers will have to take that carefully into account.

Leading on from the intervention made by the hon. Member for Battersea (Martin Linton), there is a real danger that by concentrating on peripheral issues—some would say gimmicks—the Government will ignore one extremely important lesson. According to the Electoral Reform Society, in the 2001 general election no less than 70.3 per cent of those who voted had no impact whatever on the result. That figure is composed not only of all those who voted for defeated candidates, but includes all those whose votes were over and above what was needed to achieve a success in that constituency.

The biggest single disincentive to voting is the knowledge that one's vote does not matter in many parts of the country. The hon. Member for Battersea was right—the House of Commons is not the only place where proportionality is of concern. Almost uniquely, our electoral system gives people a disincentive to vote because they know that it makes no difference.

I pray in aid the following figures to show the extent of the problem, because the aggregate average figure for turnout is misleading. For example, in Liverpool, Riverside, where the result seemed to be a foregone conclusion, the turnout was 34.1 per cent. The constituency has always been and is likely to remain a safe Labour seat. Voters knew that their vote would have no impact on the result. In Glasgow, Shettleston, turnout was 39.7 per cent.; in Glasgow Maryhill, it was 40.1 per cent.; in Salford it was 41.6 per cent.; in Leeds, Central it was 41.7 per cent.; and in Manchester, Gorton it was 42.7 per cent. There were very low turnouts in all those constituencies because the electorate knew that their vote would have no appreciable effect.

By contrast, in marginal seats where every vote counted, the turnout was much higher. Several of the following are Liberal Democrat seats, but that is a coincidence.

In Winchester, where my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) had a majority of two in 1997, the turnout was 72.3 per cent. It is worth noting that the Conservative candidate and his wife were not registered to vote in the constituency, being still registered in Scotland. In Hexham, where the Conservative had a majority of 222 in 1997, turnout was 70.9 per cent. In Northavon, turnout was 70.9 per cent.; in Torridge and West Devon, it was 70.5 per cent.; in Somerton and Frome, it was 70.3 per cent.; and in Norfolk, North, it was 70.2 per cent. Under the first-past-the-post system, average figures are misleading.

I hope that I have made one point clear: when a general election seems to be a foregone conclusion nationally, and when locally—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. To do justice to the subject, I am suspending the sitting to give the engineers time to sort out the sound problem from which we are suffering. I will add injury time at the end. It was not so bad when the voice of the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) was being amplified, but the sound is now so poor that it is pointless to carry on. With the indulgence of hon. Members, we will wait until we get the all clear.

2.26 pm

Sitting suspended.

2.43 pm

On resuming—

Mr. Tyler: I hope that that my words of wisdom have been recorded somewhere and that they have not disappeared into the ether, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to note your assent. I hope that it was not my loud tie, worn in the interests of cancer research, that caused the confusion. I apologise if that was so.

If we cannot do anything to make votes of equal value and ensure that people can be confident every time they vote that they will have an impact on the result, turnouts will continue to drop. I shall give another illustration. When I was first elected in February 1974, I had a majority of nine. Clearly, my clever constituents had worked out that my majority would be narrow and there was a turnout of 83 per cent. in the then Bodmin constituency. In my present constituency, the majority was nearly 10,000 at the 2001 election. People worked out that the national result was a foregone conclusion and that the seat was relatively safe so the turnout dropped to 63 per cent. There is a direct correlation between people's perception that their votes matter and turnout. I refer again to the extraordinary statistic that 70.3 per cent. of those who voted, let alone those who were discouraged from voting by the way in which the system operated, had no effect whatsoever on the result of the 2001 general election.

The useful, but marginal, reforms that are being piloted at the moment are well worth pursuing. However, unless the Government are prepared to grasp the real problem at the bottom of our electoral system, we will continue to see fewer people willing to go to polling stations to exercise their democratic rights. The hon. Member for West Renfrewshire is absolutely right that this is a critical issue about which we should all be concerned, but we need to take radical action to deal with a radical problem.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We have almost exactly 30 minutes in which to accommodate five hon. Members.

2.45 pm

Mr. John MacDougall (Central Fife): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Renfrewshire (Jim Sheridan) on securing this debate on a very important issue. He referred to the democratic deficit throughout the world. There are certain countries where we would like democracy and which do not have democracy but, in our own country, we have a democratic embarrassment because turnouts have decreased significantly over the years.

I recall, as will every hon. Member present, that a turnout of between 70 and 75 per cent. could be expected in every constituency not so long ago, irrespective of voting patterns. I also recall that when the referendum was held on the Scottish Parliament, aspirations were high and there was a 70-odd per cent. vote in favour of a Scottish Parliament. However, when the Scottish Parliament was elected, the turnout was lower.

People's first reason for voting is their aspirations. I wish that solving the problem were as easy as looking at other countries. It will be interesting to hear what the Minister says about the Government's proposals for policies that could be developed to encourage greater turnouts at election time.

The hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) mentioned Italy. A comparison can be drawn between the situations in Italy and in Australia, where there is compulsory voting, and one can ask whether the two cases are identical. Did the countries return the same results, or was there greater confidence in Australia than in Italy? Was the situation more stable in Australia than in Italy? One can also compare our situation with that of Sweden. My hon. Friend the Member for West Renfrewshire referred to weekend voting in Sweden, which has had a flexible voting system for many years and has turnouts of more than 80 per cent. Weekend voting and voting in supermarkets have been referred to. However, turnout has been getting lower in democratic countries throughout the world, irrespective of the voting systems in place. There is clear evidence that fewer people think it is valuable to vote in the democratic process although we encourage more democracy throughout the world. There is a conflict not only of conscience but of identification. How can we convince other people that democracy is valuable if we cannot convince our electorate that voting is valuable?

I do not want to repeat much of what has been said because as you rightly pointed out, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is an issue of time—I suppose that it would be appropriate to say that I shall short-circuit my contribution.

May I reflect on turnouts? The turnout was between 70 and 75 per cent. two parliamentary elections ago, and the turnout for the Scottish Parliament elections was 60 per cent. There was a 54 per cent. turnout in my constituency at the last general election, and a national turnout of about 56 per cent. The trend is clear. I am not so sure that PR will bring about a higher turnout in the Scottish Parliament elections this year. I would like to think that it is a solution to the problem, but time will tell.

Credibility is a big issue, as is education. The system used can have an influence, but any steps taken to change the system would have to be considered very carefully indeed. However, systems do not bring about greater enthusiasm for the democratic process. People may be fined for not voting but that would not necessarily make them more interested in the result, as my hon. Friend said, and would not necessarily bring about good government. We have to ask what it is that we actually want to improve.

I mentioned education and I mentioned other countries. We have all expressed concerns over Zimbabwe, where we would like a democratic process to be introduced in the best interests of the people. However, if we cannot make moves to encourage greater turnout in this country, our arguments are less strong.

I welcome the opportunity to have this discussion and to hear from other colleagues. We are all concerned about this issue. Whatever the solution may be, we would all like to find one that encouraged young people to see how important it is to cast their vote, and to see that—whatever the system—they can influence government and opinion.

There is a concern about how politicians are portrayed. I can remember a time when, if people saw their MP walking along the road, there was greater respect—irrespective of whether the MP was female or male. That respect was greater than the respect given to MPs today. We are almost getting to the stage where, in certain quarters, MPs are frightened to mention that they are MPs. We have to ask why politicians today are considered less credible than were politicians in the past. I am concerned about the credibility factor. We all care about our constituents, we all want to see the job done and we all want to make a difference to better our communities—but do the people believe that those are our intentions, or do they believe that that is just spin and that we care about our own objectives rather than those of our communities?

I would like to hear from the Minister about the consideration that the Government have given to possible systems. Again, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Renfrewshire on giving us this opportunity to discuss a very important subject.

2.52 pm

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Renfrewshire (Jim Sheridan) on securing this debate today. It is important to members

[John Barrett]

of all parties and members of none. Legislation that is passed and the way in which the country is run affect us all, including those who do not vote. There are a number of things that we can all do to improve voter turnout, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) mentioned the election in Winchester in which the Liberal Democrats beat the Conservatives by two votes. The Conservative candidate and his wife were not on the electoral register; they were still registered in the south of Scotland.

A number of things can be done to make it easy to vote: we can ensure that registers are accurate; we can explore weekend voting; and postal voting, which has already been mentioned, could improve things, although fraud is a key concern. Other things to consider include internet voting, electronic voting and telephoning voting. The best recent example of that was the telephone voting on "Pop Idol" on television, in which more people voted than voted in the last European election, and three times as many young people voted as voted in the general election. If people think that they can influence the result, they will get out and vote. We must make it easy for shift workers, the elderly, carers and those with mobility problems. That issue is covered by the fact that anyone who wants a postal vote may have one.

Making it easy for people to vote is probably the easiest aspect of this debate, but getting people interested and engaged in the process will also have to be tackled. As has been mentioned, education is vital. I support, and my party supports, giving the vote to 16-year-olds. Why should people pay tax but not be able to vote? Lowering the age would not increase the percentage of people voting, but it would increase young people's engagement.

People have been asked why they do not vote. Sometimes, the answer is that they are not interested in politics, but if they are asked whether they are interested in the health service, they say yes. They are interested in the education of their children, crime on the streets, defence, foreign affairs and Iraq, which was mentioned earlier. International development might not immediately strike a chord, but most people are genuinely concerned about the poor and starving in third-world countries. To engage people in the process, we must make them enthusiastic about it. Politicians must take a lead.

It has been said that the behaviour in the House of Commons, particularly during Prime Minister's Question Time, is an absolute embarrassment. As a newly elected Member, I found it embarrassing to sit in what has been described as a bear pit. It is no wonder that people who see that on television become disengaged from the process. Also, there have recently been allegations of fraud in MPs' expenses claims. We have no control over what is in the press—rightly so, we benefit from a free press—but the press must take a responsible attitude on the matter.

At the last general election, for the first time ever, more people did not vote than voted for the winning party. Recently, the British National party won a council seat. The BNP has never won a council seat where the vote was more than 40 per cent. Apathy is a real danger to us all.

PR would improve the situation, because it would be felt that a party had a strength of voice in Parliament that reflected the percentage of people who had voted for it. I feel disfranchised in this place because many MPs want a substantive vote in the House about sending troops to war in Iraq but are unable to vote on a subject that they would dearly like to discuss.

As has been mentioned, many seats are considered relatively safe seats. PR would deal with that.

To sum up, we must make it easier for people to vote. If people cannot be bothered to cast their vote, compulsory voting is not the answer, because it would hide the problem. People would go out and vote, but they would not want to vote. We must get people interested in and enthusiastic about the system. That calls for inspirational leadership. There is a danger to us all if people are disengaged, and we would all benefit by encouraging more people to vote.

2.57 pm

David Hamilton (Midlothian): I shall be brief. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for West Renfrewshire (Jim Sheridan) introduced this important subject. As several issues have already been covered, I shall speak briefly on those that have not.

The equal value vote issue is separate from the argument about the democratic deficit—people not voting. I accept that there is an argument for proportional representation, but we must be aware when we talk about it that there are different types of PR. For example, a form of PR is used in the European elections, which have a turnout of only 20 per cent. We must be clear about the type of PR we mean.

John Barrett: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the low turnout for European elections is more about the European system than about the electoral method?

David Hamilton: It says much about the European system, which brings me to my next point. It is important to recognise that people do not turn out if they feel disengaged from the decision making. For example, it is true, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Renfrewshire said, that people turned out in substantial numbers to vote for a Scottish Parliament, but only 61 per cent. turned out to vote in its first election. The PR system shouts to me of compromise—that is what it is about. The people who argue for PR normally come second in the running and are trying to take a position of power.

There is a bigger issue than PR. We must try to encourage people and bring them into the discussions. It is very important that political education starts in schools. It does not have to be dealt with in a party political manner. One of the best debates that I have heard was in a primary school. Children of primary age raised various issues such as foxhunting and so on that did not actually affect them but were important to them. I have attended public meetings that were less political than those very good discussions at Rosewell primary school in Midlothian. If we could proceed in that way, we could talk about the system and the best way to encourage voting.

I am an ex-miner. In the pits we used to vote at the pit head, and the average turnout was 81 per cent. That was because the vote was taken to the people. When the previous Government argued for, and forced the unions to hold, postal votes, the turnout plummeted to 51 per cent. It is horses for courses—an old saying—and we must try to look at different options.

I agree that we should make voting more accessible. People currently have just one day in the week—a Thursday—when they can vote. That is not a great system; weekends would be better. Enabling people to vote in the big shops—Tesco and other supermarkets—would be one way forward. If we took the vote to the people, there would be an increase in the number of votes being cast.

It is important that we recognise that in the UK more elderly people than younger people vote because they appreciate the value of what they have. Voting is a gift and I cherish people's right to vote. People in many countries wish that they had such a right. I believe strongly that the Australian system, which features compulsory voting, should be considered. I know, however, that people might resent that and I do not think it would be a great idea for one Government—this Government—to argue the case in isolation from other parties. There would have to be a cross-party discussion on compulsory voting, because whoever delivered it might be rebuffed for forcing people to turn out. The onus is on hon. Members to get out there and tell people the reasons why it is important they should vote and why they should not feel disfranchised.

The situation regarding local elections is very bad throughout the country. In my area, 59 per cent. of the population voted on local government, because it was tied to the Scottish Parliament elections. However, only 59 per cent. voted at the general election. People felt that there was an issue surrounding the Government's performance and they wondered whether their votes would count. When people who have never bothered to vote come to see me, calling me by the wrong name and saying that they did not realise I was their MP, I get angry. There is an old adage that says, "If you do not vote, what are you complaining about?" People can ensure that their views are expressed only through voting.

Some of the points that I have made have already been covered well and, bearing in mind what you have said, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will try to cut my remarks short. Electronic voting is an excellent idea, but it would apply only to a limited number of people and it could be corrupt. Whichever system we adopt, it should be a complementary system that deals with various issues. That is how we should address the issue of voting in the UK. Let us make voting appealing to people.

3.2 pm

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I am grateful to have the opportunity to talk about Government measures to improve voter participation. Hon. Members will know that in 2001 we had the worst turnout since 1918. Never have so many people been turned off by politics and politicians. Turnout was as low as 34 per cent. in some areas, and in some wards during local elections it was as low as 12 per cent. In my view that is a crisis and we must consider it.

We must consider whether to change the system fundamentally. We credit ourselves with giving democracy to the world—we did—but our political and electoral machinery has become outdated, in the same way that our industrial machinery became outdated after the industrial revolution. We must update it if it is to meet its 21st century job description, which is to deliver the will of the people and to encourage the people to exercise their will.

I shall mention the practical issue of trialling proportional representation in local elections. In November 2001, Lewisham council applied to the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions—as it was then—to have a trial additional member system in the 2002 local elections. It was refused on three bases. First, that would require a change in law. Since the law will have to change to move the European election dates that need no longer be an obstacle. Secondly, it would mean that different councillors were elected by different means under a top-up system. The Greater London Authority has shown that that can work. I do not think that Trevor Phillips has suffered very much as a result of being a top-up elected representative. Thirdly, Lewisham was told that there was no evidence that the reform of systems increases turnout. Frankly, everyone knows that those who live in safe seats are less likely to bother to vote, and that was clearly shown in the most recent general election. Turnout in the 100 most marginal seats was on average nearly 10 per cent. higher than in the 100 safest seats.

I have been instructed to be brief, and I will be, but I want to add that participation is not just down to whether people think that they can affect the result, but whether people think that the result will affect them. In other words, it is down to whether Westminster has relevance to them, and whether what happens in Westminster affects what happens on the streets or estates. Politicians have some responsibility in that respect. We have to learn to speak in plain English.

I would like the voting age to be lowered to 16. As has been said in the past, there should be no taxation without representation. I do not understand why that should not be true for 16-year-olds who pay tax. We need electronic and telephone voting, and we should consider making voting compulsory, although I hear what hon. Members say about it being unpopular. Perhaps I am influenced by the fact that I lived in Australia for some time, where voting is compulsory and that issue never came up. We think that compulsory voting would be unpopular because that is not how we do things now, but if we are to deal with the crisis that we face, we have to start doing things differently.

Finally, I would be grateful if the Minister would write to the Secretary of State about the Lewisham trial period and whether a trial can be arranged in time for the next elections.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I call on Martin Linton and ask him please to be brief. That is not an instruction, but a polite request.

3.6 pm

Martin Linton (Battersea): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Renfrewshire (Jim Sheridan) for securing the debate, and I am sorry if not all my points are in accord with his.

[Martin Linton]

We are all addressing the same problem, which is that 5 million fewer people voted in the most recent general election than in the previous one, in which there were 2.25 million fewer voters than in the election before that. A cumulative loss of 7.5 million voters clearly shows a crisis in the system. I support all the mechanical, logistical improvements that have been made to our voting system. Indeed, I was a member of the Select Committee on Home Affairs that recommended in 1998 that we have postal voting on demand and a rolling register, and that we introduce various other reforms. I am glad to say that those reforms were introduced in the Representation of the People Act 2000.

Schemes on early, electronic and weekend voting are worth piloting. I think that we can go much further down that road. My hon. Friend mentioned Sweden. In this country, we have pilots for early voting. I succeeded in getting the deadline for postal vote applications moved to one week before polling day, and that was a great help in the most recent election. Without that amendment, the deadline would have been two weeks, so I regard the change as an important advance. However, that is still not far enough; those voting in the Swedish election can cast a postal vote in any post office in the country up until the Friday before a Sunday election. Indeed, in certain big post offices in Stockholm and other large cities, people can vote in a post office on polling day if they happen to be away from their home town. Also, in certain Stockholm post offices, if people cast a postal vote before 5 pm, it will get to their polling station before the close of polls at 8 pm. There are no real technical difficulties involved; we could go much further down that route and make voting easy for everyone.

We on the Home Affairs Select Committee never believed that such changes would add any more than 5 per cent. to voting turnout. In fact, because turnout has gone down for other reasons, we have not even had the satisfaction of such an increase. I take up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Fife (Mr. MacDougall) about the voting system determining voter turnout. There are two important factors: first, the difference that a vote makes to the outcome of the election—that is important, I think—and secondly, the difference that the outcome of the election makes to someone's life. That explains why so few people vote in European elections, and why the vote in local elections is so much lower than in national elections. When one takes that into account, there is no doubt—it could not be clearer—that the main reason for the low turnout in this country is the voting system. The solution, which could not be more obvious, is to change the system.

On average across the whole globe, turnout in first-past-the-post elections is 58 per cent., which is similar to the figure in this country, while turnout in proportional systems is 68 per cent. Even that understates the difference that the system makes. We already had low turnout in national elections, European elections and local elections before the last general election. Turnout in general elections has decreased from 71 to 59 per cent., turnout in European elections has decreased from 36 to 24 per cent. and turnout in local elections has decreased from 40 to 33 per cent. In the international league table of turnout, we are in 65th place. The United States, which shares our system, is in 138th place out of 163 countries. Nobody can doubt that our voting system is uniquely likely to lead to low turnouts.

I am sceptical whether compulsory voting would make much difference. The international figures show that, if one takes turnout as a proportion of people of voting age rather than as a proportion of people who are registered to vote, compulsory voting does not make that much difference because it tends to make people not register. If we consider voters as a proportion of people of voting age, we find that in countries with compulsory voting turnout is 69 per cent., which does not say very much, and in countries with non-compulsory voting it is 63 per cent. There is a difference but it is not staggeringly large. Giving people something off their council tax if they vote would be a better way of incentivising them than making voting compulsory, which would introduce feelings of guilt that would put people off voting.

My final point is that the biggest problem in this country is not that voting turnout is low everywhere, but that it is low in safe seats. Other hon. Members have mentioned the seats where there is a problem: Liverpool, Riverside; Manchester, Central; Glasgow, Shettleston; Glasgow, Maryhill; Salford; and Leeds, Central. If one looks at Winchester, Mid-Ulster and Tyrone, the turnout is good by the standards of countries such as Germany and Sweden. It is good because several parties have a chance of winning those seats. There have been narrow majorities in the past, which means that not only every voter is incentivised to vote but every party is incentivised to campaign. Multi-party fights for narrow majorities give people the incentive to vote. If we could reproduce that in every seat in the country, the system would not matter. We cannot reproduce that turnout across the country because the first-past-the-post system creates a huge number of safe seats, which turn people off voting, turn parties off campaigning and turn people away from the political system because they feel that they have no purchase on it.

There are clearly many other causes of low turnout and there may be an international trend towards lower turnout, but if one compares this country with other countries there is no doubt that the single biggest reason, which overshadows all the other reasons by a factor of 10, is the voting system and specifically the existence of so many safe seats. Each party regards its safe seats as a source of strength, but really they are a source of tremendous weakness. We could have another 2 million Labour votes in every election if the people in our safe seats had the incentive to vote. We understate our electoral support in every election by 2 million or 3 million votes because most of it is in places where it makes no difference whether one votes. We underestimate the party's popularity and strength. We have solid support in mining seats, but half the people do not go out to vote. That has spread to huge areas of the country, where people feel no incentive to vote. Let us have a voting system—I do not mind which it is—that allows everybody to go to the polling station secure in the knowledge that their vote will make a difference.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps I should remind hon. Members that conventional practice is for each of the three winding-up speeches to last for 10 minutes.

3.14 pm

Mrs. Annette L. Brooke (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Battersea (Martin Linton) because I could not agree more with his comments about the need to change the voting system. I am not so sure about the overwhelming popularity of the Labour Government, but I shall leave that aside.

The 2001 general election gave us the lowest turnout since 1918. Indeed, some would say that it was the lowest turnout ever in this country, given the circumstances of 1918. Only 59 per cent. of the electorate were sufficiently engaged in the democratic process to play their part in choosing the Government. It is significant that that followed on from 1997, with a turnout of just over 71 per cent., which was then the lowest turnout since 1951. Many people had identified a worrying downward trend in participation in elections prior to 2001, but why did the Governments of the day not act sooner to deal with what has now become a crisis?

My further questions concern what action is being taken to deal with the problem and whether the issues behind the falling turnouts are being addressed? In 2001, more than 60 per cent. of 18 to 25-year-olds did not vote. If the problem is not dealt with adequately, that level of disengagement will pose a threat to the long-term health of our democracy. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Renfrewshire (Jim Sheridan) on securing the debate. It is timely, given the urgency of the situation, and appropriate given today's launch of the votes at 16 campaign in the House of Commons.

Why are people choosing not to exercise their democratic right? We have all experienced the responses of constituents when we are canvassing. The conversations that I have had with people who intend not to vote accord closely with the points made by Hansard Society's briefing "None of the Above". It would have been unusual for anyone in 2001 to have gone a whole day without hearing the words, "What's the point? You're all the same." It is not only young people who are disenchanted with politics and politicians. There are responsibilities on us as individuals in our constituencies and within our parties to change public perception. I hope that, in my next campaign, I do not hear so much of that argument. We, as well as the Government, must take the appropriate action.

Soon after being elected in 2001, I hosted a tour of Parliament for a group of young constituents, who were participating in the Princes Trust volunteer scheme. As a new Member of Parliament, I accompanied them along the Line of Route. They questioned parliamentary procedures in the most challenging way. Since the election has become more distant, I have not had the same experience. Interestingly, not one of those young people had voted in the general election. The main reason for that was that they did not understand what was going on, so it did not seem right to vote. That is a good reason not to vote.

That was against a background of the local council having started various initiatives to engage young people in the political process. In 1997, Poole council set up a primary schools council, a secondary schools council and a youth forum. Some schools accepted the council's offer to run elections for their representatives, so that provided some practical civic education. In addition, many schools in my constituency have school councils.

I wholeheartedly welcome the Government's commitment to citizenship education. It has been part of the national curriculum since September 2002. It was recommended in the Crick report in 1998. It is early days for an evaluation, but it will be important to review what is taking place in schools and the impact that it is making. There is obviously much more to the problem than just encouraging young people to vote. They must have a true understanding and an incentive to participate in the wider realm of democracy.

On Friday, I joined Poole's youth forum for the election of Poole's member of the youth parliament. More than 70 young people attended a lively evening. It started with pizzas and ended with a disco, while the middle part focused on political debate and processes. All those initiatives are important, but it is important to appreciate that whatever we do in schools will not be enough unless we, as politicians, change—Prime Minister's Question Time is not a good role model.

Voting at 16 is the logical conclusion of citizenship education in schools. The arguments are well rehearsed and come down to the rights of young people. Young people have a responsibility to pay tax; they can marry; they can bring up a family and they can join the armed forces, and there should be corresponding rights. I therefore welcomed the confirmation, given in July 2002 by the Minister with responsibility for young people, that the Government would consider any recommendations from the Electoral Commission following its review on the voting age over the coming year. A point raised at the launch this morning was that MPs who support the cause have an ideal opportunity to give leadership in their constituencies and in Parliament to raise awareness of such an important issue. It is, of course, Liberal Democrat policy to lower the voting age to 16.

I also welcome the Government's new commitments to increase spending on youth services. One of the benefits is that there will be additional opportunities to promote citizenship education in different ways. There is also a need for more information and citizenship education for adults. It is interesting that some non-voters can be engaged in political activities—for example, marches and protests. Globalisation protests are a prime example: people think that they can make a difference, and they care about the issues. Democratic ballots are enthusiastically embraced when people believe that their opinions will make a difference on issues that directly affect them. As an example, we have only to look at the housing transfer ballots; in contrast, ballots on how local council structures might be changed had, for the most part, woefully low turnouts. As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, West said, there was a high turnout for voting for "Pop Idol".

We have to rise to the challenges and make changes appropriate to the 21st century. We need to instigate institutional change so that Parliament has more relevance. It needs to be more representative, with more women—dare I say it?—more younger people and more people from ethnic minorities. People want candidates to be more in tune with society and more accessible. I think the Government have given good leadership by permitting all-women shortlists. Last week, I was

[Mrs. Annette L. Brooke]

pleased to attend the first Question Time on youth issues, but I thought it bizarre that the proceedings were interrupted twice for 12 minutes while voting took place in the House. As well as being considered as a measure for increasing voter turnout, surely there is a case for using electronic voting in this place.

Many hon. Members have suggested measures to make voting easier. Of course there is a case for making it easier in order to oil the wheels of democracy. One beneficial effect would be an increase in turnout, but we are not looking at very large shifts. It is important to make it easier, but at the same time we must be wary so that we avoid fraud, attempts at impersonation and so on. There are the simple mechanical changes. We have all noticed the improvements, such as the fact that it is already easier to obtain a postal vote. I agree with all the points that are being made, such as where we vote, how we vote and so on. Such issues need to be looked at, but the core point is changing the voting system.

I am an MP in one of the 100 most marginal seats. Indeed, it is probably near the top of the list. It was a marginal seat for the Conservatives in 1997 and it is a marginal seat for the Liberal Democrats now. It did not have a significantly higher turnout—65 per cent.—but I suppose that it just about fits the mould. However, there was a great deal of interest and activity, and I think that that interest will go forward to the next election.

The issue is people knowing that their vote counts. Statistics show that voter turnout is higher in countries that have a proportional voting system. It is significant that the Liberal Democrats' favoured option of a single transferable vote seems to produce the highest turnouts. A change in the voting system, particularly to a single transferable vote system, would offer many advantages. I oppose a compulsory voting system. The argument was put very well by the hon. Member for Battersea, but we ignore the problem at our peril. We have seen what happened in the council elections; it is vital that we deal with the matter.

3.24 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stone): I rather disagree with the arguments that I have heard from some quarters today, especially from the spokesman for the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mrs. Brooke). We all agree that voter participation is a serious matter and I am not sure that we will be able to give it the attention that it deserves this afternoon. It is one of the most critical factors facing democracy in this country—indeed, Europe and the rest of the world.

The solution, however, does not turn on voting systems. I do not disregard them because changes could improve matters, but I have examined and analysed the results of the electoral pilot schemes. It is interesting to note from a Library research paper that, when a website was used for electronic voting in Crewe and Nantwich, turnout increased from 18 per cent. in 1998 to 31.4 per cent. in 2002, which is remarkable.

There are other examples, however, of places where, for some reason, the same system was used but the results were different. For example, in Chorley, electronic counting was piloted, and turnout increased from 31.3 per cent. in 1998 to 61.5 per cent. in 2002. However, the same system was used in City of Westminster, and turnout dropped from 32 per cent. in 1998, to 27.4 per cent. in 2002. It is extraordinary that the same system doubles turnout in Chorley but decreases it in City of Westminster.

Had I more time, I could give details of other examples that show that changing the voting system will not solve the problem. Modernising voting systems with new technology will not get the right result. The problem is much more fundamental.

I was taken with the arguments of the hon. Member for Central Fife (Mr. MacDougall) who spoke about credibility and respect. They provide the key to the problem. I have spoken about the strengthening of Parliament in previous debates, and specifically about the problem of low voter turnout and respect for democracy. I have concluded that, to a certain extent, the Whip system has a lot to do with the problem, and I make no bones about making that point again. I need not repeat what I said in previous debates, but hon. Members are over-whipped. The Iraq war may turn out to be an example of a trend in the opposite direction—but people know that the bottom line is that the Whip system has tended to crush the individuality of hon. Members.

The role of the media has also been mentioned today. In many respects, unelected commentators and interviewers—who have no responsibility, who sometimes ask intelligent questions, but sometimes do not ask the right questions and none the less dominate the airwaves—have arrogated to themselves a position that is not justified and which is not necessarily in the interests of the people. Such people could make a useful contribution. There is no point in imagining that the problem will go away, but we must seriously examine it.

For example, when the Lord Chancellor, Lord Irvine, made his statements about burglary the other day, I sought a right of reply on the "Today" programme. I set out my arguments in a letter, which astonished people because I attacked the programme for not giving me an opportunity to reply. When I got that opportunity, the following day, I was asked about House of Lords reform. That is a perfect example. People may say that MPs are ineffective, and they may say that of the Conservative party in particular, but I had quite a few things to say and had I had the opportunity to go on, it would have made a significant difference to the way in which people perceived our reaction.

There is also the question of low attendance in the House, which is a serious problem that turns people off. We hear much about the so-called yah-boo politics that goes on in the Chamber. However, it is a much deeper problem. I am not discounting the way in which the media intrude on how people perceive politics and politicians. If the public see politicians as the butt and as people who always have to answer questions from some glory boy who happens to be the key questioner at that time, however distinguished he may be, it diminishes their respect. That is the effect of seeing someone constantly being kicked into corners. It does not matter whether the politician in question is Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Scottish Nationalist or anything else. The serious question of how we deal with that issue has to be tackled and I am not sure that I have good answers. I have been on television and radio a great deal myself and I cannot complain about the treatment that I have received. However, from the viewer's point of view it is a different story.

Broken promises by Governments also contribute. I could enlarge on that, but I do not have much time. There is now a degree of cynicism, and people simply do not believe what they are told. It is significant that the percentage vote has dropped dramatically and quickly, particularly in the period running up to the 2001 general election. There is no question but that 59.4 per cent. was catastrophic. That was a drop from about 70 per cent., which was regarded as significantly low. When I was first elected to the House nearly 20 years ago, we automatically expected about 75 per cent. or 78 per cent. Now we have 59.4 per cent. That is absolutely catastrophic, and it could well get worse. The House has nothing to be satisfied or complacent about; we have every reason to take steps to ensure that we change the situation.

The situation is partly a result of the fact that people do not perceive politicians as having sufficient conviction. That is part of my point about the whipping system and the way in which it operates. I would agree with the findings of a report that claimed that the election of 7 June 2001 was seen as not being important and as not offering adequate choices. That situation arises when there is a lack of conviction at the heart of the political process and when people are simply gambling through spin doctors or the juggling of their manifestos in order to seem as near to one another as possible. That is quite contrary to assertions that it is all to do with proportional representation. I never heard such junk. Under a system of proportional representation, people's votes matter. If a person does not vote—I would always recommend people to vote—it matters. Low turnout has an effect, as it has, for example, in France, where there was massive abstention.

There is so much more that I would like to say, but I will conclude by saying that I very much believe that the fault lies with politicians. However, structural changes must be made, and the media have a great deal to answer for.

3.34 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Renfrewshire (Jim Sheridan) on securing the debate and raising such an important issue. We have heard serious contributions from a range of perspectives in what has been a good debate. Hon. Members are right to say that drops in turnout should concern everyone who cares about democracy.

There is not yet a consensus on why turnouts have dropped. In the 2001 election, the turnout dropped to 59.4 per cent. from just over 70 per cent. in the 1997 election—which itself was a drop from the 1992 election, when the turnout was 77.7 per cent. Turnout has also fallen in European elections from 36 per cent. to 24 per cent. English local elections have shown the same general trend over the past 15 years—although the turnout in the most recent local elections in England was higher than it had been in the previous elections.

We take a lot for granted. Only 100 years ago, none of the women in this room could have voted. Many of the men probably could not have voted either. All men have had the vote for only a relatively short period; yet, after just a few generations, people take for granted the vote that was hard won over a very long period. This issue matters. If people do not vote, they do not have a voice in the choosing of their Government or the choosing of those who will speak for them. If certain groups do not vote, decisions that affect their lives will, in effect, be taken by others. Whenever there is a democratic void, anti-democratic elements, movements and parties will step into it. That is why this issue should concern us all.

There are two concerns. The first is that some groups have consistently, over a long period, been less likely to vote than others—for example, members of particular ethnic minorities, young people, and those on lower incomes. Whatever the voting system and whatever the period, those groups have been less likely to vote.

The second concern is the recent change. We do not yet know whether that change is part of a long-term trend, so we do not know whether it was just a one-off that affected the 2001 election. However, we are right to be concerned. There is no consensus on why voter turnout fell so far in the 2001 election. A range of theories has been offered. Some argue that it fell because people thought that the result of the election was a foregone conclusion; and some argue that, because of that, turnout will bounce back again when there is a closely fought election. Some argue about the fragmentation of society and a lack of party identification across the generations. Some argue that politics is too confrontational; some argue that it is not confrontational enough. There are also theories about the convenience of voting.

The fact is that we do not know why turnout fell. We will not know for some time and, by the time we do, it may well be too late to do anything. That is why hon. Members are right to raise issues that we must address immediately, regardless of the lack of consensus about what has caused turnout to fall. We have to ask what political parties can and should do. Political parties are the main forum for voter engagement—through individual politicians, candidates, local party organisations or national party organisations. I will not discuss those issues in detail now because the main issue to discuss is what we can do on a cross-party basis.

There is a perception that the Opposition are weak and that the media have felt obliged to become an opposition instead. The impact of that on people's perception of politics has not helped. Media attitudes towards politics and politicians have changed, and that has not helped either.

What can we do to address these issues? There are two areas in which the Government can try to respond. First, what more can we do throughout society, not only through Government, to promote a sense of citizenship and voter engagement and participation and, secondly, how can we address practical issues to make voting easier? Hon. Members raised issues about the voting system and the way in which votes are counted, and I shall address that in a minute.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Renfrewshire was right to raise the issues of education and young people. A change since 2000 is that citizenship is now a statutory part of the curriculum in secondary schools. That has the overall objective of ensuring that young

[Yvette Cooper]

people are aware of their rights and responsibilities and that they know more about our political system, our institutions and the votes to which they are entitled.

Increasingly, in addition to work being done by schools and the Department for Education and Skills, the youth service and local organisations are working to promote young people's knowledge about political institutions and their rights. On Sunday, I visited Wakefield college, which is just outside my constituency, to attend an event for the election of members of the youth parliament. Given that the event took place at 10.15 on a Sunday morning, I expected there to be me, three members of the youth service, four teenagers and not a lot more people. In fact, 100 young people aged between 12 and 18 turned up on a Sunday morning to discuss issues that concerned them and to participate in an election for local members of the youth parliament. I thought that that showed a fantastic level of interest, and it just shows that those who think that young people are not interested in politics in the widest sense or in the issues that concern them are talking nonsense. We need to give young people more opportunities to raise their worries. The young people at the college talked about local bus routes, teenage pregnancies and the required age for entry into clubs. The issues were of immediate concern to the young people, but they were interested in issues nevertheless.

This is not about only information and education for young people, but about older people as well. The Electoral Commission has the remit for voter information, education and awareness. It has started its work only recently and it focuses on increasing the participation of groups that are especially unlikely to vote. It has worked with Operation Black Vote, for example, and we should look forward to interesting work in that area.

We should make it easier to vote. It is not a panacea, but turnout increased in pilot schemes that involved only postal voting, when voting was incredibly convenient. Convenience is an issue, although it is not the only issue, and it is a reason why I am sympathetic to a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (David Hamilton) about weekend voting. I do not know how people find time to vote on Thursdays if they have kids, go to work and are busy. They may forget to vote on the way to work in the morning, and how will they find the time to vote if it is 8 o'clock in the evening and the kids are about to go to bed? It should not be a hassle to exercise one's democratic rights.

My hon. Friends the Members for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) and for Battersea (Martin Linton) and the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett) raised the question of whether the introduction of proportional representation would be effective. Hon. Members have overstated their case on that one. We have had the first-past-the-post system for decades but turnout has fallen significantly only during the past few years. The voting system does not explain changes during the past five to 15 years. Additionally, when PR was introduced for the European elections, turnout fell from 36 per cent. to 24 per cent. A range of reasons why that happened can be offered, but it is clear that no simple voting mechanism will address the turnout issues that we face. There is a wide range of problems. No one has any easy solutions, although I wish that they did because I would be desperate to implement them. It is right to try as many different mechanisms on as many different fronts as possible, and to keep the debate going in this House and throughout the country so that as many people as possible are engaged in how we can increase voter turnout and engagement in our democracy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I register my appreciation of and commendation for the good humour and patience that has been displayed throughout the tribulations of the sitting. I shall not offer an apology, because I do not think that one is necessary, but the circumstances were very difficult, and you all deserve credit.

We come now, 15 minutes late, to the next topic for consideration. My notes indicate that the subject is Humber bridge tools, but I am sure that it should be Humber bridge tolls.

Humber Bridge Tolls

3.45 pm

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes): Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is in fact a debate about Humber bridge tolls, not tools.

Tolls to cross the River Humber are nothing new. For example, I noted during my background research for the debate that Edward II granted a charter to the warden and burgesses of Hull to operate a ferry between Hull and Barton-upon-Humber in my constituency. In 1315, the cost of the toll for the ferry was half an old pence.

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): Overcharging!

Shona McIsaac: It probably was overcharging then. That charge was for a person on foot. If one was wealthy enough to have a horse, the charge was one old pence, and for a horse and cart it was two old pence. We have always had tolls to cross the Humber—they are nothing new.

However, in the 19th century it was acknowledged that the river and the ferry crossings were becoming barriers to trade and communications, so local groups launched campaigns to have a tunnel or bridge built. The lobbying continued until enactment of the Humber Bridge Act 1959, which set up the board. Its raison d'être was to raise money and to construct, operate, maintain and administer the Humber bridge. It comprises representatives from councils in the surrounding area, such as Hull, North Lincolnshire, East Riding of Yorkshire and Lincolnshire councils.

Finally, in 1971, the project was realised and the board set about borrowing money for a major construction project. At the time, it was estimated that the cost of the bridge would be about £28 million, but it had escalated to £151 million by the time the bridge opened in 1981.

Since then, the debt, repayment of loans to the Government and cost of the tolls have been of great local concern. MPs from the area have campaigned tenaciously on the subject. I wish to pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Brigg and Goole (Mr. Cawsey) and for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell), who are here today in support of the debate, and the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley), who cannot be here today because of ministerial duties. He too has worked very hard in campaigning on the issue.

We have had successes. In July 1998, the Government responded to our concerns about the escalating debt, the interest and the cost of the tolls, and an order was passed by Parliament writing off £62 million of the debt and to suspend and reschedule the remaining debt to make debt payments more realistic. The interest rate was reduced from about 12 per cent., which was high in 1998, to a fixed rate of 7.75 per cent.

Mr. Ian Cawsey (Brigg and Goole): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. As she will know, I have been a local in the area throughout the period that the bridge went from being a pipe dream to a reality. I have always believed that the potential benefits of movements to and from the north and south banks are considerable but hampered by toll levels.

Is my hon. Friend aware that the absence of tolls during a brief period of industrial action by the bridge board staff in the 1980s resulted in a huge increase in the traffic that went over the bridge, proving that the toll level is a major deterrent to achieving all the benefits that could result from movements between the north and south banks?

Shona McIsaac: I thank my hon. Friend for that characteristic intervention. He is right to say that traffic across the bridge increased enormously when the industrial action took place, thus proving that the tolls are still a barrier.

A few years later, after campaigning as a team on Humber bridge tolls and achieving success in rescheduling the debt, we were faced with the possibility of VAT being levied on the tolls. To be fair to the Government, however, we fought the case together and the decision that was made in Europe went in our favour and VAT was not levied on the bridge. It is levied only on tolls for private bridges. We have worked successfully with the Government.

The current campaign links in with what my hon. Friend said. The levels of the toll are creating barriers, particularly for people who want to access health care. The system has been dubbed "the toll on health". The campaign was sparked off by the reorganisation of health authorities in the area. It meant that people who used to receive various treatments for cancer, for example, in hospital in Lincoln now have to travel across the bridge to Hull and incur a toll of £2.50 each way.

The vast area of the south bank of the River Humber disadvantages those in Grimsby and Cleethorpes and those who live further west in the Isle of Axholme. In addition to the cost of the tolls, people have to make a lengthy journey to access health care, especially cancer treatment. Tolls should not be a barrier to health. In the 19th century, it was said that the river was a barrier to trade and communication; now the bridge is a toll on health.

I know from my constituency casework—as I am sure do my colleagues—that people are declining appointments because they cannot meet the cost of travelling to hospital. Relatives are having to cut down on their visits to their loved ones, even those who are seriously ill, because they cannot meet the costs of travelling daily over the bridge. It is all very well to say that people can use public transport, but as anyone who has visited that part of the country will know, we do not have direct rail links to Hull. The bus services are infrequent, especially in the evening. Unless people have cars, it is a difficult journey.

I admit that there are concessions and money is available to help a small proportion of people. If a person has the money to pay up front, there are discounts to be had. However, many people on low incomes who do not qualify for the concessions, or pensioners who are above the income support level usually cannot afford to pay £50 up front to receive a 10 per cent. reduction. There is an exemption, however, for people who receive the highest rate of disability living allowance and have a tax exempt vehicle. It is worth while my making that statement today because there are people who do not realise that they are entitled to free trips across the river.

[Shona McIsaac]

Locally, everyone is in agreement that something must be done to assist people to access health care. The bridge board has said that, in principle, it wants action to be taken. The local authority supports the idea. In fact, my hon. Friends the Members for Scunthorpe and for Brigg and Goole were questioned by North Lincolnshire council about the campaign. They, too, lent their support to it. The primary care trust also supports it. The campaign has been marvellously publicised by the local newspapers, the *Grimsby Telegraph* and the *Scunthorpe Evening Telegraph*. Thousands of people have expressed their support for it, either through the newspapers or their MPs. Everyone agrees that such action is desirable. We must find a way forward.

We are taking part in a huge game of pass the parcel. Everyone is saying that we have to do something, but they are also saying, "It's not my responsibility", "There may be legal problems", or "We haven't got the money." I want everybody to get together and come up with a scheme that will actually get rid of this toll on health and the barrier created by the high level of tolls.

Mr. Cawsey: Does my hon. Friend agree that the need to find a quick solution is ever more pressing? The modernisation of the health service is leading to greater use of regional centres and specialisations, which is entirely correct from a medical point of view. However, what is an historic problem is affecting more and more families as the modernisation of the national health service moves on.

Shona McIsaac: My hon. Friend is correct. As I stressed earlier, reorganisation and modernisation mean that people have to incur longer and more costly journeys to access health care. The Government have a role to play. They can provide a solution.

Mr. Austin Mitchell: My hon. Friend has incited me to intervene. She has the backing of all the Members of Parliament in the area, but is not the real problem the Treasury, which could write down the debt? It is now a notional figure. Interest rates are much lower now than when they were fixed. The Treasury demonstrated in the 1990s that it could reduce outlay, and it has done so on many other occasions—for large-scale voluntary transfers, for example. This is a Treasury problem.

Shona McIsaac: As in the local community, many interested groups are involved. On ministerial responsibility, many Departments have an interest—the Department for Transport, the Department of Health and the Treasury. If my hon. Friend waits a couple more minutes, I will come to my point about interest rates.

Debt is the problem. The Humber bridge makes a substantial operating profit: it raises approximately £18 million a year from tolls, of which £15 million goes to the Exchequer. The Exchequer has received more than £150 million from the tollpayers of Humberside, so the key lies with the Treasury. The Minister can have influence. I want him to re-examine the arrangements put in place in 1998 when the debt was rescheduled and the interest rates were reduced from approximately 12 to 7.75 per cent., which was a fixed rate. Everybody would now agree with my hon. Friend that 7.75 per cent. is high.

The debt arrangements will soon be due for a five-yearly review, and the Minister has scope to do something about the interest rates. He could also look at the length of time over which the debt must be repaid and extend the payment period. Both options would result in more of the money raised by tollpayers staying in the community. It would free up capital to allow organisations in the area to fund schemes to help people to access health care or help visitors to visit loved ones. We could even do something for trainee nurses who have to go to Hull for their training.

Those things could be done easily—they are not difficult. The review is coming up and the Government hold the key to providing the solution. If the Minister will consider those suggestions, I will try, with the support of my colleagues who represent constituencies on the south bank of the Humber, to ask all the interested organisations to come together at a joint meeting so that we can devise a constructive way forward. We will work together and with the Minister to try to provide a solution to this problem. I also hope that the Minister will agree to meet a delegation from those local organisations so that we can scrap the toll on health.

4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Jamieson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Shona McIsaac) on securing this important debate and on the clarity with which she made her points on behalf of her constituents. In my hon. Friend they have a good fighter for their cause who can make their case clearly and with some power and passion. I am pleased to see my hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) and for Brigg and Goole (Mr. Cawsey) take an interest on this important matter from south of the Humber.

My hon. Friend gave us a brief history lesson, which I thought was interesting, but above all she gave a clear appraisal of the effects that the toll is having on her constituents, especially on those of limited means. The hon. Lady mentioned in particular the issue of the hospital, in relation to the sick, relatives visiting people there and nurses. If, once the deliberations have taken place and my hon. Friend has met various interested parties, she feels that there is some value in having a meeting, I would be pleased to see her and other hon. Members.

I shall give a brief summary of the bridge's history, which may be helpful in putting the issue, and some of the possible ways forward, in context. The Humber bridge was opened in 1981. It is not a part of the trunk road network, but was built under legislation promoted by the local authority—the Humber Bridge Act 1959, as amended by the Humber Bridge Act 1971. The bridge is managed by the Humber bridge board, which is a local authority body. Most members of the board are from Hull city council, and its local taxpayers stand to finance most of any deficit from the tolls.

The bridge was financed by borrowing from the Secretary of State for Transport and the Public Works Loan Board. It took longer and cost more to construct than was expected and traffic growth was lower than forecast because the population growth that was expected for south Humberside when the bridge was planned never materialised. Toll income failed to cover the interest on debts, so unpaid interest was added to the debt. Capitalisation caused an exponential growth in debt from £181 million in 1981 to £439 million at 31 March 1992. It was recognised that the bridge board's financial situation was unsustainable and that action was needed. Without Government assistance, the debt would have risen to £650 million by 1997.

In July 1991, the Roads Minister announced the Government's intention to legislate in order to obtain express powers to write off or suspend debt. The Humber Bridge (Debts) Act 1996 received Royal Assent in February 1996. In July 1998, a new loan agreement was signed with the Humber bridge board and approved by the Humber Bridge (Debts) Order 1998 under the 1996 Act. That wrote off the debt to the PWLB and fixed a new, lower consolidated loan interest rate and suspended interest payments on some of the Secretary of State for Transport's debt. In the absence of these arrangements, the total interest charges on the Humber bridge debts would have amounted to nearly £50 million, which, without Government action, would have resulted in an impossible burden on the local taxpayers of Hull. The new arrangements initially reduced interest charges to less than £10 million, which were to be accommodated from within the bridge board's operating surplus after operating and maintenance costs had been met.

Although the bridge was built with Government loans, its financing and operation is primarily a matter for the bridge board. It is for the board to propose the tolls charged, and it can revise them only by applying to the Secretary of State for Transport, who must consider the application objectively in accordance with the criteria set out in the Humber Bridge Acts of 1959 and 1971. Under those Acts, the Secretary of State must not be unduly influenced by the debt owed to him.

The toll revision process is lengthy and includes advertising the application and the possibility of a public inquiry into objections. The decision on whether to provide discounts to, or exemptions from, toll charges is a matter for the board, except in the cases of certain groups of people and vehicles defined in the legislation. Although not obliged to do so, the board provides exemptions for disabled drivers in receipt of mobility allowance and for those who receive the higher rate of the mobility component of the disability living allowance. The board has also put in place a discount scheme for all bridge users on whom tolls are levied, which is available when pre-purchasing books of tickets.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes raised the issue of people travelling to hospitals in Hull having to pay the full bridge toll. The matter has also been covered widely in the Humberside press. The last toll revision public inquiry, held in December 2001, discussed whether concessions for bridge crossings should be made on social policy grounds. In his decision letter on the toll application, the Secretary of State for Transport accepted the inspector's view that any subsidies granted on social policy grounds were a matter for those responsible for the provision of health and social services, not the Humber bridge board.

My hon. Friend pointed out that the Humber Bridge (Debts) Order was made in 1998, and has added five to get to 2003. However, my Department and the Humber bridge board are undertaking a review of the debt. Any rescheduling thought necessary as a result of the debt review will, of course, require approval from the Treasury, and would be made by order under section 1 of the Humber Bridge (Debts) Act 1996. The order would have to be laid before the House, and would be subject to an annulment in pursuance of a resolution of the House of Commons—that is, to a negative resolution procedure.

Section 75 of the Humber Bridge Act 1959 sets out how the board shall apply revenues, and it lists nine purposes for which the revenues can be used. The ninth of those reads:

> "ninthly in the reduction of tolls which may be demanded taken and recovered under this Act or for such other purpose as may be approved by the Minister".

If the review went well and decided in the board's favour, an interpretation of that ninth category would have to be made to determine whether it would allow a concessionary crossing fee to be applied to those in certain categories. I am sure that my hon. Friend is not expecting any legal advice from me, but it would be for the board to interpret the ninth category, so one route down which people might go, if the five-yearly review goes favourably, would be to seek such advice and find out whether it gives them any comfort.

Shona McIsaac: Peeling away all the layers of legalese, is the Minister basically saying that there is a way forward to try to achieve our aim?

Mr. Jamieson: I have learned in this place that the intricate layers of legalese cannot be ignored. I hope that I have set out the legal position for my hon. Friend. The 1959 Act gives the board the ability to make a decision on the reduction of tolls on the basis that I outlined. However, we make the laws in this place but others interpret them. The board would need expert interpretation of the law and I said that I was not qualified to do that today. Putting this in simple terms, it seems as if there might be an avenue for exploration, at least, of an interpretation of the meaning before the board does what it urgently and earnestly desires.

My hon. Friend said that she had received representations from her constituents setting out their discontent about having to travel to and from Hull for hospital. She cited the example of people receiving daily cancer treatment but not receiving help with paying toll charges for using the bridge although a person visiting someone in prison in Hull could receive assistance with the charge. Let me clarify that because I believe that it has been mentioned in the local media.

I am sure that my hon. Friend will appreciate that this is not a matter for my Department, but for the completeness of the debate, I took the trouble to peruse the websites of Her Majesty's Prison Service and the Departments of Health and for Work and Pensions—you see what I do in my spare time, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The websites provide information on assistance that might be available to some users of the bridge. If a person is visiting a close relative or partner in prison or if a person has a low income and is a prisoner's only visitor, they may be entitled to help with the cost of the journey through the assisted prison visits scheme, which is funded and managed by Her Majesty's Prison Service.

People in receipt of income support, working families tax credit, disabled person's tax credit or income-based jobseeker's allowance can receive help with travel costs

[Mr. Jamieson]

when they attend hospital for national health service treatment and when they come out of hospital through the hospital travel costs scheme. They can also receive help with travel costs when they go to and from hospital as an out-patient for NHS treatment. They may also be able to get help with travels costs for someone whom they need to accompany them to hospital, if they cannot go by themselves.

People who are on a low income, but who do not receive income support or income-based jobseeker's allowance, may be able to get help with travel costs through the NHS low income scheme, as may people whom they require to accompany them. Further questions about those schemes should be addressed to the Department of Health; I have outlined only my understanding.

Persons in receipt of income support or income-based jobseeker's allowance who visit an ill person in hospital may be able to get help with travel costs from the community care grant from the social fund. Further questions about that should be directed to the Department for Work and Pensions. My hon. Friend's constituents' concerns might be due in part to a lack of awareness of the funding available from various pots.

Shona McIsaac: I totally agree that some constituents have a lack of awareness about available help. If they contact me or any other Member of Parliament who represents the area, we put them straight. However, it is not only people on low incomes who have a problem. People on moderate incomes find the cost of the tolls a real hardship and barrier.

Mr. Jamieson: I accept that. People who are just over the barrier—on a low income, but not a low enough income to qualify for the benefits—often have problems. There might be a case for better advertising of the schemes. Some people might be paying the toll although they could apply for one of the benefits.

My hon. Friend made an extremely powerful case on behalf of her constituents. The five-yearly review is taking place, although I cannot predict its outcome because there will be discussions between the Department—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We must turn our attention to the final topic for consideration today: policing in Somerset.

Policing (Somerset)

4.14 pm

Mr. Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater): I am grateful to be able to bring to the Minister's attention the situation of policing in Somerset. Running late is a bit of a novelty. Perhaps the microphones should always go down—things might go a lot quicker and less painfully. It has certainly been a long time since I saw an hon. Member get up and say, "Can I have a yes or no from the Minister?" It was very unusual but very nice to see.

This debate is slightly unusual. I am interested in policing in Somerset but we come under the Avon and Somerset constabulary area. That area was set up to include Bristol and a very large rural hinterland. As the years have passed, we have discovered that Bristol—which is now a large conurbation—takes more and more resources. Many of Bristol's problems are not problems that we have in rural Somerset. As a result, public service agreement targets have caused more and more problems for the chief constable.

I recently had a meeting with Steve Pilkington, the chief constable of Avon and Somerset constabulary. He has been trying to work his way through the raft of targets that he has been asked to hit. The latest target is to reduce burglary in Bristol. He has been very successful in doing that, but the problem is that burglary in rural areas has gone up. It is not that he is not trying to keep the levels down; it is that the resources that he requires for the enormous Bristol conurbation are way out of proportion.

The PSA targets should be broken down further to consider both rural and urban policing. I know that it is unusual to have such a big conurbation at the top of an area, but policing resources for rural Somerset should be readdressed. I imagine that hon. Members who represent Bristol will have something to say about that, and will say it louder than I am saying this, but there is a problem. Owing to the fact that the policing plan is national, it does not consider local variations. In Somerset, the national picture cannot be turned into a local picture with the flick of a magic wand.

The chief constable's task is to spend enough money to stand still, but the precept this year means that he will not be able to do that. His additional spending for 2003–04 is £21 million—just to stand still. The inflation part of that, and pay awards, account for £8.6 million and the extra cost of police pensions accounts for £1.9 million. Service growth accounts for £11.8 million. He has nothing extra to expand policing in his area. The chief constable will have to try to deliver with what he has got.

It is very worrying to receive a letter from a chief constable saying that the likely cuts in the precept could result in up to 100 officers having to go. He has made it clear that that will not happen—so I do not want to scare the Minister into thinking that it will—but he is extremely concerned, as any chief constable would be, about what he has been offered. To hit the PSA targets, he now needs to provide an extra 193 officers and 130 support staff. That represents a rise of 6 to 7 per cent. in policing numbers.

What targets will the chief constable have to try to achieve? They are: a 15 per cent. detection rate for domestic burglaries; a 6 per cent. detection rate for theft from motor vehicles; an 18 per cent. detection rate for robberies to be reached over two years; and to attend 80 per cent. of calls within 10 minutes in urban areas. One should note that that is the urban, not the rural, response time for policing in Somerset.

The Minister and the Government are imposing those targets on a chief constable who is finding it difficult to know where resources will come from. His increase in Government funding this year is £4.6 million—or 3 per cent. However, that figure would have to be £11.4 million just to allow policing to stand still. He will not be able to make up that differential unless he does so through efficiency measures or by putting up the precept in Somerset. That is the important part.

After this year's budget increases, pay and national insurance contributions alone will total £7 million. Over and above that, £2.8 million will have to be put aside for pensions. The only other sums that the chief constable will receive to meet the PSA targets—I have checked this carefully—are for certain specific Home Office projects on crime detection or crime reduction.

I wonder whether the targets are achievable. The increased revenue forecasts for 2004–05 and for 2005–06 are £20.5 million and £35.4 million respectively. Policing is getting more and more expensive. We want police, we need police and they do an extremely good job, but as resources are cut, it becomes harder and harder to see where the extra money will come from and how west Somerset will cope. The first thing that the inspector said to me was that we need resources. He said, "We have a drugs problem and other normal policing problems, yet I have to second officers to Taunton, Yeovil and other places." I see that the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) in present. The police consistently face the problem of trying to balance the books.

My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Mr. Flook), who unfortunately cannot be here because he is serving on the Standing Committee considering the Hunting Bill, has made the point that on the enormous expanse of Exmoor, radios do not even work—never mind policemen. Police in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) have found it hard to hit the response times for the fairly elderly population of Burnham-on-Sea and Highbridge because of the problems of such an unbalanced society. Elderly people require slightly more; they demand high-quality policing at all times.

In our area, we have the parish warden scheme, which was set up to build up police resources. I have no basic problem with that; as an idea, it is sound. Our two wardens do an extremely good job; they work hard. When funding for them runs out, however, it will fall to Sedgemoor district council to pay. It cannot afford to do so. We would like parish wardens, and I am sure that the Minister will say that he would like to give them to us, but district councils cannot afford to fund the posts. I would like many more people to be taken on as parish wardens to try to help the police.

I would also like more special constables. As an ex-Territorial Army soldier, I know the importance of volunteers. Special constables do a phenomenal job. Bridgwater has the biggest carnival in the world; it commemorates the battle of Sedgemoor. The specials police an event that sees 150,000 people arrive in a town of a population of 30,000. There is never any great trouble because it is policed beautifully. We know what is going to happen. We have the right people to do the job now, but given the terms and conditions and the fact that they are volunteering for what can be an extremely difficult job, the problem in future will be recruiting.

Mr. David Laws (Yeovil): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. Does he agree that the prospect faced this year by his constituents and mine is a 35 per cent. rise in the police precept in Somerset in order to fund what is essentially a crime problem in Bristol? Does he also agree that Home Office Ministers should consider funding Bristol's particular problems centrally rather than at the expense of residents in Somerset? Does he further agree that if the raiding of Somerset's budget to fund Bristol continues, there will eventually be pressure for Somerset to join the more rural counties such as Dorset and to break the link with Bristol altogether?

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: The hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly valid point. He is absolutely right. The chief constable has said that he can envisage council tax on a band D property rising this year by £25.45—just to be able to police the Somerset area. As the hon. Gentleman said, perhaps we should be talking about Somerset joining another rural area such as Dorset or Devon, because as a rural area we cannot afford to police a large conurbation.

An interesting piece appeared in Bristol's *Evening Post* in October. The chief constable, Steve Pilkington, wrote to all the area's MPs to say that if we do not sort out the issue, council tax will have to go up. The article said that his letter was a stark warning as the Government prepared to announce the conclusion of consultation on radical changes to the funding formula for local authorities. There is real concern. I am sure that the Minister would agree that when important local newspapers lead with such stories, it does not do the morale of anybody in the area any good.

I want to bring the problem of raves to the Minister's attention. Before people ask why we are discussing raves in Somerset, I point out that Glastonbury is down the road, where one of the biggest outdoor festivals in the country takes place. We also have Steart common, an area of unspoilt beauty. In 2002, there were two raves there, which ended up with 4,000 people trying to get past three policemen. The inspector had no choice but to withdraw the policemen. The chief constable was magnanimous in saying that there were problems but that a large number of people had come through Bristol and having got away from being held there had gone to an area in Bridgwater from which they could not be removed. The resources to police rural Somerset are not sufficient.There have been opportunities to give money, and the local council, the local police and the enterprise agencies have each given £1,000 to put up gates to try to stop such people, but policemen are needed to head them off. We do not have them.

The courts system is now under threat. I know that this is not the Minister's responsibility—he is concerned with rural policing—but the court in Minehead is to shut, the court in Bridgwater is under threat, and other courts in Somerset may be closing. The police in west Somerset fear that, having arrested an offender, they will have to take him to Taunton. We only have buses; if

[Mr. Liddell-Grainger]

people do not have a car, they are stuck—and the buses do not exactly arrive every 10 minutes. That type of problem is creating enormous worry in the police system. If Bridgwater courts shut, cases will have to go to Taunton. We have an industrial town in the middle of Somerset, with all the attendant problems. Will the Minister consider how policing will be carried out if we do not have the courts system in the area to cope?

Another problem concerns the probationary service. Last week, the *Somerset County Gazette* ran a story, which is now confirmed, on how the probation service might have to change the way in which it works because magistrates are stopping case after case to wait for late reports. Police time, effort and resources are being wasted. We are squandering what we have. As I said when referring to my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton, my constituency covers Exmoor. If a policeman goes there, not only can he not use his mobile phone because there are no masts for his radio, but he cannot be contacted to find out what has been going on. That is a long-term worry.

The Government are putting the onus on local authorities, which are being used to cover a hole in the economy. The Government's thinking is to put the onus on them to raise the precept by 40 per cent. and ensure that local people have to raise the money so that they make the decision whether they want the policing level that they deserve. Will the Minister please look again at the calculations and allow the chief constable of Avon and Somerset to put his case? Will he make sure that the precept means that we have policing in real terms without having to beg central Government every year or put 30 to 40 per cent. on the council tax payers of Avon and Somerset?

4.28 pm

The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety (Mr. John Denham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. Liddell-Grainger) on obtaining a debate on policing in Somerset. I will try to reply to as many of his points as possible. He spoke forcefully about the situation in Somerset, but his argument revealed some misconceptions. It is not the case that the Government have set a vast raft of public service agreement targets. This year, the Somerset force has three nationally set targets: on burglary, car crime and street crime. All the others that the hon. Gentleman mentioned are either generated locally by the police authority or are set by it against national best value performance indicators.

It is one thing for the Government to say to a force that aspects of its service must be measured because it, like any service, needs to know how well it is performing, but quite another thing for the Government to impose targets on forces. Under the new national policing plan, the burglary target is not set nationally—certainly not at this stage—but we have invited forces to set burglary and car crime targets. Overall, we wish to achieve the PSA standard that has been set. We should not confuse targets that have been set by the local police authority and police force with Government-imposed procedure.

Mr. Laws: Does the Minister deny that the priorities of the Avon and Somerset constabulary were essentially micro-managed by his Department during the recent street crime initiative in Bristol, in order to meet specific objectives?

Mr. Denham: There was no micro-management by the Home Office, but there was a common approach to tackling street crime among the 10 forces with a major problem, of which Bristol was undeniably one. For people in the Avon and Somerset area, the initiative achieved a dramatic reduction in street crime. *[Interruption.]* There was a dramatic reduction in street crime.

Additionally, the initiative focused attention on other aspects of the criminal justice system, and the benefits are spreading to other areas. For example, it led to the introduction of the Crown Prosecution Service premium service. In October, that was extended to the whole of the Avon and Somerset area, so it is not the case that the advantages accrue only in a small area.

It has been interesting to hear from both Opposition parties—through the hon. Members for Bridgwater and for Yeovil (Mr. Laws)—about the break-up of the constabulary that they advocate. I am surprised to hear, particularly from the hon. Member for Yeovil, the idea that areas with the highest levels of crime should not receive additional resources. Let us compare Bristol and Sedgemoor, for example. In Bristol, 48.2 households per 1,000 are burgled. In the Sedgemoor area, the figure is 16.2. In Bristol, 17.4 households per 1,000 suffer theft of a motor vehicle, whereas in the Sedgemoor area the figure is 3.1—and so on.

I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Bridgwater that his constituents have every right to feel safe and secure in their own homes and in the towns, villages and isolated communities in which they live. However, it is equally right that the Government and the chief constable of Avon and Somerset give priority attention to communities where crime levels are highest. I would find it very surprising if anyone were seriously to advocate that we did not do so.

The Government have made specific provision for funding for rural areas. The hon. Gentleman referred to a newspaper article that I believe he said was published before the funding formula was determined. It warned about the consequences of changes to the formula. He will know that we did not make some of the changes on which we had consulted. For example, we left things as they were in respect of the rural policing fund, from which the Avon and Somerset constabulary benefits to the tune of £1 million a year. It is expected that the chief constable of Avon and Somerset will have used that money to enhance policing in rural areas.

As a point of principle, we should not separate out the costs of forces that cover major cities from the rest of an area. None the less, we recognise that additional costs exist in cities such as Bristol. That is why it has had extra money from the street crime initiative. It has also had additional Home Office money, for example, in the communities against drugs initiative. Central Government have recognised the need to provide some earmarked funds for rural areas, such as most of Somerset, and to meet the additional costs that are involved in the city of Bristol. That balanced approach has been right.

I reassure the hon. Member for Bridgwater that we are concerned about rural areas. That is clear in the development of the police standards unit and the new performance assessment framework for the police. We are not concerned solely with those parts of the country that have the highest crime rates. We will be looking for an increase in policing performance throughout the police service. We would look with as much interest at a rural basic command unit that was performing less well than its comparator BCUs in the same or other police forces as we would at an inner-city area BCU that was not doing as well as those in other inner-city areas. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will not focus solely on the higher-crime urban areas during the next two or three years. If a police service in a rural area is performing poorly down to BCU level, we will want to identify that, support it and work with it to improve its service.

I turn briefly to the funding formula. It is worth looking at what has been achieved on police officer numbers, especially against the background of a debate that may have left the impression that Avon and Somerset police have not been dealt with very well over the years. The latest published figures show that Avon and Somerset had a record number of 3,096 police officers at 31 March 2002—107 more than when the Labour party came to office in 1997. The constabulary is committed to increasing police officer numbers further and it is recruiting well. Between April and December last year, 157 new officers were recruited. The police force itself has forecast a strength of 3,187 by 31 March 2003—another record number.

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: I was arguing not about whether recruitment or numbers were right, but about the fact that the amount of money needed to continue to recruit just to maintain the number of policemen and women and to fund them will not be provided unless there are enormous county council precepts.

Mr. Denham: What may not have come across from the earlier parts of the debate is that, in addition to the 3 per cent. increase in police grant, to which I will return in a moment, the Government are directly picking up, through the crime fighting fund, the cost of a significant proportion of the additional police officers who have been recruited in the past couple of years. Indeed, we anticipate being able to provide further ring-fenced money to Avon and Somerset for new officers—paid for, or sponsored by, the crime fighting fund in the coming years. We are not only picking up the costs of recruiting officers in one particular year. The salary costs of those who were recruited two years ago are still being paid by central Government through the crime fighting fund. That principle of a level of continued Government support for additional officers will continue in the next financial year.

That illustrates a basic point that needs to be made. It is understandable that the focus has been on the headline figure of police grant increase. That figure has varied from a floor of 3 per cent., which Avon and Somerset has received, to a ceiling of 4.9 per cent., even for forces that the formula says should get more. I am sure that the focus will be the same next week when we discuss the police grant. That grant increase is, however, only a part of the resources that are being made available to forces through the crime fighting fund.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned that the radios do not work in one part of west Somerset. The new airwave radio system is funded from central resources; it is designed to ensure that police officers have radios that do work. We will also be providing centrally funds to meet the costs of introducing the case-in-custody scheme. That major information technology innovation will provide the greatest opportunity to free up police officer time and get them away from paper-based systems. There is much more in the funding that is being made available than the headline increase in the police grant. Indeed, including capital and ring-fenced funds, police resources will increase by 6.2 per cent. overall this year, rather than by the average of 4.3 per cent. increase in the police grant.

Of course, people will always want more, and it is good that local communities have been committed to supporting their police service in recent years when people have sought extra resources. Somerset's precept for policing is a little—but not massively—below the average; presumably that reflects decisions that have been taken. It is for the police authority to decide what precept it will set. There is nothing to suggest that anyone wants to do anything other than enable the police force to continue to operate effectively at a local level.

The hon. Member for Bridgwater mentioned a few other issues with which I would like to deal. I would hope that, where parish warden schemes have been a proven success, people would find ways to continue supporting them. In most of the places to which I have been, people have found the scheme remarkably cost-effective, as there has been a reduction in costs—whether through less graffiti and environmental damage, or through fewer abandoned cars—which has benefited local taxpayers.

I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the valuable role of specials. He may know that a national specials weekend is being organised for 21 to 23 February to promote their role. I shall soon write to all hon. Members, inviting them to contact their local police force and offer to be involved in promotional activities that weekend. It would be enormously helpful if hon. Members involved themselves.

I should like to touch on the thorny issue of raves. I share the anxiety that raves should not become an excuse for disorder, antisocial activity, criminality or behaviour that intimidates local communities. I also recognise that the effects of raves are not always limited to the duration of the event itself. They may bring traffic congestion to unsuited roads, and there may be rubbish or problems with people moving on somewhere else after the police have used their initial powers.

Legislation was introduced in the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 as a response to the growing phenomenon of the rave and the associated difficulties. Section 63 allows the police to direct rave-goers to leave

[Mr. Denham]

an event in certain cases. If they refuse, police are provided with a power of arrest, and on conviction the offence carries three months' imprisonment and/or a fine. The police also have powers to seize sound equipment in certain circumstances.

In the White Paper "Justice for All", published last summer, we said that we were considering extending police powers to include smaller raves and raves in buildings in which people are trespassing. We are also aware of the problem, raised by Avon and Somerset constabulary, of organisers who are directed to leave simply moving to another venue and starting all over again, and bringing misery to another community, as the hon. Gentleman says. We are considering making it a criminal offence for someone who is given a direction to leave a rave to attend another outdoor or trespassary indoor rave event within 24 hours of that direction being given.

I reassure the hon. Gentleman that I understand from the chief probation officer for Somerset that although the magistrates courts building in Minehead will close at the end of March because it is too big, the service is looking for alternative accommodation. There is no suggestion of reducing the level of service to the community in Minehead.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at sixteen minutes to Five o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 29 January 2003

[MR. JOHN MCWILLIAM *in the Chair*]

Gun Crime

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Gillian Merron.]*

9.30 am

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Before I call the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), I draw Members' attention to the fact that we have some problems with the sound system, so if it goes off, there is a contingency plan. I shall suspend the sitting for a very short time to enable the radio microphone to be brought in.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): As we move into the 21st century, the inner cities of our country are falling under the shadow of gun crime. There is no single aspect of crime and criminality that causes so much fear and anxiety among ordinary people as the use of guns, including air guns. We have recently had the announcement of statistics that show the rise in gun crime nationally. I know that gun crime, including incidents involving air guns, is a big problem in many of our city centres. Some of my colleagues will speak to that fact.

The national figures mask a particularly steep rise in our inner cities. In London in 2000–01 gun crime incidents stood at 2,817, but in the past year gun crime incidents have gone up to 4,192—a rise of 49 per cent. In the Greater Manchester area in 2000–01 gun crime stood at 964, but in the most recent period for which statistics have been collected, it has gone up to 1,361—a rise of 41 per cent. In the west midlands, the site of the tragic shooting of those young girls that was in the papers over Christmas and new year, gun crimes went up from 887 in 2000–01 to 1,289—a rise of 45 per cent. Handguns were used last year in more than 5,871 incidents, the highest number ever recorded. That represents a 46 per cent. increase since the previous year. I remind the Chamber that in the whole of 1954—the year after I was born—there were only four armed robberies in the whole of London. Now, four armed robberies take place in London every single day.

Those are the statistical parameters of the problem, but as a Member of Parliament for the part of London—the Hackney and Tottenham area—which has the highest level of gun crime in the country, I need to draw to the attention of colleagues what it is like for people to live in an area, a residential area, much of it with highvalue residential housing, where they can wake up in the morning and find that there has been a shooting at the end of their road, where they can look out of the window and see a vehicle with a dead person in it, where people queuing at bus stops have been the victims of drive-by shootings, and where an innocent young person at a club or a party can get caught up in a gun crime incident.

This is not a type of criminality that affects only those who move in criminal circles. As the wave of gun crime engulfs our inner cities, more and more innocent people, just like those young women in Birmingham, are being caught up in it, and more and more innocent people are witnessing it on their doorstep, on their streets and in their communities, and feeling terrorised.

It is important to stress that gun crime is not just a black crime. It is certainly the case that 80 per cent. of the incidents reported to the Metropolitan police involve black-on-black crime, but we saw just before the new year a terrible outburst of gang shootings among the Kosovan community in Green lanes in Haringey, we are seeing increasing numbers of Asian-on-Asian gun crime incidents in west Yorkshire connected with the drug trade, and the Albanians are increasingly figuring in gun crime statistics. Where there are hard drugs and a particularly toxic mix of poverty and social alienation, we will find gun crime. We need not think, as a society, that it is confined to particular communities, and use that as an excuse to look away.

I first spoke in the House about gun crime more than a year ago. One of the points that I stressed was the extent to which gun crime in recent times had become almost a lifestyle crime. It is one thing to take out a gun to carry out an armed robbery and then take it home—that is utterly deplorable and very wrong—but what we have seen in recent years is a rise in gun crime as a lifestyle crime. It is worth drawing to the attention of the Chamber that the proportion of robberies involving firearms has remained steady at 4 to 5 per cent. over the past five years.

However, as I have said, there has been an explosion of gun crime as a lifestyle crime—people shooting people because of disputes over territory, people shooting people because of disputes over money owed, people shooting people because of petty squabbles in nightclubs, and people shooting people because of squabbles over girlfriends. In Hackney we have even had people shooting people because they believed that somebody had made a disrespectful remark about their clothes or their hairstyle. What is new about the phenomenon of gun crime as a lifestyle crime that is engulfing London, Moss Side and parts of Birmingham is when a section of young people—it may be a tiny section, but it is still a section—feel that they are not properly dressed for a night out unless they are carrying a gun. Unless we understand that, we cannot understand the importance of combating the problems underlying the phenomenon.

I shall touch briefly on what I believe to be the causes. I begin by saying what I do not think is the cause. With the greatest respect to Ministers, I do not believe that it is helpful to speak about rap music as the cause of gun crime. I find the lyrics of much rap music utterly deplorable. I dislike the misogyny, the glorification of violence, the hatred of homosexuals and so on. I find it all deeply shocking, but the music of young people has always been intended to shock middle-aged ladies like me. If it did not shock middle-aged ladies like me, young people would feel that something was seriously lacking in their culture. To say that we do not like the lyrics, that they are deeply shocking and that things were better when we were young is not the same as saying that that music is the cause of the gun crime. The music is a symptom of the youth culture. What we need to do as politicians is not to give people the benefit of our personal opinion on young people's music, but to identify the underlying causes and the law enforcement issues with which we need to engage.

[Ms Diane Abbott]

I believe that the root causes of gun crime are related to an arms race between gangs and gangsters, to hard drugs, to the huge amounts of money to be made out of hard drugs, which incites people to use the ultimate weapon to protect their profits and their territory, and more broadly to social alienation. Hon. Members will forgive me if I say that I believe that in the long term, one of the underlying causes of the social alienation and the gun crime that we see in our inner cities is educational under-achievement among our young men, especially young black men. This is not a matter for Home Office Ministers, but I would not be doing the subject justice if I did not touch briefly on that.

Nationwide, 42 per cent. of young men aged 16 get five GCSEs at grades A to E, but in Hackney and many other inner-city boroughs, only 9 per cent. of black boys aged 16 get average grades in GCSE. What is happening to the other 90 per cent.? I have long argued that it is not good enough to lump in what is happening to black children with general figures and programmes applying to ethnic minorities. Some ethnic minorities in our inner-city areas are doing better than white children. In particular, however, it is Afro-Caribbean boys who are failing.

As I have said many times, we need to focus on the underlying causes of under-achievement. Those causes are complex and relate not only to young people's attitudes and parenting, but to factors in schools and teachers' expectations. Until the Government have a strategy for black under-achievement in schools that is similar to their strategy on literacy and numeracy, not only will we find it very hard to raise overall standards in inner cities, but social alienation, whose many negative aspects include gun crime, will continue.

Mr. Mark Francois (Rayleigh): I have followed the hon. Lady's argument carefully. I believe that educational under-achievement is an important aspect of the situation. However, will she enlighten the House as to which party has for many years been running the LEAs in most of the inner-city areas to which she is referring, where children have been mortally failed by the education system?

Ms Abbott: I am happy to enlighten hon. Members: most of those LEAs are run by Labour authorities, especially in London. The hon. Gentleman may not remember, however, that it was a Tory Government who dismantled the Inner London education authority. Londonwide policy issues such as the under-achievement of black children have suffered ever since because of the lack of an overarching strategic focus.

It was inevitable that individual boroughs such as Hackney would struggle when they were left on their own to deal with multiple issues of social deprivation and their effect on education. I welcome the Government's appointment of a London commissioner for education, which may allow us to return to some of the best aspects of the Inner London education authority, which could stand back, consider the issues and support weaker boroughs. It is no good talking about the failings of an individual borough such as Hackney. I am no apologist for what is happening to black children in boroughs such as Hackney, but many of today's problems in the area date back to the abolition of the Inner London education authority. In my view and that of many Conservative Members at the time, that was a criminal act of educational vandalism.

Before I deal with specific issues relating to gun crime, I want to mention a few related questions. I live in a borough that has a very high proportion of public authority housing, and one of the things that my constituents complain about bitterly is crack dens, which are sometimes situated on the same estate, floor or landing as their homes. I ask hon. Members to think about how it must feel to be a young woman struggling on her own to bring up decently two or three children and having every day to take her pushchair across a landing where a flat has been taken over as a crack den. Some local authorities, including Hackney, are doing a lot of work to try to close crack dens and they work closely with the police.

I ask the Government to consider the effectiveness of current legislation. I believe that we have legislation on the books that enables the police to close down the crack dens. When will it be activated? It is illegal to run an opium den, but as I understand it, it is not illegal to run a crack den as such. When the police raid the dens, people drop the crack on the floor and cannot be done for possession, and no individual can be done for running a crack den as such. I stand to be corrected if my understanding of the law is faulty, but that is how I have been briefed by local police. If the legislation is not on the books, we need to introduce it, but if it has not been activated, we need to ensure that it takes effect. In the 21st century, when we know about the menace of crack in our communities, which relates not only to gun crime, but to the robberies that people carry out to feed their habits, it is absurd that the law is not fully effective in helping the police to close down the crack dens.

Drug mules are tied to the same gangs that are using guns to enforce and protect their territory. Hon. Members will know that the largest group of foreign nationals in Holloway prison for women are Jamaican women who were drug mules. I have visited those women, whose situation is tragic. Those who act as drug mules swallow lots of bags of crack and come through customs. They are told that they will not go to prison if they are caught, but that if they do, British prisons are easy. Such women have often left their families in Jamaica, where there are no social services as we know them and they were in a desperate situation.

I know that the Government have acted against the drug mule trade and that the Jamaican Government are co-operating well. For instance, the British Government have helped the Jamaican Government to install special ion scanners to test whether people getting on to planes have handled cocaine. When I discussed the issue with Ministers last year, they told me that every single person boarding a plane in Kingston, whether it was a British Airways aircraft or a Jamaican one, would be tested for handling crack cocaine. I visited Jamaica last year, and although it was a private trip, I made a point of visiting the airport and meeting the Jamaican drug squad, British customs officers and Metropolitan police officers. I stood and watched them testing people as they boarded the planes, but they were doing so at random. We do not need to be criminal specialists or intelligence experts to understand how easy it is to subvert a testing regime that works on a random basis. Ministers told me last year that every single person was being tested, but I saw with my own eyes last May, when the system was introduced, that people were being tested at random.

I want to make a very simple point about drug mules: we must work with the Jamaican authorities and the airlines to ensure that every person who gets on a plane in Kingston, Jamaica, is tested for crack cocaine. That will benefit my constituents, who are suffering as a result of the crack trade, the reputation of the island of Jamaica and also the poor girls who act as drug mules and are the victims of the trade.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): The hon. Lady is making an extraordinarily important point about the Jamaican drugs trade. Does she also accept that, even if the random nature of the search is not subverted—I think that was the word she used—the fact that not everybody is being tested means that the dealers and traders who are paying the women to be drug mules can build in a wastage factor? In other words, cannot they afford to lose some of the mules, because of all the others who will get through a random test?

Ms Abbott: Exactly. I have worked closely with Operation Trident officers on this issue, so I can describe the process. Heathrow has eight cells and the drug gangs know that that is the case. Early in the week, they send over a certain number of girls. Once they know that all those girls have been held, they flood the flights.

There are ways of closing down drug mule trafficking from Jamaica. They involve testing everybody and establishing more cells and more police activity at Heathrow. I want the practice to be stopped not only for my constituents, but for the island of Jamaica and the poor girls who get caught up in it.

I turn now to specific issues relating to guns. On arms traffickers, we need to consider action to curb the supply of illegal firearms into the UK from countries in the Balkans and central and eastern Europe. Those countries are also the main source of guns entering African war zones. As I said, although the majority of gun crime is black-on-black, other nationalities, notably the Albanians, are entering the market. If we do not act to check the flow of firearms from eastern Europe, we will reap a very bitter harvest.

Most black-on-black gun crime is performed using reactivated replica weapons, but the Albanians and other groups have access to top-class weaponry that is available in eastern Europe and the Balkans. Surely, it is better for Ministers to check the trade now than very shortly to see gangs settling their differences on the streets of London with AK47s and military-style weapons. We need to increase the funding that is given to the police and intelligence services to combat firearm tracking. I believe that the police have been under-resourced in that area.

I applaud the Government for taking steps to ban the possession of replica weapons, but we also need a ban on their sale, importation and manufacture. Action must also be taken against weapons that are not replica weapons as such, but that can be used as firearms. It is a fact that 80 per cent. of black-on-black gun crime is undertaken using replica weapons, and although I applaud the increased penalties for possession, we need to stop such weapons flooding the market; we need to ban their sale, importation and manufacture.

Perhaps the single most important issue that I want to raise with the Minister is witness protection. In respect of gun crime incidents in London, Birmingham and across the country, the police have a big problem—certainly initially—with community co-operation. The point about the type of gun crime that I am discussing is that it is no secret in the community as to who is committing these crimes. Somebody is washing their shirts and cooking their dinner, and they are boasting about their actions, so people know. The reason why they are not brought to book is not a failure of detective work, but the difficulty in getting people to be witnesses.

Some colleagues may find this point difficult or unacceptable, but in communities such as Hackney, we have to remember the context in which we are asking for community co-operation. Hackney is an east-end borough of London, and I should remind Members that people in the east end do not grass other people up. It is not a black thing—it is an attitude that has characterised the east end since the 18th century. In fact, as accounts of the time show, in the 18th century there was, if anything, a more visceral hatred of the forces of law and order in the east end.

In the recent past, stations such as Stoke Newington have had a very unfortunate record in terms of deaths in custody and assault. However, I give great credit to Stoke Newington's current leadership, and Chief Superintendent Benson in particular. In the 1990s, there was a very serious corruption scandal at Stoke Newington, which was investigated by the Met through Operation Jackpot. The essence of that operation's findings was that the police in Stoke Newington were running their own drug dealers on the street. If they confiscated £10 worth of drugs, they would book £1 worth in at the station and give out £9 worth to their own drug dealers. This was not an assertion by the community; this was the conclusion of an investigation, and most of the police involved had to move on. That is the context—it is not an excuse—in which people are reluctant to come forward and give evidence. I am working locally with the black community to encourage them to come forward and work with the police. We need to be aware of that context, and the fact that similar contexts exist in some other inner-city areas.

The real problem is fear. Witnesses are frightened to come forward because they believe that the gunmen and their associates will come and get them. Only two weeks ago, I met a very nice, respectable, church-going, middle-aged black woman at one of my regular advice sessions. She had been one of a number of witnesses to a gun crime, and had gone to court. The guys concerned went down, and since then she has had to move five times out of fear of those gunmen. For someone who is a witness to a high-profile gangland crime, the Metropolitan police lay on a very good witness protection scheme. They can change such people's identity and move them around the country. However, the protection that is available to a witness to a regular gun incident or shooting is not adequate. This is a particular problem in London. In London, a witness to a gun crime who wants re-housing goes to their borough, which re-houses them within that borough. That means that, in boroughs such as Hackney, such a person is perhaps half a mile away from the gunmen and their associates.

[Ms Abbott]

The Home Office, in co-operation with other Departments, needs to consider an intermediate witness protection programme in London that is co-ordinated not at borough level, but, for example, by the Metropolitan Police Authority. Under it, registered social landlords would have to allocate to the authority a certain amount of housing every year. The police could nominate people for that programme, and they could get re-housed as a matter of priority into decent quality housing. We also need a package of counselling and support for witnesses after the trial is over. The same woman to whom I referred told me that, when she telephoned the police station to speak to the sergeant about her housing problem, threats and so on once the trial was over, he refused to come to the phone.

I understand why, once a crime is solved, policemen have to move on to solving the next one, but that example shows why we need a comprehensive witness protection programme. It could be a step down from what is offered to witnesses to major gangland killings, but people must be offered such protection. They are not going to come forward if they believe that, afterwards, they will be in fear of their lives. This practical step does not have massive resource implications. Until the Government do more about witness protection, things will continue to be very difficult for those, such as me, who are genuinely encouraging people in the community to co-operate further.

I welcome the steps that the Government have taken against replicas, and to increase the minimum penalty for the possession of firearms, but there is still further to go. With the support of other Members, I am setting up an all-party Back-Bench committee on gun crime. It will involve MPs from all the inner city areas in which this is an issue, and they will take evidence and make suggestions to Ministers later in the year.

In some ways, gun crime is an endemic and global issue that reflects the culture in which we live, and its materialism and brutality. The associated problems are deep-rooted, and will take a long time to solve, but the law and order elements need to be put in place now. The administration of the system, witness protection and action against drug traffickers can be done in the here and now. In the past, there may have been a sense among certain authorities that, because this was a crime confined to certain communities that involved criminals killing other criminals, they could perhaps afford not to give it their full attention. However, for a year or more some type of gun crime has taken place every weekend in areas such Hackney. I welcome what the Government have done, but there is great deal more to do. I urge Ministers to realise that if a Labour Government in the 21st century cannot guarantee all our communities freedom from fear, we will be failing in our responsibilities to them.

9.57 am

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster): The hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) made a marvellous speech, and I am only sorry that more people were not here to hear it. I congratulate her on drawing our attention to this very important issue, but in a moment I want to talk about gun control, rather than just gun crime.

As the hon. Lady knows, I am also an inner-London Member of Parliament; indeed, I suspect that at the nearest point our constituencies are only two and a half or three miles apart. I do not wish to extol all the virtues of her constituency—she can doubtless do that—but I want to point out that, although many people will assume that Hackney, North and Stoke Newington is a horrible, inner-city hell-hole, nothing could be further from the truth. For example, one can take a walk along Stoke Newington's historical Church street. Some 400 years ago, when Stoke Newington was a village, much of the rest of the land between the City of London and that area was open fields. Likewise, even today, parts of Stamford Hill are very suburban in outlook. Like much of inner London, it is made up of people who work very hard to make their way in life

What the hon. Lady said, especially on witness protection, was very valuable. I wish I could articulate things in that way—I suspect that she has more knowledge of those matters—but I should like to reiterate my support for what she said, and I hope that the Home Office will pay close attention.

Hon. Members are perhaps lucky; we can go through our day-to-day life without that sense of fear. Perhaps things are even easier for me as a man; when I walk home at night from the House or, indeed, from a tube station in my constituency for five or six minutes in the middle of the night, I do not fear that I will be mugged or attacked in any way. Likewise, in our day-to-day life, there is no fear of who is living across the corridor or whether they might be trying to extort money from us or just making our lives a misery by playing music and causing disruption at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, but perhaps all Members of Parliament can appreciate those fears; it is certainly a state of affairs that many of our constituents are unfortunate enough to suffer.

What the hon. Lady said about witness protection, and the context in which she made her remarks, was also valuable. I suspect that those long-standing concerns are true in parts of my own constituency, as it includes parts of Bayswater and Pimlico that would not necessarily be typical in a relatively safe Conservative constituency. Having spoken to my constituents, I am aware that there are certainly some very real problems.

The hon. Lady rightly talked about the drugs problem. She said that drugs were very much at the forefront of gun crime, and she discussed the issue at some length. There seems little doubt—I entirely endorse what she said—that it is not simply a black-on-black crime. In my constituency, we have found that gangs of eastern Europeans are fighting turf wars, particularly around Soho and in the vicinity of the Edgware road. It is easy to say that they are Kosovans or Albanians, but there is no doubt that a whole raft of people from eastern and central European ethnic groups have looked to gain in that area—in relation not just to drugs, but prostitution, protection rackets and a vast array of other problems—and they are using guns daily.

However, as I said, I want to say a few words about gun control. The hon. Lady rightly pointed out that the new year started with one of those very brutal acts that still has the capacity to shock the entire nation. The savage gunning down of two teenagers at a party in Birmingham by young men who were armed with automatic sub-machine-guns brought home to many people the growing violence that exists in parts of our inner cities—not just in London—and has already expanded into several of our city suburbs and now seems to be threatening, in a minor way, even some of our rural towns.

Since the Government declared a total ban on handguns some six years ago in the aftermath of the Dunblane tragedy, it has become clear that ever more guns are being used by criminals in our society. However much the police in Birmingham or, indeed, London try to make out that that new year incident was somehow an out-of-the-ordinary event, it is clear that it was only the gender of the victims that made it so startling. From speaking to local residents, councils and residents associations virtually every day, I am fully aware that, even on the streets of London, gangs of young men are involved in the illegal drugs trade, prostitution and protection rackets, and they think nothing of brandishing firearms to protect their patch.

Ms Abbott: I want to confirm what the hon. Gentleman says. Just like him, I feel that, tragically, that shooting got on to the front pages because girls were involved. That is very sad because, as he says, such things are happening all the time.

Mr. Field: Drug dealers need to ensure a monopoly of supply in their own districts if they are to maximise their profits—I suspect that that is a basic rule of economics in the drugs trade—and the territory is fought over. Those gangsters have no fear of the police; their only equals are those in other gangs whom they know will be similarly armed. Until we support the police in their endeavours to enforce the law to diminish the power of those gangs, the use of firearms will increase.

Unfortunately, in the immediate aftermath of the new year incident in Birmingham, the response of many politicians and, indeed, many people in the media in Birmingham and beyond was predictable and somewhat illogical. The call for the existing handgun ban to be further enforced by handing out the new mandatory five-year jail sentence to anyone possessing a firearm seems to be just grandstanding. I appreciate that, for the first time, I diverge from the hon. Lady's path. Even a moment's reflection should have persuaded everyone that such a mandatory ban was neither a sensible nor a practical way forward. The police may find it impractical to enforce, and there may be legal problems because it is mandatory and discretion has not been left in the hands of the judiciary.

The fact is that the criminals on our streets are already refusing to obey the existing laws—the total ban on handguns—so there seems little point in passing even more new legislation for them to ignore with gay abandon. Until the current total ban on handguns is properly enforced in this country, we shall continue to see a greater increase in gun-related violence.

In the immediate aftermath of the new year incident, I discussed the entire issue of handgun control and gun crime with a good friend of mine who lives in leafy Hertfordshire. He told me, with an entirely straight face, that he is now so fearful of crime that, if he were living, rather than simply working, in London, he would seriously contemplate procuring a firearm for his family's self-defence, although he has never fired a gun before in his life.

My great concern is that I am not sure whether that response to such incidents is totally out of the ordinary in what has traditionally been a very gun-adverse society, in great contrast to the United States. We are now very much at a crossroads in public policy on the issue. Obviously, we in politics have to play a part, but it is important that such things are discussed with a cool head, especially in the light of what seems to be an escalating murder rate involving the use of firearms.

In a sense, the problem is straightforward. We have failed to enforce our current, already relatively strict gun laws. We should not stand by and wash our hands of the problem by passing yet more laws. The police already have sufficient powers, and all that is now required is the political and judicial will for them to use those powers properly.

I fear that, all too often in recent years, we have handcuffed our police by removing their ability to stop and search. I appreciate that political correctness considerations were part and parcel of that. In essence, no-go areas have been created in our inner cities, partly as a result of political correctness, but I reiterate that this is not just a matter of black-on-black crime; we are looking at those in a range of different ethnic groups in our society who are playing a part in using guns for the purposes of protection rackets and drugs and prostitution.

I therefore gained little pleasure from listening to community leaders who spoke about the Birmingham incident and said that the police had become too lenient in the area. It was very much an eye opener that a number of those community leaders felt that the police had simply turned a blind eye to a problem that they knew was getting ever worse. All too often, if a vacuum of social order is created, it will be filled by violence, anarchy and the indifferent destruction of human life.

In a way it is fortunate that we can still be stunned by the manner of the loss of those teenagers' lives in Birmingham, but I fear that in a few years' time—perhaps rather like in the United States of America—such things will no longer be headlines but will simply be small pieces on page 3 or 4 of the newspapers, rather than something that shocks the entire nation for days. Unless we reverse the anarchy and social disorder in parts of our nation—in particular, in our inner cities—I fear that such horrors are likely to recur.

I hope that the Minister will be able to take on board the points that have been made about witness protection, as that is very much the way forward in any attempt to address the problems that have already arisen, as well as ensuring that the police have the necessary support and are encouraged to enforce the laws that are already in place. The knee-jerk reaction of introducing a new array of laws does not seem to be a sensible way to try to counter the gun crime problem.

10.8 am

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) on initiating this debate. This issue is certainly of huge concern to many hon. Members, and I am pleased to be able to make my contribution to the debate. I share all the concerns that she raised and recognise the huge increase in gun crime that she described. Such crime is of immense concern to residents, and not only those in inner cities.

[Ms Julia Drown]

Swindon—only two hours outside London—is a prosperous town, but it contains areas of deprivation. We have had 280 reports of firearms incidents in the past year, mostly involving airguns and replica guns. However, because it is so hard to distinguish between airguns and replicas and the real thing, a significant number of those incidents have to be dealt with as though they involve real firearms. The police thus have to make a huge effort in terms of resources, risk assessments and so on. They have been called out 96 times in the past year to such incidents, resulting in 28 airguns, pistols and replica guns being recovered.

Animals have been injured in the town. People have been shot at, and one man was almost blinded by an airgun. Bus drivers have come to talk to me about their concerns because they have had guns fired at their buses. That is not only a danger to the people on the bus but a major issue for anybody around that bus, in the street, on the pavement or cycling past. It becomes a major issue of public concern and safety. Not only have bus drivers and residents come to me to raise their concerns but pet owners and wildlife carers—who have seen an increase in injuries to wildlife—say that more needs to be done to tackle this real problem.

I have been most concerned, however, about the police who have come to me regularly to raise their concern that they do not have enough powers to deal with the problem. I have met the police on several occasions to discuss not only proposals for what we can do in Swindon but proposals that we can put to the Government on action at a national level to improve the situation. For example, I have written to a number of local schools to raise with parents the problem of the wide and increasing availability of airguns, pointing out the dangers and encouraging parents to get them out of circulation because of the problems that they can potentially cause to everyone in our communities.

One of my overwhelming and worrying memories is of the police sitting down with me and saying that they have a real fear that, because of the wide availability of replica guns and airguns, one day they will end up having to shoot somebody because they could not tell the difference between an airgun, a replica gun and the real thing; the incident will turn out later to have been not so serious, but they will have had to take that action.

Ms Abbott: I was shown a video by the police in Brixton involving a young teenager who had what turned out to be a replica weapon. He pointed it at a policeman, who took a split-second decision and kicked the gun away. The policeman would have been within his rights, however, to shoot that youngster down.

Ms Drown: That is absolutely right. I am sure that that is of concern to all right hon. and hon. Members, and it demonstrates the real need to address the problem of airguns and replica guns. The police brought to me a case of guns, replica guns and airguns. I looked at them and could not tell the difference between a genuine gun, a replica gun and an airgun. Even an expert would have had difficulty distinguishing between them when they were right in front of their eyes, let alone somebody looking at them from 10 m away. That is a real problem.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): Does my hon. Friend therefore agree that we should consider a ban on the sale, import and manufacture of replica and imitation guns?

Ms Drown: Yes. That is something that is supported by the Gun Control Network and by several members of the police to whom I have spoken in Swindon.

I have talked through with local police the Government's proposals for action so far. They certainly welcome the plans, and want to see them in place as soon as possible. I was not clear whether the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) was disagreeing with both the minimum five-year sentence and the legislation to ban replica and air weapons in public places. Perhaps he will clarify that.

Mr. Mark Field: Just the former.

Ms Drown: Just the five-year sentence. Obviously, there will be exceptions if there has been a genuine misunderstanding about what was happening, and I would support that. The hon. Gentleman's argument against the proposal was that existing legislation needs to be enforced, and I agree. We need to make sure that existing legislation on handguns is enforced. The problem is that it is so difficult to distinguish between handguns, replica guns and so on, and we will make the job easier for the police if we ban all guns in public places without good reason. The police will therefore be able to stop people without having to assess what sort of gun they have.

Similarly, raising the age limit for using an air weapon will start to address some of the culture change that is needed to show this is not about toys. It is a serious and potentially lethal game, as some might describe it, in which people are getting involved. I am pleased that the Home Office is examining a ban on the sale, manufacture and import of tandem air cartridge systems, such as the Brocock, as they can so easily be converted to fire live ammunition. Those are all welcome initiatives, but I would push for even more to be done, as it is important that we get on top of the problem and that all areas of the country do not become as bad as the picture painted by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington. I appreciate her concerns. The level of crime with which she must deal in her constituency is far in excess of what I must deal with in South Swindon; nevertheless, the fact that it also exists in Swindon shows that it will affect all of us across the country unless further steps are taken.

The police made four further suggestions to me about what action should be taken. One proposal that seems attractive, and which I hope the Government will consider, is that all air rifles and air pistols should be kept only in clubs, which will be charged with keeping all the air guns and ammunition at their establishments, with all the necessary associated security. Club members would not therefore be able to take those weapons out of the clubs, and we could be secure in the knowledge that they were not in general circulation. Having corresponded with a local gun club, I know that they already keep some people's guns, so why should they not extend that as a general rule?

Another suggested measure is to tighten up on the sale of weapons by restricting sales to registered dealers. Internet sales are a problem, and banning those altogether would be good, but perhaps even they could be registered. If all the guns and ammunition were kept in gun clubs, only registered dealers could deliver those guns directly to the clubs. We could therefore be assured that we were keeping guns out of general circulation.

Mr. Paice: I am listening with interest to the hon. Lady's proposals. However, they seem to be based on the misunderstanding that all airgun users use them solely for target practice in clubs. Does she not understand that, in large parts of this country, airguns and air rifles in particular are used for pest control and other field sport activities, and are not used in recognised clubs or ranges but out in the open countryside, perfectly safely and often by very young people?

Ms Drown: I recognise that, but such sporting activity could be organised only through clubs to keep control of the guns and ammunition. Clearly, pest control and more rare exceptions such as use in film making and theatres would have to be subject to exceptional procedure, licensing and so on to allow that to continue. The wish for sports to continue, however, must be balanced against the real needs of residents whose fear of guns and what can happen as a result of them is increasing daily.

I discussed with local police in particular the complicated existing legislation for firearms. I was shown one of the "easy-to-read" handbooks, which went on for page after page. The more complex the existing legislation, the harder it is for the police to use and implement it. There is a disincentive for them to use it as it becomes more complicated. Again I urge that we completely replace the legislation to make it easier and more streamlined. I know that the Government are keen to reduce bureaucracy in the police service, and this seems to be one area in which that can be done. For example, there is a discussion about whether airguns should be included as firearms, as some people could argue in court that they are not really lethal. Simplifying those issues could be very helpful to police officers whom we entrust to enforce the law.

The police are concerned that they are increasingly tracing the origin of weapons to people's houses and that when they visit those houses they find not just one or two weapons but whole walls covered with replica guns, antique guns and so on. The police ask whether in the face of such huge dangers to our community such displays should be allowed. Of course, some of those guns are, supposedly, decommissioned and the Home Office is reasonably sure that the most recent decommissioning rules allow people to have confidence that once weapons are decommissioned they cannot be brought back into use. However, what are we doing with guns decommissioned under previous rules? I am told that many of those weapons can easily be converted to take live ammunition. That is a huge concern.

My final concern is about the number of weapons on the market that look like pens or cigarette lighters. I realise that if they are actually guns, they are already outlawed, but is there any law to stop airguns, which cause the same fear as real guns, being marketed in that way? Perhaps the practice is already illegal, but many of my constituents express concern about it. There is no reason that people should have cigarette lighters that are guns of any sort and we should do what we can to ensure that they are not available.

I very much welcome this debate. The Government are right to take the steps that they have outlined. There is a real problem, not only in our cities but throughout the country. It is certainly clear to me that residents in my constituency, public servants and the police are increasingly concerned and that the problem must be addressed. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety will tell us that we shall go even further than the existing proposals so that we can all go back to our constituents and assure them that everything possible will be done to reduce this real and growing fear that affects so many people in our country.

10.22 am

Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) for bringing us back to the problem of gun crime, about which she and I have talked often. She has been up-front about confronting the direct issue of how we deal with guns. However, she also knows, because I have told her privately, that one of the most impressive events that I have attended in recent years was the conference that she organised at the Queen Elizabeth II conference centre, which addressed the educational underperformance of young black males. In reality, the two issues go together.

I want to be positive and optimistic. Of course we have to deal with the villains—the criminals and the adults who set bad examples—but if we do not at the same time deal with the youngsters and give them alternative routes to success, we shall never turn them from the directions about which we are so unhappy.

People who have had a formative influence on me include Lucy Cope, who is known to Ministers. She has lived in Southwark for many years and experienced the tragedy of losing two sons during the past few years. One son died a violent death, accidentally, at the hands of his brother. Last year, her second son was involved in a minor disagreement in Southwark one morning and, as a result, was shot and killed in the evening of the same day.

Lucy Cope and people like her who have been through such experiences are members of Mothers Against Guns. She is a white woman, married to a black husband, so the family is mixed race and she understands the background of both communities. We need to listen to such people—as the Government and others are increasingly doing—who have important lessons for us.

We also have to listen to the police. Like the hon. Lady, I, too, recently received an update from the people running Operation Trident, who have done extremely good work. Police forces throughout the country and the National Criminal Intelligence Service all have an important role to play and we must learn from their experience.

One positive result of the tragedy that occurred on new year's eve was that young people from the inner city wrote eloquent and relevant newspaper articles to

[Simon Hughes]

communicate their experience. The next generation are telling us how it is and we need to listen to them. One of those articles was written for the *New Nation* by Akosa Annobil Dodoo, a 21-year-old woman. We should read the work of such people and listen to them. They are the neighbours, sisters, nieces and friends of people who suddenly find themselves caught up in something that they dislike and about which they are angry but which is often overpowering.

On the day after the tragic death of the detective constable in Manchester, which was not a gun crime, I was at a meeting at my local police station. Afterwards, I had an informal conversation with officers who had not attended the meeting; they were just changing shifts. We need to listen to them, too. They told me that we must be careful not to exaggerate the figures. Indeed, I try never to misrepresent figures.

The figures show that gun crime is a minute proportion of all crime, even though it is growing and unacceptable, but officers are increasingly worried about it. When they are called out to Southwark estates after reports that someone has been seen with a knife or a gun, they often never find the person or cannot identify them. That greater propensity to use weapons is not reported, so although there is significant growth in the number of gun crimes recorded, we must also realise that there is much more that the police cannot manage to tackle.

I want to read from two sets of figures. They are all in the public domain so it would not be helpful to read them ritualistically. According to last year's figures, 2001–02, firearms, including air weapons, were used in 0.4 per cent. of all recorded crimes and in 0.2 per cent. if air weapons are excluded. That gives us some perspective, but the recent growth must give us real cause for alarm. I shall give two figures. In 2001–02, there were nearly 10,000 recorded crimes in which firearms were used—up 35 per cent. from the previous year; and there were nearly 12,500 in which air weapons were used, which is the highest number ever recorded.

I want to share some of the Trident figures with Members as I hope that they will serve to disabuse some commentators of their myths, although it is true that the level of offending was serious in 2001–02. In London, gun-related murders rose from 15 to 24 and other shootings from 35 to 118. Some boroughs are especially badly affected. Sadly, Hackney has the worst problem, with 15 per cent. of gun incidents; 13 per cent. took place in Brent and 12 per cent. in my borough, Southwark. Of course, I am not trying to underplay the problems in places such as Westminster, Birmingham or Manchester.

Contrary to what is often thought, the highest number of gun incidents—18 per cent.—took place inside people's homes, according to the latest figures. The second largest group, 16 per cent., took place on the street and a further 16 per cent. were related to night clubs, bars or pubs. As the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington pointed out, those crimes happen in social contexts where a disagreement or a word or jealousy spark something and people overreact.

The motive for such crime is unknown in the majority of cases. Where the motive is known, 16 per cent. of incidents were gang-related—the highest number; 14 per cent. were robbery-related; and 13 per cent. related to drug rip-offs or arguments about drug sales. In 11 per cent. of cases, the motive was disrespect—just an argument about status.

The nationality of Trident victims is important: 58 per cent. were British, 28 per cent. Jamaican, and 7 per cent. Nigerian. However, that is not the perception. We must get the figures clear, right and in the public domain. The figures show that most victims were British, followed by Jamaicans, and then, miles behind, come the other categories. According to Trident, the most common category of violence is British on British, with Jamaican on Jamaican further down the league table. We must be careful to get those messages across.

Saddest of all, if inevitable, is the age profile. The bottom end of the graph of gun crime victims shows 14-year-olds with 19 and 20-year-olds at the peak. That is often the age of people who get shot outside the pub or their house, or in the street. They are the flower of our youth, the next generation, the guys and girls—mainly guys—with energy, strength and ability. On victim injury rates, 45 per cent. of victims involved in such crimes were shot, while 33 per cent. were not.

One important issue that I have discussed with the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington and Home Office Ministers is that of getting people to say what happened. Of 174 offences reported last year, in 115 cases 67 per cent. of victims were willing to substantiate what had happened, but in 46 cases—26 per cent.—the victims were not willing to do so. Where people are willing to substantiate, the clear-up rate is nearly one in four, which is as good as anything in London—the average rate in London is 12.5 per cent.

The police statement of the criminal profile reveals deprived environments, school exclusion, social exclusion, and elder siblings involved in crime. The process starts at a young age, with 10 to 12-year-olds engaged in acquisitive crime, 13 to 17-year-olds beginning to get involved in robbery, "steaming", carjacking and running for drug dealers, then, by the age of 18 and above, gun crime and drugs.

We now have the information and the profiles and we understand the score. I agree with the hon. Lady. I am not trying to make a party political point, because the issue is much bigger than that, and we are all striving for the best solutions. First, we must deal with the dealers, the big guys, the criminals, the drug traffickers, the profiteers and the money launderers who are making money from exploiting other people and getting them involved on their side.

Secondly, the police want long-term initiatives. Trident is beginning to be really successful, but it has only been going for two or three years. I think that in Birmingham or Manchester, the police have just closed down a specialist gun initiative. The police say, "Please don't give us an initiative in January, another one in June, then another one in December." Dealing with this sort of crime is a long, steady process.

Thirdly, we have to be honest, as I have tried to be, about the colour, race groups and backgrounds of those involved in gun crime, because then we can target it. We have to make people understand that it is not exclusive to one group—there are predominant categories, characteristics and backgrounds.

Fourthly, there is a big glamour issue, but it is marginal. Every American film that I have seen since I was a kid has had guns and violence in it—guns are often part of their cultural background. There is a responsibility not to glamorise violence. The tragedy in Britain is that we have an increasingly violent society. Violence is more acceptable, but it should not be—we have to take it on and pull it down.

My only criticism of the Government is that, having done lots of preparatory work—I pay tribute to the Minister, to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Coventry, North-East (Mr. Ainsworth) and to their colleagues—they got into a terrible muddle over the new year. They announced that they were going to make proposals, then the five year minimum sentence, then that they were going to have a summit—which obviously should have come first—then backed off from the five-year mandatory sentence. I hope that that was a lesson in realising that it is less important to go for the soundbites and tough-sounding headlines than to get the policy right having spoken to the right people. I hope that we do not go down that road again.

Where do we go from here? An amnesty is a good idea. There should be a common border force involving much more effective Customs and Excise and police work on controlling guns coming into the country from eastern and southern Europe and elsewhere. At the moment, the situation is very poor. I have been told horror stories about how we are not catching people coming through the system. We need a national policing response through NCIS.

The age limit for airguns should be raised to 17. I share the view about replica guns—we should ban their sale through the internet and mail order so that they are available only through authorised outlets, and introduce an offence of possessing them without authority. At the moment, people do not know whether they are replicas and respond as if they are real.

There should be a presumption of custody for everybody caught on the streets with a gun or a knife without a lawful excuse, but I do not agree with the five-year mandatory sentence, because such sentences never work. There is a huge difference between a 16-year-old holding a gun for 10 seconds for his cousin and a person who is going out for the first time with a machine gun or other serious weapon, intending to use it. Once somebody has been sent to prison, there is no stronger response that can be made, and people do not normally come out of prison less likely to commit crime. That is not the experience of black or white young men, who normally come out more likely to commit crimes.

We need more police, and armed response vehicles in every command unit area in the inner city, so that the police can come quickly. Protective clothing must be worn on all occasions.

We need to encourage communities to speak out. Women will lead the way in that, and thank God that they are now doing so, because it is often up to them to make crime unacceptable to their male colleagues.

We must improve witness and victim protection. Above all, we have to encourage young people to have self-respect and take advantage of opportunities from the beginning.

There are ways forward—it is not a dire picture—but it is urgent to have a united response that learns the best of the lessons from all of us.

10.37 am

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): I am anxious that the Minister should have time to respond in depth, so I shall endeavour to keep my remarks brief.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) not only on attaining the debate—she knows the standard practice on these occasions—but on her whole speech. She showed a huge depth of knowledge and understanding of the issues. With one minor exception, to which I shall come in a moment, I agree with everything she said. She may recall, because I notified her beforehand, that I was in her constituency last week, at the Groundwork initiative. I would not pretend that it gave me a huge insight into her whole constituency, but suffice it to say that I realised that she is dealing with problems that are very different from those that I have to deal with in my constituency: it would be foolish to pretend otherwise.

The statistics on gun crime are well known, and I shall not detain hon. Members by repeating them. Such a statement is usually followed by a "but". I have a short "but", which is simply to reflect on the shift in the types of firearm that are being used.

I have statistics that go back a long way. In 1985, 27 per cent. of firearm-related robberies were committed with shotguns and rifles, although the latter have always constituted a minuscule proportion. That is well below 10 per cent. of firearms offences. However, there has been a compensatory increase in the use of handguns and, sadly, automatic weapons. The ground therefore periodically shifts, and I am sure that the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington is right about the development of gang culture—I shall not say the advent because gangs have always existed; we had them at school—on the fringes of criminality. Gangs often serve as a pseudo-family, especially in areas where family breakdown is rife.

We must reflect on what needs to be done. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) made some suggestions but we need to keep it at the forefront of our minds that a gun lying in the middle of the Chamber would not cause problems until it reached somebody's hands. We should concentrate on ensuring that guns do not get into the wrong hands rather than worrying about all guns.

The Centre for Defence Studies at King's college clearly states:

> "The apparent failure of the 1997 handgun legislation to have a positive impact on the use of handguns in firearm related robberies supports the argument that any future initiatives directed at firearm crimes must not rely on legislation designed to impose stricter controls on existing lawfully held firearms. Law enforcement agencies need to identify robust and imaginative initiatives that will positively identify current sources of illegal firearms and provide a defence against the continuation of the present level of firearm crimes".

That is important. The increase in handgun crimes, despite the reaction to the Dunblane tragedy, demonstrates beyond doubt that there is no direct link between removing legally owned handguns and reducing their illegal use for criminal purposes. We

[Mr. James Paice]

should learn that lesson to the extent of reversing the legislation on Olympic sports and thus end the absurd position whereby members of the British team have to go abroad to practise.

Most hon. Members referred to replica guns. As the hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) said, many replicas cannot be distinguished from a real gun. Whenever anyone has considered the matter—that includes Labour and Conservative Governments and the Home Affairs Committee—definition has caused a problem. A replica could be a cigarette lighter that happens to resemble a pistol, a child's pistol, an antique pistol, a starting pistol or an expensive, technical, state-of-the-art object that is impossible to distinguish from a real gun unless one tries to pull the trigger. Some replicas can be converted, as can the Brocock. However, I am worried by the suggestion that we should ban all replicas, their manufacture and import, and even prevent someone from having them on the wall. That is an overreaction. I do not especially want a collection of replica guns, but I understand that some people do. They do not cause a problem of themselves, but we have to ensure that they are not improperly used.

A similar point can be made about airguns. Those who use them illegally almost invariably own them illegally—the level of crime for which a person who legally possesses a gun is responsible is generally low, apart from an extreme tragedy such as Dunblane. That applies to airguns to a lesser extent. The statute book already contains a large number of criminal offences that apply to all sorts of guns. There are 28 criminal offences that involve prosecution for using an airgun. It is an offence for a person under 17 to have an air weapon in a public place, yet in the past few years there has been no change in the number of prosecutions or convictions for such offences. Indeed, a marginal decline has taken place.

That highlights the fact that we need not to create more crimes but to make more effort to find out who uses airguns, deal with the gang culture that instigates their use, and of course, education, about which the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington spoke so excellently. I shall not even try to repeat her words, which are rightly on the record.

A couple of weeks ago, I spoke to a retired black Metropolitan police superintendent. His view was similar to that of the hon. Lady—that the police know who holds many of the weapons, but even when the police know the identity of those who have guns they are impeded by a lack of witnesses. There is no doubt that the Macpherson report played a part, but so has general unwillingness to risk accusations of racism. The police therefore do not harass those who have guns. The superintendent said, "If you go to bed with a gun under your pillow, you should lie awake all night worrying that the police are going to bang on the door." However, that does not happen.

Much more effort needs to be made to discover the source of the guns. The important King's college report states:

> "This research project has indicated in a compelling fashion that the UK law enforcement agencies and the relevant government ministries are woefully ill-equipped to monitor and analyse the extent to which the UK is becoming affected . . . by illegal arms trafficking. There is a clear lack of co-ordination between all parties involved in the collection and dissemination of data relating to illegal firearms".

The report continues:

> "The inability of the UK law enforcement agencies and the associated government ministries to assess the threat to public safety posed by trends in the availability of illegal weapons highlights a serious failure to devise effective methodologies for data capture."

There is no central record of weapons in this country. Everyone who has a certificate for a firearm or a shotgun registers the weapon. The police have the serial numbers and all the necessary information, but that is where the matter ends.

First, we need to establish a national register of all firearms so that if any police force in any part of the country found a firearm that had been used in a crime, it could immediately undertake the necessary research to ascertain whether it had ever been legally owned in this country. I believe that the 1997 legislation provided for that. It would be a first step towards stamping out the supply. Not only the culture needs to be tackled—although that is a priority—but the supply of illegal weapons. We need to stop them getting into the hands of those who are inclined to use them.

We need to leave alone the very large number of people who use guns regularly for sporting purposes—field sports, target sports, clay pigeon shooting or whatever—who do not pose a risk to the public and who take as a huge offence the implication that they do and that they should be penalised for their own activity.

I hope that when the Government introduce their legislation in the next month or two they will bear that in mind. I also hope that before considering more legislation—I have not reflected today on the specific Government proposals—they will think much more carefully about what we can do to stamp out the supply of guns and alter the mindset of those who would use them.

10.50 am

The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety (Mr. John Denham): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) on obtaining this debate. She made an excellent speech, which needs to be reread. I shall think about a number of the issues that she raised, even if I am not able to reply to them all today. I shall respond to as many points as I can.

My hon. Friend was probably the first Member to advocate the mandatory minimum sentence. She will be pleased that that campaign of hers has succeeded. As always, she is now moving on to new issues, which is quite right.

My hon. Friend graphically described the problems experienced in the community that she represents. She rightly stressed that although this has been predominantly a crime that has been seen as black on black it is by no means confined to the black community, and indeed is likely to spread if we are not successful in tackling it.

I agree with the stress that my hon. Friend laid on the long-term need to tackle educational under-achievement to raise aspirations and opportunities for success, in particular among Afro-Caribbean young men. That critical issue was raised at the gun crime summit in January. It was stressed in particular by Lee Jasper from the Mayor of London's office, and it is one that we must build into our long-term planning.

Under many of the initiatives, such as excellent schools, the behaviour improvement programme, extended schools and so on, the investment will be concentrated predominantly in inner-city areas and areas with the same type of deprivation. We must make sure that we reach those parts of the community in most need of success.

It has not been touched on a great deal in this debate, but what has also been stressed to us in all the work that we have been doing on this issue—by the police, local authorities and community organisations, and again at the gun crime summit—is the importance of supporting and working with members of local communities who want to stand up to and speak out against gun crime. We have some very good initiatives—the "Not another drop" campaign in Brent, which has significantly reduced gun crime in Harlesden, and the similar initiative being run in Haringey. But I do not think that we can say at present that we are running such campaigns in every community where we need to get across such a strong message.

Mr. Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the partnership against crime in my constituency, which has done a great deal of work in persuading some of the young people to move away from gangs and drugs back into the mainstream of society?

Mr. Denham: I am very pleased to do so. Indeed, I look forward to discussing this issue with my hon. Friend and members of the local community in his constituency next Tuesday, when I come to Birmingham to discuss these very matters.

We are also very keen to make sure that we can have a more strategic approach to working with local communities and supporting local community organisations, particularly local black organisations, which can work in partnership with the other agencies to tackle gun crime. The Home Office is, for example, looking at ways in which the expanded active communities unit can help us with that work. That is a very important part of the overall strategy to persuade those who are carrying guns at present not to do so.

The hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice), speaking for the Opposition, said that it was not the gun but the person who used it that was dangerous. I can see his point, although, had there been a gun on the floor and had the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) spoken for much longer, I think that the risk presented by that gun would gradually have risen. This is a light-hearted way of making a very serious point. We must not only address the issue of those who carry guns but take very firm action to remove guns from those who might use them not in a planned or organised crime, but in all of the situations that have been described in the debate.

The reason why we have been persuaded of the case for introducing a mandatory minimum sentence for carrying a firearm is precisely to reduce the number of those who are carrying guns. We fully recognise that some of those who are going out with organised criminal intent carry guns. It has always been against the law and they have always faced penalties. Armed robbers and the like are likely to continue. We need to send a most powerful message through influential groups in the community to those who have only begun to carry guns in the recent past. We need to make it clear that it is not worth the cost.

The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) raised a point on which I disagree. He said that the issue was enforcement of the existing laws. When Operation Trident was established by the Metropolitan Police, I think the underlying analysis was that there would be a certain number of people in London carrying guns for criminal purposes, often associated with the drug trade, and that their removal from the scene by effective policing would on its own turn the rising tide of gun use.

The case that the Metropolitan Police has put to us and others is that Trident has been quite successful in the number of arrests and the number of individuals who have been targeted. It has been successful in increasing and improving detection rates, particularly for gun murders and so on. It is a real success, and we should never let the impression be given that nothing has been done. That action, targeted on the hard-core element within gun crime, needs to be supplemented by measures that will reduce the wider number of people carrying guns, which can lead to the type of tragedy that occurred in Birmingham. The two approaches—a mandatory minimum sentence plus the targeting of individuals—go together.

I want to concentrate now on the witness issue, which is very important. We have been working, for example, with Waltham Forest on what we regard as something of a model programme called SafetyNet—a partnership between the London borough of Waltham Forest, the housing association and the Metropolitan Police, to support vulnerable and intimidated witnesses. At the heart of that is the need for fast-track relocation for some witnesses at risk.

My hon. Friend asked whether we can go further than that. We have issued guidance to the police on tackling witness intimidation in the past. In May 2001 we urged the police to prosecute instances of witness intimidation wherever possible. We have also recommended that, in partnership with local authorities, community-based support schemes should be set up for witnesses.

My officials, in conjunction with the Association of Chief Police Officers and leading police practitioners engaged in the highly sensitive area of witness protection, are reviewing the existing arrangements. I do not want to go too much in public into details of what that might be, but I can say that we are planning a conference with chief constables to raise awareness of this issue and to examine ways forward.

My hon. Friend made some very important points about co-ordination and reciprocity between different housing organisations across a wider area. I shall take the opportunity, as part of the review, to ask my officials to look at those issues and see what further can be done, and also to see what can be done to strengthen community-based support and the lower level of support that is on offer—for example, the installation of

[Mr. Denham]

panic alarms, the making available of mobile phones with a direct connection to a police support line, the regular use of police patrols and so on, so that we can increase the number of those willing to be witnesses in gun crime cases by having them feel the support that they deserve for being willing to come forward.

The question of guns from the Balkans was raised. There is no evidence of large-scale trafficking of guns, although there are criminals associated with that part of the world who are undoubtedly bringing guns in. We take this seriously, and my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State and the Foreign Secretary hosted a conference in London in the autumn looking specifically at organised crime issues in the Balkans and their links with this country. It is an issue that we shall continue to work on.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask Members not wishing to stay for the next debate to leave quickly and quietly.

Strategic Rail Authority (Edinburgh)

11 am

Mr. Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith): I am delighted to have the opportunity to discuss the implications of Strategic Rail Authority plans for Edinburgh. I am pleased that several hon. Members from the Edinburgh area and further afield are in the Chamber.

It has become clear in the past few weeks that financial pressures are starting to have an impact on some of the SRA's work. I am concerned about key projects in the Edinburgh area. I hope that the Minister will give assurances about those and, in a couple of cases, respond to my points at a later stage. I want the projects to go ahead and the Government to provide cash to the SRA and the railway industry to allow the necessary improvements to be undertaken.

The first project that concerns me is the long-awaited upgrading and modernisation of Waverley station. Anyone who uses the station can see that it needs a radical transformation. I am sure that you will have noticed that from your visits north of the border, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The upgrading is important not just for cosmetic reasons, but for the entire transport network of south-east Scotland. It will allow extra intercity trains to go north and to use the east and west coast main lines. Operators want to run those trains to meet the growing demand for services to Edinburgh.

The upgrade will also help to meet the need for suburban services in and around Edinburgh. That will allow areas such as the borders to benefit from Edinburgh's economic prosperity by enabling workers to get into Edinburgh quickly by train rather than by road. The redevelopment of Waverley is important for local transport plans and the community around the station. Most of the station is in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, but it is only 100 yd from the border of my constituency, so I have an interest in it. Delays in the upgrading and redevelopment of Waverley would have local implications as well as more far-flung implications for the transport system.

I am pleased that the Scottish Executive, the SRA and the Department for Transport are working together on plans to improve direct rail links to Edinburgh airport. That will be possible only if Waverley is improved to allow the trains to go somewhere on a regular basis. Everything links together and hangs on the early redevelopment of Waverley. Some people in Scotland, including Members of Opposition parties, have mischievously tried to suggest that the scheme is imperilled or will be delayed. I hope that the Minister reiterates the strong Government backing for the plan to put at rest the fears raised in some quarters.

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West) *rose—*

Mr. Lazarowicz: I do not know whether the hon. Gentlemen is one of those who have been asking mischievous questions about the airport link, but I shall give way to him anyway.

John Barrett: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the airport link should be constructed as a matter of urgency to avoid gridlock on the west side of the city?

Mr. Lazarowicz: I agree that the provision of direct rail services to Edinburgh airport is a priority. Another problem on the west side is the opening of the long-awaited Edinburgh Park railway station, which will affect the entire Edinburgh area.

The second project that concerns me is the improvement to the east coast main line. We expect the SRA to make an announcement any day now—perhaps as soon as tomorrow—about the upgrading of high-speed passenger services from Scotland to England. The word on the railway line is that the SRA will push for a major upgrade to the main line rail network between Scotland and England. That would be excellent news for the economy, tourism and the general leisure travel market.

Major improvements in the frequency of trains between Edinburgh and London will be possible with a new high-speed line, but Government cash will be needed if that is to happen. They must be prepared to put resources into the project. I want them to make it clear that in principle they will back a new high-speed line from Scotland to England. After all, if the French, Germans and Italians can have high-speed railways, why not us? Such an improvement would enable other parts of the country to benefit from the London to Dover channel tunnel extension when it is completed in a few years' time.

Mr. Iain Luke (Dundee, East): Does my hon. Friend accept that I welcome and support the fast-speed link between Scotland and England? Although we are talking about improvements in an Edinburgh context, many of us in north-east Scotland who have longer travel times to the south and abroad would argue that the improvement needs to be extended north of the city so that we all benefit from it.

Mr. Lazarowicz: My hon. Friend knows that I am anxious to reduce not only my travel time to London but his travel time to Edinburgh. I hope that the improvements he wants will made in due course.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): I congratulate my hon. Friend on initiating the debate. We all agree that the journey time by train from Edinburgh to London is too long. Indeed, most journeys have got longer in recent years. I strongly support what he says about investment in the east coast main line and Waverley station. He will agree that it is vital to get investment in track and signalling because the whole development of the railway network is being held up. In particular, does he support the creation of Parkway station at Musselburgh? That is a major issue because of the new higher education establishment that is coming to the area shortly.

Mr. Lazarowicz: Absolutely. I am glad that my right hon. Friend referred to the fact that journey times between Edinburgh and London are not decreasing but increasing. The SRA's proposals for the future are welcome, but we should not forget that journey times may lengthen in the meantime. Those of us who use that route know that over the past five years or so, apart from the flagship service of four hours one minute, the average journey time has increased. City of Edinburgh council advised me this morning that it has been told that, as part of the SRA's consultation on changes to the passenger service requirement for GNER, it has been proposed that instead of 74 per cent. of Anglo-Scottish services achieving a journey time of 280 minutes or less, only 50 per cent. of them will have to meet that target between Edinburgh and London. That would mean that half the services would be allowed to take more than four hours and 40 minutes to get from Edinburgh to London. That would be unacceptable, because it would inconvenience existing passengers and make it much more difficult to attract passengers from the airways to the railway. If we had high-speed trains from Edinburgh and elsewhere in Scotland to London, we could relieve some of the pressure to build extra airport capacity. Unfortunately, we are going in the wrong direction to do that, and I hope that the Minister will be able to give me some assurances that train times from Edinburgh to London will reduce, not increase, and that we can return to journey times that were the norm before electrification.

Earlier in my speech I mentioned the need for TGV-style train services from Edinburgh to London. Some people may have understood me to mean that I wanted to see TGVs running from Edinburgh to France. That would be welcome—and indeed possible, through the channel tunnel—but I am concentrating today on domestic services from London to Scotland. I hope that the Minister will give a general welcome to the idea of an improved high-speed line from Edinburgh to London and also reassure us that the frequency and speed of the present services will not be adversely affected.

I have concerns about two further issues. First, I hope that the Government will take some action to encourage the SRA to restore the cuts in assistance for freight services that were recently announced. Although I understand that those cuts apply only to the SRA's programme in England and Wales and that support for freight facilities is a devolved matter in Scotland, freight trains do not just stop at the border. Their journeys continue. If the welcome expansion of freight facilities in recent years stops in England, freight from Scotland will be less able to travel to England by rail instead of by road. That is an issue of great local interest. I recently learned that the freight facilities provided at Leith—in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang) and just across the border from my constituency—allow freight to be taken by rail instead of road from Edinburgh to another facility in Chatham, which is also supported by a freight facilities grant. The rail services are more economic than sending the freight by road and also take heavy lorries off the roads between Edinburgh and Chatham. We in Scotland will also suffer if support for freight facilities is reduced in the long term.

Secondly, I am concerned about the situation with the proposed Edinburgh Park railway station. Although it would be on the borders of the constituencies of my hon. and learned Friend the Advocate-General for Scotland and my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett), but it would affect my constituency because tens of thousands of people work at Edinburgh Park and have to travel by bus or car through or from my constituency. We would certainly benefit from the proposed new station at Edinburgh Park.

Other hon. Members from Edinburgh will be aware of the long-running saga of attempts to establish that station. In October last year, the SRA announced a

[Mr. Lazarowicz]

welcome grant of £2 million from the rail passenger partnership schemes. That is the final part of the funding package, but to make the new station possible the SRA still needs to confirm to the Scottish rail franchise the changes that have been agreed with ScotRail and the Strathclyde passenger executive. I was not able to give the Minister advance notice of this point, because it was brought to my notice only this morning, but I understand that confirmation from the SRA is still awaited. It is now critical, because Railtrack has advised that construction of the station foundations must take place in the winter months if the station is to open as envisaged. If the Minister cannot respond on that point now, I should be grateful if he would write to me with some indication that the SRA will provide the necessary confirmation of the changes as soon as possible. The rail franchise is a matter for the Executive, but SRA approval is required.

All that I have said today should not detract from the general welcome that I give to the extra resources that the Government have put into the rail system and the work that the SRA has done. Before I entered the House, I worked with my local authority to pilot through the reopening of rail services to Brunstane and Newcraighall from Edinburgh Waverley, thanks to a grant from the SRA. That body has now taken much-needed charge of the rail network, and I pay tribute to its current leadership and to the Department for Transport. I recognise that the decisions are difficult, given the funding available and the demands made on it, but the issues involved are important for my constituents, for Edinburgh and for south-east Scotland. I hope that the Minister can provide today some answers that will allay the concerns that hon. Members have raised in this debate.

11.16 am

The Minister for Transport (Mr. John Spellar): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mr. Lazarowicz) on securing this debate on the SRA's forthcoming strategic plan and its implications for Edinburgh. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, East (Mr. Luke) suggested, it will also have implications for those further afield. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith for his comments about the progress that has already been made. I understand the need for him to make representations about further progress. The strategic plan is expected very soon and copies will be placed in the Library when it is published.

My hon. Friend raised several important issues in his speech and I wish to respond to them, but first I shall make some general comments about the railways. The railways and their customers—passengers and freight, both north and south of the border—have had a difficult time as we deal with the legacy of privatisation and the structural discontinuity it caused, and with the problems caused by decades of under-investment and delayed decisions. The Government are backing the rail agenda and putting in place a structure to ensure that the industry can deliver, and my hon. Friend kindly referred to the role of the SRA in that task.

Over 10 years, we will provide £33 billion of direct public sector investment, backed by £34 billion of private sector investment. The investment is now in place and, although we face short-term cost and budget pressures, and difficult decisions will have to be made, we can and will deliver a better quality rail service. It will be better managed, focused on delivery and will provide reliable and punctual passenger services. In short, it will be a railway that puts those who use it first.

The SRA is already getting a grip on projects such as the west coast main line and is taking a much-needed look at how to get the most out of the existing capacity on the railway. Network Rail has been set up to operate in the public's interest. It is getting to grips with the planning and management of projects and, as recent announcements have demonstrated, is taking a hands-on role in maintenance. I am sure that that is both deeply necessary and widely welcomed. The rail regulator is working on his review of access charges as an essential part of dealing with costs and as we move towards the spending review in 2004. Investment is beginning to deliver results. Since April 2001, stock worth more than £1 billion has been introduced and more than 2,000 vehicles are on order.

As my hon. Friend said, the SRA drives the strategic agenda for developing the national railway infrastructure of which the Scottish network is an integral part. Although responsibility for infrastructure and safety is reserved to Westminster, Scottish Ministers can and have issued directions and guidance to the SRA, which form the core of the Executive's agenda with the SRA. The Executive are responsible for funding the Scottish passenger franchise and work closely with the SRA towards the replacement of the current franchise in 2004. The Executive and Strathclyde passenger transport executive, which is responsible for services in the Strathclyde area, have set out what they want the franchise to deliver. A new ScotRail franchise will allow the SRA and the Executive to make improvements to local and regional services in Scotland.

The competition for the replacement franchise was launched in October. In December, the SRA and the Executive announced a package of investment for Scottish services that will deliver new trains for the ScotRail fleet, and recruit and train additional drivers. The new trains will start to come on stream later this year. That will mean big improvements for passengers using the Scottish network.

The Executive also have power to invest by using funding from the public transport fund. The Executive are investing in several important projects in Scotland, including Waverley station, about which I shall say more in a minute. They are also playing a leading role in the feasibility study for possible new rail links to Edinburgh and Glasgow airports, which my hon. Friend mentioned. Yesterday, we debated the Railways and Transport Safety Bill, which will set up a new, independent railway accident investigation branch. Safety is a key priority and the Bill demonstrates our commitment to it.

The redevelopment of Waverley station is an important project for Edinburgh and the Scottish network as a whole. The station's geographical situation is difficult and means that there are physical constraints on any redevelopment. In railway terms, it is a bottleneck that needs to be unblocked. Current service aspirations exceed the existing capacity of the station, which will also soon need some structural and other renewal. Any redevelopment project for the site will need careful planning and consideration. Constraints on the delivery of new capacity include the proximity of other buildings on two sides of the site and the underground tunnels on the other two sides. An additional complication is that the station is a grade A listed building.

The SRA and the Scottish Executive, together with Network Rail, are considering several options for increasing track capacity to allow an increase in train frequencies for local and regional services. Outline development work was carried out for the Executive in 2002. Evaluation of the business cases and engineering requirements for several options for redevelopment will be completed early this year. Affordability constraints apply to Scotland as much as to the rest of the network, but I understand that the SRA remains committed to working with the Executive to make progress on that important project. Network Rail is also continuing with a project to upgrade the signalling network in and around Waverley. That is the largest rail network project being undertaken in Scotland and it will be completed in 2004. It includes the renewal of equipment in the main signal centre at Waverley, which controls the east coast main line.

My hon. Friend reminded the House that the east coast main line is a strategically important route. On an average day, it bears 1,900 passenger trains carrying 200,000 people and 250 freight services with a loading of 20,000 tonnes. Last year, the SRA negotiated a two-year extension to Great North Eastern Railway's current east coast franchise. That secured more than £100 million of private sector investment in the route, including more frequent services to Leeds, from which passengers to Edinburgh will benefit through reduced overcrowding on other services; reliability improvements to all the line's diesel high-speed trains and £20 million to improve the reliability of its electric trains; the replacement of five relatively old recovery locomotives by six new or rebuilt locomotives, to ensure more rapid recovery of failed trains and the swifter restoration of subsequent services; and an improved incentive regime requiring 81 per cent. of trains to be on time from April 2003, rising to 83 per cent. from April 2004. From 2003, the company will introduce passenger refunds of 50 per cent. for trains that are late by more than 45 minutes and full refunds for services that are late by 90 minutes or more. We hope that that will not cost the company too much because the improvements in service will have been achieved.

The primary objective of the proposed east coast main line upgrade is to provide for an increase in capacity. I summarised a moment ago how busy the line is. It is running out of capacity and finding it increasingly difficult to accommodate extra trains for both passenger and freight operators within the existing infrastructure. The SRA's work on capacity utilisation will help, but the longer term solution is likely to require infrastructure improvements. The SRA is continuing the upgrade work in close co-operation with Network Rail.

My hon. Friend mentioned the high-speed rail link. The SRA commissioned a study to compare a range of possible scenarios, including the need for, and viability of, a new high-speed line between London and the north of England and Scotland. The study will include an assessment of the proposal that such a north-south line should be connected to the channel tunnel rail link. Last week, I visited the channel tunnel rail link, which hopes to start running services in September. The project will be brought in on time and to budget, which is very encouraging.

Mr. Luke: Does my hon. Friend agree that the extension of a high-speed line from the channel tunnel should include areas north of Edinburgh, so that people who live there can experience the benefits?

Mr. Spellar: Any improvements to the line between Edinburgh and London will benefit those who live further afield. I recognise the desire for further improvements, but we have to address the needs of all parts of the country and choose our priorities. We must also ensure that we obtain value for money from our present work. The right return from that work will free up resources to undertake further work. From my hon. Friend's intervention today and the debate that he has obtained on the issue, I am well aware of his strong campaign on behalf of Dundee and the need for improvements in its rail services.

The study will be used to inform strategic decisions to deal with potential long-term—after 2010—capacity constraints on services between London and Scotland. I ask my hon. Friends to be patient and to await the imminent publication of the SRA's strategic plan. The key findings of the study will be reported there and the SRA will give us more detail about the consultants' work. At this stage, I can give no more assurance other than to say that we will examine the study's findings carefully before deciding on the next step. However, I understand the arguments that have been made on the advantages of a north-south high-speed link.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith also mentioned the issue of freight. Next year, a further £40 million grant will go to rail freight. Increasing the amount of goods transported by rail remains one of our priorities, because of the environmental advantages and congestion relief. The SRA has to achieve a balance between different areas, but the resumption of discretionary grants will be considered a priority in the event that surplus resources become available to the Department for Transport.

I trust that I have responded to my hon. Friend's points. I hope that he is reassured that rail users in Edinburgh and elsewhere in Scotland can look forward to better services.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended—until Two o'clock.

Rail Services (London and South-West)

2 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): Good afternoon, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The danger with debates about railways is that they can follow a familiar pattern: a series of weary travellers stand up and tell their favourite late train story; at the end, the Minister agrees that the situation is not all that it might be but adds that things are in hand and that the Government are spending records sums of money; then we all go away and nothing much changes. What I want to do today—although I will allow myself one late train story—is to avoid that familiar pattern.

I was prompted to try to secure this debate by the deterioration in services in recent weeks and months, especially on the First Great Western route. Although the topic of the debate is rail services between London and the south-west as a whole, I will focus my remarks on the London to Bristol routes. I want to challenge what I regard as the fatalism that has slipped into the Government's policy on the railways. I will give an example of what I mean by that. A couple of weeks ago, the Secretary of State for Transport was interviewed in *The Observer*, and this is what the newspaper wrote:

> "Transport Secretary Alistair Darling admits today he cannot say when, if ever, Britain will have an efficient and reliable rail system."

As if reading that was not depressing enough, last Sunday a different journalist wrote in *The Observer*:

> "Major multi-million pound improvements to the rail network have been abandoned amid plans to axe hundreds more services, promising fresh misery for passengers."

The article went on to say:

> "High-profile schemes have succumbed to soaring maintenance bills in the wake of the Hatfield crash".

Then came the most chilling sentence:

> "The £35 billion rail budget for the next decade is nearing exhaustion in the face of escalating cost."

I wanted to challenge the Minister today because the mood music is fatalistic, saying in effect that we do not know when, if ever, things will be sorted. Most of the money allocated for the next 10 years seems to be spoken for. It seems that we have overspent. Despite that, there seem to be few signs, even after the spending of that money, of real improvement for my constituents and those of the many west country Members of Parliament who are here.

What am I seeking today? I am seeking three things. I seek assurances from the Minister on funding for some specific infrastructure improvements on the routes between London and the west—I am thinking of particular things such as pinch points and areas that are known to be unreliable and to cause problems. I would like some commitments from him that the money will be found to tackle those problems.

The Strategic Rail Authority needs to show more urgency in responding to the ideas that have been put to it about improving the integration of services between London and the west. I am referring in particular to a proposal by First Great Western that went to the SRA last September. The proposal was to bring together the First Great Western and the Thames Trains services. The SRA has been sitting on the proposal for four months. The Minister seems to be saying that that is not so, but First Great Western says that the proposal went in last September. Those services could be running next year. I was going to say that, in train times, that is not very long, but I am sure that I should rephrase that. The company needs a prompt response to its proposal and it has not had one.

Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): I want to pick up on my hon. Friend's point about the SRA. Does he agree that it would be a good move for the SRA to have a regional office in Bristol and to have regional directors, as the authority has promised?

Mr. Webb: That would be very welcome. The idea has been mooted and it is moving ahead in Scotland and Wales, but, as ever, the English regions are somehow second class. The sooner things move ahead here the better.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): The hon. Gentleman mentioned the proposal by First Great Western to have a wider franchise area. I think all hon. Members would agree that we have to reduce the number of train operating companies. Has the hon. Gentleman written to the Secretary of State and the Strategic Rail Authority, as I and many of my colleagues have done in support of the proposals of First Great Western? We are entitled to know where he stands on the issue.

Mr. Webb: I am clear where I stand on the issue. I fully support integration, and a letter has been written making that point. I welcome the potential for integration that would follow from, for example, Thames Trains not having an extension to its franchise after 2004 and its being able to integrate services better.

In the four weeks to 4 January 2003, the reliability of the service was 98 per cent. That means that one in 50 trains did not run. The punctuality rate was 72 per cent., which means that one in four trains was late. Those trains could have been 10 minutes, one hour or two hours late. All those figures give us is a crude head count measure of the number of trains that were more than 10 minutes late. One of my worries about the statistics is that they do not distinguish between a train that is 10 minutes late—which is not ideal, but liveable with in some circumstances—and trains that are severely late. There is a big difference between companies whose trains are always 10 minutes late and those whose trains are hours late on occasions. Can some thought be given to that?

I have an appropriate late-train story. When it became apparent that I had achieved time for this debate, I was telephoned by First Great Western, which wanted to talk to me before I spoke. I welcomed the call. I agreed to see its managing director and we thought that Paddington would not be a bad place to meet. It was arranged that I would leave Bristol Parkway at 7 o'clock on Monday evening and that I would meet the managing director at 8.30 pm at Paddington.

I arrived at Bristol Parkway at 6.35 pm. Within a few seconds of my arrival, the information screens went blank. I then received a pager message to ring the managing director of First Great Western—if only I always received a pager message whenever trains were to be late! He said that the Severn tunnel was shut, but that he hoped it would open in a few minutes. He asked me to ring him in 10 minutes and said that he would let me know the situation. Ten minutes went by. I overheard a conversation that the London train would be in soon and, sure enough, all was well.

I made it up to the platform at 7 o'clock to catch what turned out to be the 6 o'clock train. It was then agreed that the managing director would get on the train at Reading and travel with me to Paddington. That was fine, except for the fact that the train was stationary between Parkway and Swindon, and the managing director had to wait some time for it to arrive at Reading. Half an hour went by; we finally rendezvoused at Reading. I was tempted to tell everyone in the carriage who was about to get on the train.

The managing director told me enthusiastically about all the plans that First Great Western had for improving the service and, as we rolled into Paddington, someone announced through the Tannoy, "Ladies and gentlemen, we are now arriving at London Paddington two hours late. I apologise. I have run out of complaint forms, but if you go on to the concourse, you can have your money back." I could not help but remark on the contrast between the golden vision that had been set out on the train and reality. Of course, we experience bad journeys and that could have been a one-off, but statistics suggest that the problem is much more general.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Can my hon. Friend explain why my train is the one in four that is always late? He is making an important point about the general strategy, but will he consider a particular subtext? The way in which the industry has been split up into so many different units means that information among different parts of the industry is now incredibly confused. I give as an illustration the fact that Exeter St. Davids, where I catch trains, often receives information from Swindon, which does not have a clue what is going on in Exeter, so the information on the screen is completely unreliable. Reliability of service is extremely important, but so is reliability of information.

Mr. Webb: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Integration and co-ordination of rail services have suffered since the fragmentation that resulted from privatisation. However, I have good news for him. I have in my hand First Great Western's commitment to improving train performance, page 10 of which sets out the customer service disruption management strategy. In a first for the industry, First Great Western is developing a holistic approach to its service recovery. A system of green, amber and red alert statuses will be activated by pagers to trains and staff to ensure

"a consistent approach to service recovery".

Things will be improving, I hope, although I suspect that if a few of the management consultants were sacked, it would be even better.

Recently, the service has been especially bad. Sometimes it is wonderful, and at its best it is excellent. However, when signal failures affected all trains out of Paddington recently, the scenes there would have disgraced a third-world country. People were locked on trains in the station because it was physically impossible to force anyone else on. The hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) was locked on the train. *[Interruption.]* We were all there.

What were the problems? First Great Western prepared a brief for me, outlining all the problems that it had experienced since October. Hon. Members will not be surprised to hear that the list included high winds, heavy rain, flooding, derailments, signal failures, timetabling problems, and rolling stock and infrastructure failures—the usual things. What worries me is that many of the problems, such as strong winds and heavy rainfall, will not go away. When will we see the improvements for which we have been hoping?

I want to make it clear that my comments are not an attack on First Great Western, partly because I want to reflect the fact that many other train operating companies have had similar patterns of performance in recent months. I met Chris Kinchin-Smith. Let us be honest: he was decent enough to spend his Monday evening on a train going into London being nagged by me, even though he lives in Bath and had to get home to his family at 11 pm. He is committed and wants to get things done. This is not an attack on First Great Western and its staff. My point is that the infrastructure and the systems that are in operation are not delivering the quality of service that we have a right to expect.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): My hon. Friend makes a vital point. Will he confirm that at least 50 per cent. of the delays on First Great Western trains are caused by problems with the track infrastructure, rather than by the operating company itself?

Mr. Webb: Absolutely. The figures that I have seen suggest that First Great Western is responsible for a quarter of the overall lost minutes. Clearly, the whole system needs to be sorted out, not one individual train operating company.

Mr. Salter: We are getting to the nub of the debate, which is not the performance of train operating companies but the infrastructure on which they run, as the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) said. Does the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) acknowledge that in Reading, which I represent, the station causes a bottleneck? All hon. Members with a constituency interest in the south and south-west rail network should hope—and, I suggest, pray—that when the SRA announces its 10-year plan tomorrow, it will include a significant commitment to upgrading Reading station. The track infrastructure in Reading is capable of 50 per cent. more traffic than the station can cope with. Many problems mentioned by the hon. Gentleman and others in this debate could be solved by a straightforward upgrading of Reading station.

Mr. Webb: We can all say amen to that prayer.

Station infrastructure is certainly part of the story. Swindon station is acquiring a fourth platform, which will help. Such things are important. However, one cannot help being nervous about another 10-year plan. Obviously, such matters are long term, but we are already some years into a different 10-year plan for which the money may or may not have already run out.

[Mr. Webb]

I wish to stress the urgency of these matters to the Minister rather than the defeatism that characterises the Government's approach.

How does the current performance compare with what happened in the past? I am sure you will recall, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that about a year after I first came to the House, I led a debate about rail services between London and the west country—within a year of being elected, I was complaining. At that time, I complained that reliability was 99.4 per cent. What would we not give for that now? Punctuality was 86.7 per cent. compared with 72 per cent. now. I was unhappy that the service had deteriorated but it is substantially worse now.

Nobody expects instant quick fixes, but we are in the sixth term—[HON. MEMBERS: " What?"] Sorry, that was a Freudian slip. We are in the sixth year of a Labour Government. They will still have a 10-year plan after the sixth term. We are not expecting quick fixes, but things seem to be going backwards. We have not returned to the quality of service that was inherited.

I am worried that at the end of the debate the Minister will say, "We have a plan; there is all this money going in and things are heading in the right direction." I intend no disrespect to the Minister, but why should we believe a word of it? Six years have passed. We have had such assurances before and still we see the service getting worse. I hope that the Minister will give us some convincing reason why we should believe the kinds of assurances that we are likely to get.

What needs to be done? I shall raise some general matters relating to infrastructure work that is needed in respect of particular vulnerabilities and pressure points, but I shall start by raising two matters of local interest. First, will the Minister tell us what is the status of Filton junction? I understand that it still features in the SRA's proposals, but that there is some uncertainty about whether the money will be forthcoming. The status of that junction is important in our local area.

Secondly, the infamous Chipping Sodbury tunnel is a matter of particular interest to my constituents and to me. No sooner does it rain than the tunnel floods and trains are redirected or cancelled. I understand that it might be possible to pump water out of the tunnel on to part of the Badminton estate and create a permanent wetland environment. That is an intriguing and attractive idea. Is the Minister aware of that? If so, has he any thoughts about it? Has he considered what action should be taken to ensure that the tunnel is effectively pumped? When there is heavy rain the tunnel causes a permanent bottleneck.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) said that we need more co-ordination between different parts of the rail industry. I spoke to the managing director of First Great Western, who talked about his company setting up common control rooms with Network Rail and said, "We sit down and think about what we would do if we were part of an integrated rail system." They are trying to recreate how it once was and how it might be, but it is bizarre that different companies and organisations have to do that. There is a real chance that if things are co-ordinated they might be improved. Infrastructure is finite and long-term investment will inevitably take a while to have an effect. We must make the most of what we have—that means more co-ordination.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): My hon. Friend is describing the deficiencies in the infrastructure that he recognises in his part of the world. We all recognise such things in our own constituencies. Does he agree that, in the overall picture, improvements to the west country's rail infrastructure are completely forgotten and that we are doing extremely badly in comparison with other parts of the country?

Mr. Webb: My hon. Friend has better eyesight than I thought, since he has anticipated my third point. I will return to that issue. It will, however, be no surprise to him that I agree on that point.

In respect of co-ordination, on which we have already touched, I would support a single operator for Paddington and I would welcome the merger of the Thames Trains and First Great Western franchises. We need an urgent response from the SRA about these ideas. Some of the proposals can be implemented during the period 2004 to 2006, and there is potential for more integration and improvements to the service beyond that date. The routes currently operated by Thames Trains need to be freed up in order to create better co-ordination on the existing track.

I welcome the fact that First Great Western is working with the SRA and that joint control rooms are being set up. We need more of that kind of thing and I hope that the Government will not delay matters. There seems to be a lot of dither and delay on the issue of refranchising and co-ordination, and I hope that that can be removed.

My final points, which were prefigured by my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), refer to the sense, which many hon. Members in the Chamber will have, that the wider south-west is neglected in terms of transport infrastructure. The Minister shakes his head at that, but given where he is from he might nod his head were he wearing a different hat.

The south-west seems to be the poor relation in respect of the planned major rail infrastructure programmes. I am told that the SRA has not even been coming to recent meetings in the region that it might have been expected to attend. That is perhaps indicative of the attitude of the SRA and successive Governments to the needs of the south-west—there always seems to be a more high-profile region. I sometimes think that south-west MPs have failed to speak as a region. Some of our colleagues from other regions in the country speak more effectively as a region than we do. I accept that, in that respect, we have a problem with our Cornish friends. Hon. Members from the south-west should perhaps speak rather more on behalf of their region.

Mr. Don Foster: My hon. Friend makes a critical point about the SRA not involving itself in the region. Sadly, on some occasions it does turn up for meetings. Recently it met with four local authorities in my area to discuss the future of Corsham station. The SRA representatives sat through deliberations on how to progress with plans for that station, and three days later it announced that the project was not going to go ahead. Presumably, the SRA had known that all along.

Mr. Webb: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I have not spoken at length about the withdrawal of Bristol to Oxford services, which is linked to the Corsham decision. The south-west often suffers when changes of this sort are made, and perhaps it is time that it stopped being the sleeping giant and demanded its fair share of infrastructure investment, and a decent infrastructure. The south-west area multi-modal study advocated particular infrastructure investment, but from what we have been told, there is no money for it.

We could all moan about the railways ad nauseam, and I am sure that the Minister hears a lot about the matter, but I do not apologise for that fact. Some constituents e-mail me on the subject. E-mail is wonderful, because commuters copy me in on First Great Western's reply to their complaints and on the dialogue between them. My constituents are getting angrier and angrier, because investment is not being made; we have been promised great things, but the train service is failing to deliver them. If anything, we are going backwards.

There is a certain fatalism about the Government's approach. They have given up on telling us when, if ever, we can expect a decent, high-quality, reliable rail service. I hope that the Minister will tell me that I am wrong, but I fear that I am not.

2.21 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am delighted to take part in the debate, and I apologise in advance for the fact that I have to attend a meeting of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs this afternoon and shall not be able to listen to the summing up. However, I look forward to reading it in *Hansard.* I will try not to make this a rerun of the debate that the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) and I were involved in a couple of weeks ago; it became known as the Virgin debate, because most of us did not have much to say in favour of Virgin. However, one hopes that things have moved on.

I should like to concentrate on some of the plus points, as the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) has made a pretty damning indictment of some of the problems that have been experienced. Anyone who uses the trains regularly—and I think that all the Labour Members present are regular rail users—will know that there have been significant problems since November. The service did surprisingly well after the Paddington rail crash. Given all the problems that were bound to occur, it is disappointing that we should come out of a long tunnel only to find more problems. However, in the past few weeks, the service has been much better, and I hope that that is a sign of things to come.

It is pleasing that the fourth platform at Swindon is coming back into use because that will bring about a significant improvement in the passage of trains through the town. Although my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) says that Reading is the centre point for problems, there are difficulties at either end of the line. There are problems at Paddington, which is clearly in need of major infrastructure development, and at Swindon, although the latter is being catered for, and that is good news.

I am glad that we are in dialogue with the rail operating companies. To be fair to those companies, my spies in Network Rail can honestly say that nearly all the problems in recent months have been to do with infrastructure, rather than the companies themselves. That is not helped by the way in which the companies have to interlock with the infrastructure, but let us put the blame where it belongs, and let us hope that Network Rail is beginning to get to grips with that issue.

Mr. Salter: Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the recent announcement that Network Rail is taking back in-house responsibility for significant elements of track maintenance? Does he agree that one of the consequences of the disastrous privatisation of the railways is the pre-eminence of contractor culture in the British Rail network? Although many Labour Members would welcome the complete renationalisation of the track infrastructure, at least Network Rail's action is a move in the right direction.

Mr. Drew: My hon. Friend has always been provocative. I could talk about historical lessons, but I have a great deal of sympathy with what he said. Anyone who knows anything about railways knows that contractualisation has been a menace, but the situation is more serious than that. I know from talking to people in the industry that the real problem is that we do not have expertise in the industry any more because there are insufficient numbers of railway engineers. That is a safety issue; in our part of the world the number of people who are able to react to emergencies is sometimes pretty minimal.

Mr. Tyler: May I endorse the point that was made by the hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter)? Neither he nor the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) were in the House when the Labour party was in opposition. I was then the Liberal Democrat transport spokesman and I stressed the need to prevent further fragmentation under the previous Government's privatisation proposals. I urged the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats to make a firm statement that either or both parties would buy back Railtrack if they were in a position to do so following an election. That would have prevented the sale of Railtrack and the fragmentation to which the hon. Gentlemen referred. I know that, like many of us, they have suffered in recent weeks from the chaos in Slough caused by the lack of infrastructure and investment.

Mr. Drew: A benefit of not being around at that time is that I was not privy to such discussions. I hope that we are reaching a more sensible arrangement but there is a need for more co-ordination, which leads on to my next point.

Although we see the sense of refranchising and repackaging parts of our railways, that is causing short-term worries because we are not sure what decisions will result from the discussions. We desperately need to consider a more integrated service. I always make a plea for my own line—the Cheltenham to Swindon line—and we want to be included, which is why we are happy that First Great Western is putting on more trains. However, there was the bombshell of Virgin pulling out. We have lost Wales and West services so we have gone back to the

[Mr. Drew]

Wessex Trains arrangements, but we are not sure where we fit into the great refranchising arrangement. Will the Minister get a move on and get decisions taken through the Strategic Rail Authority? Will he examine the best integrated outcome, because that will give certainty, which is what the rail system needs more than anything?

I could read out many statistics about the investment that is required. The figures relating to the south-west are fairly stark: 450 miles of track need refurbishing or replacing; many units for switches and crossing equipment need replacing; and many temporary speed limits are in operation. Those of us who travel on the railway know all about that.

The title of the debate gives away one of our rail system's problems. The hon. Member for Northavon is right to talk about the rail system between the south-west and London, but part of the problem is that, although it is not the sum total of the system, it completely dominates all decision making. That is why Virgin dropped out. It could not get places in Paddington and had to pull out all other services because of the knock-on effect. That shows short-term, contradictory thinking.

There are many ways in which we must start to rebuild our local network. I cannot speak from experience because I do not often travel to Bristol by train. We could re-establish local stations. We have examined carefully how that could be done and suggestions have been made about my line. I should declare an interest because I live nearby, but Stonehouse Bristol Road station, one of two stations in Stonehouse, could be reopened. That would allow people to travel from Gloucester to Bristol on a train that stops at several stations, making localised commuting possible. At present, a person who wants to go to London can commute, although it may be rather expensive—we could do something about that. However, anyone who wants to commute can travel nowhere apart from London.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): The hon. Gentleman is quite right about new stations. One of the problems in Corsham in my constituency is that although there may be the money and the plans to open the station, there are no trains; there have to be trains. The recent announcement from the SRA makes the situation even more difficult.

Mr. Drew: I do not know much about Corsham, but that seems similar to what happens in my part of the world. One can get the infrastructure but not the trains, or one can get the trains but they cannot stop at the appropriate times. We need much more joined-up thinking. My plea is that we should think about how to use refranchising not only to reconstruct the system but to re-energise it. The situation could be improved by linking the trains and the bus network; in some cases, train operators also run bus franchises.

However, that is a local issue, and it does not affect people who commute to London. Although we need to improve the service to London—and in some cases to hold on to it—we must also consider genuine alternatives to the car, to enable people to move around locally. The SRA has many proposals to consider. I urge it to get on with the refranchising and to consider issues on their own merit rather than measuring everything according to its relevance for people travelling to London. I fear that by the time we have waited until Paddington is right, and then we have waited until Reading is right, some of us in the south-west will be able to get to London, but we will not be able to get anywhere else. That is not what the rail network should be about.

2.31 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I should like to mention some matters that affect the railway further to the south-west than the areas mentioned by the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb). He rightly focused on the part of the track between Bristol and Swindon and then on to Reading. That has had an impact on my constituency in Devon, in particular, over the years, on Tiverton Parkway station. Parkway stations are good; this one services not only mid-Devon but north Devon and parts of Somerset. However, it has had problems.

Each year, when the timetables have been revised, trains going through to Paddington have been removed from the schedule. When I have inquired about that reduction in the stopping services at Tiverton Parkway, I have been told that it is because of congestion further up the track, between Bristol and Swindon. All indications are, as has been said, that putting the franchising agreements in place as soon as possible—particularly if there is to be a link between First Great Western and Thames Trains—will make a difference not only to those served by that part of the track but to us, further down.

It would be remiss of me not to remind the Minister, who does not need reminding as he hears from me regularly on the matter, about the parts of the line to the west of Bristol where there are still problems. One is the long-standing issue of the flooding of Stafford's bridge at Stoke Canon in my constituency which means that people have to be bussed from Tiverton Parkway to Exeter St. David's. Not only does that have a huge, detrimental effect on the local community, it does not augur well for businesses that want to locate in the further south-west or for our tourist industry. As we know, it occasionally rains in the summer as well as the winter. I know that work has been done on Stafford's bridge, and I am grateful for the information that I have received about the engineering work. However, we have not completely resolved the problem, and while it remains, it affects the main route from Penzance to London.

I should also like to flag up to the Minister the fact that I took a close interest in the south west area regional multi-modal study exercise last year. It looked at the overall strategic importance of rail, road and other interrelated links. He should take fright at it as much as I did, not least because he represents a Plymouth seat. The SWARMMS report concluded that one of the key problems was the lack of competitiveness of the rail link, particularly west of Exeter.

If there is ever any question of the railway's being deemed not important further west of Exeter, I am sure that both the Minister and I will champion the railway. That exercise was carried out for the SWARMMS report and overseen by the regional assembly. During that process, I, as a Member of Parliament, had the humiliation of being allowed to observe the deliberations, while others who had little knowledge of the locality made profound pronouncements. I hope that the Minister will bear it in mind not only that such comments are depressing for business, but that no hon. Member from the west of Exeter would countenance such events in future. I am sure that I have cross-party support on that point.

Mr. Drew: I am sure that the hon. Lady will remember, but I got the SWARMMS people to the House, because I thought that it was important that they had a dialogue with us. I hope that the Minister will take on board the idea that SWARMMS should work with hon. Members, not disregard them as seems to have happened.

Mrs. Browning: I could not agree more. I was allowed to go and observe, but not to sit round the table and talk about the issues in my constituency, something that was difficult for me, as the Minister will appreciate.

If we are talking about rail links between the south-west and London, I must mention the Exeter to Waterloo line. That is not the issue that the hon. Member for Northavon raised initially, but it is equally important. The fact that the new franchises are being issued is important. Railtrack wrote to me in August 2001, further to my inquiries about dualling the track on the line. It said that various train operator bidders for the new Wessex franchise covering that area had considered the suggestions, taken them on board and anticipated that dualling certain parts of the track would feature in their proposals. There are huge problems with that line, but it should not be forgotten, because it is an important alternative to the main Paddington link. It is useful not only to my constituents but to those further up the track.

In conclusion, I realise that there are difficulties at the moment, because of what has happened recently to the structure of Railtrack and the Strategic Rail Authority. However, I should appreciate it if Ministers personally kept hon. Members informed on such matters, rather than leaving that to the train operators and those who obtain the franchises. Those briefings are useful, but I would be grateful if we could hear more regularly from Ministers about their thinking and their realistic expectations of timetabling for the strategic overview of rail transport in the south-west.

2.37 pm

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): There are three subjects that most Englishmen like to talk or complain about: cricket, weather and the awfulness of the rail services. That has been the case under all regimes, from the very beginning of the railways. I congratulate the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on calling the debate, and wholeheartedly agree with most of his remarks about the general dreadfulness of the service. "Delays, discomfort and disgraceful cost" is a reasonable summary. It is not necessary for me to expand on that. Everyone present knows what the matter boils down to, and I stand with them in complaining to the Government, to First Great Western and to others.

I want to speak in this debate because of the announcement a few weeks ago of the withdrawal of the Bristol to Oxford service via my constituency. That announcement has an unintentional and regrettable consequence: the likely failure to reopen Corsham station. Corsham is a town of 10,000 or 15,000 people and is growing rapidly. The station has been planned in all but its final stages. There has been a slight hiccup recently over the cost involved, but the £2.5 million that was originally proposed seems to be enough. A consultant recently proposed that it would cost £2.5 million to reopen the station, and the trains from Bristol to Oxford were going to stop there.

Corsham is largely a commuter area, from which people tend to commute to Bath, Bristol, Chippenham, Reading and London. A survey carried out 10 years ago found that, of the 1,500 or so people commuting from Corsham, more than 1,000 were doing so in the local area and a total of only 48 commuted to London. The service that was offered from Corsham to Bath, Chippenham and Swindon would have been heavily used. In addition, a new development has been proposed in the Pockeridge lane to Peel circus site, which would create 595 new houses within a 100 yd or so of the new station. That development is being built not least because the new station was expected.

Following last week's announcement by the Strategic Rail Authority of the withdrawal of the Bristol-Oxford service, it now looks as if the rail passenger partnership will not be an option for Corsham station. The Corsham station programme may well collapse, in which case the station will not be reopened. Incidentally, that would mean that other projects for which we have been fighting, such as the Wootton Bassett station, are equally unlikely to occur. In these days of sustainable transport and all the brave words used by the Government about trying to persuade people off the roads and on to railways, it is extremely regrettable to see a project such as the one for Corsham station disappear.

I want to ask the Minister two things. First, is there a way in which he can delay the withdrawal of the Bristol-Oxford service? It has been announced that the service will be withdrawn in May, but if he could delay that until after refranchising, it is just possible that the new franchisee might find some way to run the present service or provide another service that will stop at Corsham station.

Even if the Minister cannot go that far, will he take an early opportunity—I have written to him on this matter—to welcome to his office representatives of a broad consensus, consisting presumably of those from Wiltshire county council and North Wiltshire district council, myself and other interested persons? The civic society at Corsham is very active on the matter, as is Councillor Peter Davis, a Liberal Democrat who has been campaigning on the subject for 20 years, to whom I pay tribute. If the Minister would be so kind as to meet us to discuss the matter, I should like to find a way of allowing the project to go ahead.

Mr. Tyler: I am listening carefully. There is a more general point. The Minister's influence in the matter would, of course, have been much greater had the

[Mr. Tyler]

industry not been fragmented by privatisation. Will the hon. Gentleman say whether he would have voted for that legislation had he been a Member at the time?

Mr. Gray: I am here to fight the corner of the people of North Wiltshire, including the people of Corsham. I am not interested in entering into petty party political dialogues of that sort. We are here to talk about Corsham station.

Another disadvantage that has resulted from the announcement is that the money earmarked to turn Chippenham station into a transport hub has been withdrawn. There was to be a bus link from Chippenham to west Wiltshire, especially to Devizes, Calne, Melksham and Trowbridge. That is to be cancelled. Both those developments are extremely regrettable.

I am grateful for the Minister's nod, which I understand to mean that he will welcome a delegation of the sort that I have described. I look forward to discussing the matter further with him in the privacy of his office.

2.43 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on securing the debate.

It may appear to an innocent observer that Members are making competing claims on the Minister, but I do not see it that way. All that we are saying is complementary in that we are trying to establish a viable and integrated rail infrastructure for the south-west. If we are serious about moving people from our overcrowded road system and the over-congested A303 and M4, we must have a rail network capable of meeting their needs. In order to meet those needs, the service must be economical, efficient and convenient for those who want to use it. At the moment, it is none of those things.

I have serious concerns about the level of investment in the west country, as I said during an intervention on my hon. Friend. We are losing out as a region, as we so often have on such a wide range of issues over the years. We do not speak sufficiently forcefully and we do not speak with one voice. I hope that we are beginning to rectify that omission today. Other infrastructure programmes, equally important in their own way, do nothing for the people whom we represent in the west country. The west coast main line seems to be gobbling up all the available cash at the moment.

At Transport questions yesterday there was a bizarre competition to offer to buy the Minister more and more drinks in order to secure his support for various rail schemes. The bidding for Somerset was left with a commitment from the Minister to come down to Yeovil junction to have a pint of cider with my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) and me while discussing the Waterloo to Exeter line. I do not intend to enter that auction, today. I simply want to express my concerns about the three main lines and then deal with local services.

My hon. Friend the Member for Northavon talked about the first main line—London to Bristol. It is the main link for many of my constituents in Frome and the surrounding area. As we have heard, there are huge deficiencies in that line at the moment. It is an essential arterial route, not only for the west of England but for Wales. I tend to badger the Secretary of State for Wales on the ground that sometimes I can put a question to him when I cannot put one to the Transport Minister. Our desire for an effective rail service should cross the Bristol channel.

The second main line is the service that runs out of Paddington through Westbury and Frome in my constituency. It does not stop at Frome, however, which is a longstanding grievance. Frome is the largest town in England with a mainline station where the trains do not stop. The line then runs through Castle Cary—a very important station—and down to Taunton and beyond. We are concerned about the level of investment in that track and in the rolling stock that is used on that line, and about the future of the line as a whole. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) spoke about that too.

The third main line is Waterloo to Exeter, near to what I rather archaically refer to as the Southern region line, which serves my constituency via Temple Combe. A programme to dual that track could be implemented but is now on hold. There is no sense in talking about improving the public transport infrastructure in the area without addressing that issue.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): Would not dualling that old Southern region line and increasing the speed of journey times between London and the south-west open up the very competition between routes that privatisation was supposed to promise? It is the lack of investment in infrastructure that has turned it into such a disaster.

Mr. Heath: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The biggest nonsense of all was when the dual-bed bridge at Temple Combe was taken up and replaced with a single-bed bridge. That was the height of myopia.

Mrs. Browning: In the spirit of cross-party consensus on this issue, may I point out that the hon. Gentleman and I are hit by a double whammy? Not only will those involved not dual our railway line between Exeter and Waterloo, they will not dual our road—the A30/303—either.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Lady must not lead me down that route, because otherwise I would talk about the Sparkford to Ilchester section of the A303, which I hope is to be dualled in the very near future.

Mr. Adrian Flook (Taunton): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that for many years there has been great concern about the Reading, Westbury, Taunton element of the track? Is he convinced that the SRA will help maintain the present level of services, or is he worried about what it has been doing in Corsham and elsewhere?

Mr. Heath: I would be extremely worried. There seems to be a blind spot about the major arterial route to the west country. The hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) is right to say that one of the deficiencies is the bottleneck at Reading. That is outside our region, but affects all our people.

I shall say a few words about local services. I agree with the point made by the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) that it is no good having the best express trains in the world if there is no way of getting people from their localities to them. One way of achieving that is via parkway stations, which are suitable in some circumstances, but a better way is to have good, connecting local services. As a result of Dr. Beeching's policies many years ago, there are huge gaps in the services available on the line from Westbury to Taunton.

One of my long-term intentions—it really is long term, as I started discussing it in 1985 on the county council—is to see the reopening of local stations. Stations such as Langport and Somerton, Castle Cary, Bruton, Witham Friary Junction—in which I declare an interest, because I live there—and Frome, could provide a useful component of the local public transport infrastructure. The reopening of those stations was being considered as a feasibility scheme under Railtrack, but now that has disappeared. I cannot tell my constituents whether there is any possibility of the reawakening and reinvigoration of that very enlightened and sensible scheme. It is a great opportunity missed.

I do not understand why we in Somerset cannot have the same sort of infrastructure that is taken for granted in other parts of the country. Why do we always have to get into our battered cars and drive to places, rather than use the railway that runs past the end of our garden but speeds its way down to Cornwall or up to London without stopping? I make a plea to Ministers. Let us deal with the main thoroughfares—the trunk routes, as it were—of the railway system, but let us also recognise that railways could perform a very valuable local public transport function. In the west country, at present, they fail to do that.

2.51 pm

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): I rise to speak in the debate without declaring an interest, as I am not a regular rail user. That is because the service between Cheltenham, Gloucester and London is appallingly bad. I support all hon. Members who have commented to that effect.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on securing the debate. I know that his intentions are genuine, and that he would not have raised the subject had it not been so important.

What is wrong with the Cheltenham service? Cheltenham and Gloucester are a main town and city and therefore deserve much better rail services than they have. The frequency is poor and the reliability is poor.

The direct service between Cheltenham, Gloucester and London is limited. Many trains require passengers to change at Swindon and the quality and safety of the train that takes them from Cheltenham to Swindon is questionable. One would struggle to find a bus that was worse or more antiquated.

The length of the journey is another problem: it can take well over two hours, and it is easy to drive to London in that time. If one then adds in the length of time it takes to get to the initial station and the time to travel across London, that is at least another hour. That is why so many people drive, because they cannot depend on the trains to get them to London on time or even to get them there at all. Nor can they depend on having refreshments when they are on the train.

The whole service is a disaster, and I want to bring it to the attention of the Minister, if he is not aware of it already, and to the House. I am being far less polite and measured in my terms than the hon. Member for Northavon was, but that reinforces my point—the service is dreadful.

The situation has been made worse and possibly more frustrating by the fact that, some while ago, I attended a meeting with First Great Western, which runs the trains from Cheltenham to London, and was promised that better services were on the way. I cannot remember the exact date of that meeting, but it is long enough ago to suggest that there should be some difference by now. I am not, however, aware of any sign of a difference.

On top of that is the quality of the station at Cheltenham, which for a mainline station is appalling. Some time ago, we were promised an hourly service to London from a small station called Ashchurch, which is near Tewkesbury. I do not expect the Minister to be aware of that station or the situation, but I would appreciate it if he examined the matter and wrote to me about it. That promise was made to people in the area, and just before today's debate started, I spoke to the parish council, which is concerned about the station's current viability.

Time is short. I would like to say a lot more, but I cannot. I will say only that it is a cop-out to blame privatisation, as it avoids examining the real issue. We hear that fragmentation has been the cause of the problem, but I cannot think of a transport industry that is more fragmented that the airline industry. Not all airports are owned by the same company and there are goodness knows how many air operators, but the quality of the service is far better, and it is safer and more reliable.

The fragmentation argument is nonsense. If there is any problem in that regard, it is that there are not enough rail providers. We do not have the choice that privatisation perhaps should have brought, and competitive rail services would improve the situation. If we are saying that British Rail should be the model for every industry, it is no wonder that people have no faith in politicians.

2.56 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on securing this important debate, in which he has rightly raised the concerns of all rail users in the south-west. Indeed, he has gone further and challenged Members of Parliament of all parties from the south-west to work harder together to get a better deal for our rail users.

My hon. Friend raised several specific local issues, as have other hon. Members, and the Minister will have made his traditional list of the questions to answer. My hon. Friend asked about Filton junction and Chipping Sodbury tunnel. Other hon. Members have asked about station improvements at Reading, problems of flooding at Stafford's Bridge, the Chippenham transport hub and the dualing of the Exeter to Waterloo line or what my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) described as the Southern region line. Rightly,

[Mr. Don Foster]

the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) raised the vital question of Corsham station, to which I will return in a few minutes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Northavon also talked about how the region has been neglected and is seen as a poor relation. Sadly, it is worse than that, because for certain rail and transport purposes, the south-west region does not even exist. Hon. Members will be aware that in 1999 the Deputy Prime Minister announced a new all-singing, all-dancing public information system. It was to be a "Travel Direct" along the lines of NHS Direct. At a research seminar organised by the Institute of Public Policy Research in December 1999, he said:

> "I see no reason why you should not in the future be able to buy a single ticket on the phone, allowing you to go long distance, door-to-door, with a cab picking you up at home and taking you to the train, and another cab or bus taking you right to the door at the other end. The service should also be available on the internet, giving you the chance to buy your ticket and plan your journey at home or the office. New technology, modern transport will offer a brand new service for passengers."

Knowing my hon. Friend lives in the beautiful village of Olveston, I decided to check out how good that service, which was established in 1999, was in 2003, and he will be delighted to know that the all-singing, all-dancing system that was supposed to help integrate transport does not operate in the south-west. When I entered the name "Olveston", the system said that no results were found and that it could find not find any places that matched the inquiry for Olveston. I was surprised, but thought that it was perhaps because Olveston was too small for the computer. I thought that I would try my own wonderful constituency of Bath and was more generous by putting in the name of my local authority, Bath and North-East Somerset council. Unfortunately, it said that there was no journey planner covering Bath or Bath and north-east Somerset. So much for taking note of the transport needs of the south-west. My hon. Friend is right; we have been neglected. He was right to draw attention to the fatalistic approach adopted by those who are supposedly in charge of our over-fragmented railway system.

Tomorrow, the Strategic Rail Authority will announce its new, updated, strategic plan, to which we look forward with great interest and, I fear, resignation. A year ago when the first plan was announced, the Secretary of State told us there was a line in the sand—there would be a new dawn for the railways, and at long last there was long-term planning for the future. Tomorrow, that plan will be torn up, and many of its exciting projects—the schemes that hon. Members on both sides have referred to—will not go ahead.

The south-west loses out in many respects. There are signalling problems in many parts of the region—from Castle Cary to Taunton, Totnes to Plymouth, and Bristol to Swindon—and problems resulting from the failure to install a dual track in many areas. We have discussed the Exeter to Waterloo line; my hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) referred to the need for dualling in the Probus and Burngullow area in Cornwall.

There are overcrowded trains in many parts of the system, and even the new rolling stock is sometimes inappropriate. I am unhappy with the Adelante trains introduced by First Great Western, and many people who have to use Virgin services are concerned about the Voyager train. When there are cutbacks in train services it is crazy to run shorter trains, with less room for passengers, rather than longer ones. More space should be available on the overcrowded Virgin Voyager and the Adelante trains. I was surprised that the Minister yesterday in the Chamber—at column 706 of *Hansard*—described the Virgin Voyager trains as "a considerable improvement". That view is not shared by many people.

There are all sorts of problems in my region. In common with everyone else, we suffer increasing delays and cancellations. Since the Government came to power, delays have increased by 100 per cent. and cancellations by 50 per cent. Services in the south-west are part of those statistics. That is not solely the fault of the train operating companies; much of the problem results from the failure, over many years, to invest in railway infrastructure and from the problems caused by the fragmentation introduced when the railway system was privatised.

The south-west loses out in other ways, even when the Government decide it is important to look at the overall system. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) referred to the south west area regional multi-modal study. Many of us were unhappy about its proposals but the study at least made an effort to consider the integration of road and rail. But what happened? As soon it was presented we were told that the road schemes might go ahead but there was no funding for the rail projects.

The notion of integrated, joined-up thinking on transport seems to have gone out of the window. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire gave as an example the cuts to the Bristol Temple Meads to Oxford line and its implications for Corsham station. That will be a disaster for rail travellers, and it will put many more cars on the roads, which means more congestion. We are being offered jam tomorrow for our railways, but jams today on the roads.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Jamieson): I do not want to stem the hon. Gentleman's flow, but he talked about infrastructure improvements and listed several substantial improvements that he wanted. Would he tell the Chamber whether the Liberal Democrats plan to put more money into transport? If not, how will they bring about improvements?

Mr. Foster: Yes, it is, in part, about more money. If the hon. Gentleman will wait just a few more days, we will present a detailed alternative Budget. I ask him to be patient.

However, it is also a matter of making more effective use of money. We all accept that rail costs are massively over the top, but I raised questions a very long time ago about the way in which money was wasted on the railways. Even the Minister's Government accepted that part of the problem was that there were far too many contractors and subcontractors on the track, all taking a share of the profits. The former Secretary of State for Transport accepted that more than 12 months ago—action is long overdue.

There are far too many train operating companies, and there is a need to address the fragmented nature of the railway. Some developments are simply not affordable because everyone is concerned about the safety regime on the railway and thus not moving forward. If the Government were to take up suggestions as to how such problems might be managed, we would be able to make better use sooner of existing resources.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: As the hon. Gentleman is talking about safety, would he comment on the fact that there are far more airline companies than there are train companies, yet the safety record in the air is infinitely better?

Mr. Foster: We had that debate in the Chamber only yesterday. Comparisons between a fragmented monopoly and a fragmented competitive situation are totally false. In reality, people have little choice about which trains they take, whereas they have the option of not flying on an unsafe plane. Competition can drive up safety in a way that a fragmented monopoly cannot.

Much can be done. It is regrettable that there will be significant reductions to the big schemes that were planned by the Strategic Rail Authority. The Minister heard from Members from all parties today, and will continue to hear from Members from the south-west and elsewhere, that many pinch-point problems can be resolved by relatively small, relatively low-cost schemes on different parts of the network. Bringing in a passing-loop line to allow a fast train to overtake a slow one and a bit of dualling here and there could make a huge difference. I urge him to review the rail passenger partnership programme, because it offers opportunities. Local people can suggest local solutions to how improvements can be made on the network.

Let me conclude by speaking briefly in support of what the hon. Member for North Wiltshire said about the Oxford to Bristol Temple Meads line. I accept that it may be sensible to reduce the number of trains in some pinch-point areas to achieve improved reliability. I would not deny that for a minute and have said so publicly several times.

However, each service must be considered much more carefully than it has been to date. The impacts on other aspects of the transport network and on long-term future planning of the rail network must be considered in the round. The cancellation of the Oxford to Bristol Temple Meads train is an example of a bad mistake about to be made. It will mean not only more cars on our roads but almost certainly cancellation of the Corsham station plans. Frankly, that would be a disaster for the area.

I hope that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire will urge the Minister not only to meet a group of people with an interest in the matter—the affected area is much wider than the immediate north Wiltshire area because, as other hon. Members have said, an impact in one area can spread a very long way—but also to take a personal interest in the issue and try to delay the decision.

This has been a very important debate. We look forward to the response from the Minister but above all to his assurance that the south-west will not continue to lose out in the provision of a rail system.

3.9 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on introducing the debate. We heard important contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) and for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson). It is notable that, with the exception of the hon. Gentleman who introduced the debate and his hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), who has just replied from the Front Bench, the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) is the only Liberal Democrat with the staying power to listen to the debate throughout. By coming into the Chamber to offer a sound bite and then disappearing, the Liberal Democrats quite typically show that they do not take the issues as seriously as they should. This matter needs more than a short contribution; it needs sustained involvement. That is why I am delighted that I have four of my hon. Friends with me.

Mr. Heath: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Chope: No, I will not give way at the moment.

Nobody has dealt with a significant issue that affects the part of Dorset that includes Christchurch, Bournemouth and Poole. The Strategic Rail Authority announced in December that it would reduce the number of trains a day on the line between Southampton and Bournemouth by no fewer than 30 with effect from May. It used the extraordinary justification that

> "the purpose of these particular reductions is to make more productive use of capacity on an overcrowded network."

People in my constituency recognise that there is pressure on the network further to the east of Southampton, but there is not the pressure on the network between Bournemouth and Southampton to justify that enormous cut in service. That is another example of the SRA being rather disingenuous.

Another big issue for my constituents is the uncertainty generated by the delay in deciding on the new franchise for South West Trains. When South West Trains became the preferred bidder, it put its money where its mouth was and invested heavily in new rolling stock, which will come on stream in the next two or three years. In return, it has received delay and indecision from the Government, and the franchise, which expires next month, will be extended for a year while a new three-year deal is negotiated. One adverse consequence is that investment in infrastructure that South West Trains has been willing to commit to as part of a longer-term franchise will no longer be available. That money will be clawed back by the SRA, and we will not know until tomorrow's announcement whether the authority will invest in the infrastructure to the extent that South West Trains would have been willing to do, had it been given a longer franchise. We may find that the reduction in the lengths of the franchise will be to the detriment of the travelling public, particularly in Dorset.

Several hon. Members referred to the SRA's announcement. It is extraordinary to have a debate when there will be a major announcement on the following day, and it is extraordinary that we cannot have the debate the day after the announcement so that we can comment on it. There is plenty of scope there for conspiracy theorists. We are likely to hear tomorrow that there will be a substantial reduction in investment in railway infrastructure because of the extraordinary

[Mr. Chope]

overspending and waste that has been identified. I hope that the independent rail regulator, who is still in office, Mr. Tom Winsor, will consider very carefully what the SRA intends to do and will see whether it will be even-handed in its investment in various parts of the country.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): I apologise for not having been here for the whole debate. I have been serving on an inquiry team, and I am sure that the House—particularly Liberal Democrat Members, because they are never here when such things are being said—will understand why I have not been here until now.

I do not understand why we cannot catch a train from Paddington to Plymouth without such a fuss. Anywhere else in Europe, people simply get on a train. I cannot believe that we are having a debate about the lines and the rolling stock. What is the problem with this country that means that we cannot just get on a train, get off it at the other end and arrive on time? What has gone wrong with Britain and our rail services?

Mr. Chope: My hon. Friend, as always, puts his finger on the core issue, which is that the people who are responsible for running the railways are not able to deliver the common-sense results that both he and I want. I feel strongly about rail travel between Cornwall and the south-east, particularly between Cornwall and my constituency. My mother lives in Cornwall and depends wholly on the railways when she wants to see her family. She is not alone in Cornwall in feeling isolated, and the Government's failure to deliver improved services on the railways, and on the roads to Cornwall, increases that feeling of isolation.

I refer to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton and others about the south west area regional multi-modal study. What a waste of time that was. We were suspicious when it was set up. We thought that it was a delaying tactic by the Government to get a lot of people chattering among themselves and becoming involved in enormously complicated evidence gathering, evidence giving and playing one group of people off against another. At the end of that elongated process, a report was produced, which made it clear that if there is a west country voice on such matters, it should be that the railway line to the east of Exeter should be dualled.

How did the Government respond? They ignored the report and thereby insulted everyone who had been involved in its preparation. If he does nothing else this afternoon, the Minister should apologise to those people who, in good faith, embarked on that consultation exercise, only to have the Government press their faces into the mud.

3.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Jamieson): I am pleased to follow the temperate remarks of the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope).

I congratulate the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on securing this debate and making the points that he has done. I shall put on my south-west hat for a moment. He was right to say that there is considerable advantage in Members of Parliament and local authorities speaking with one voice. If I have a criticism of my region, it is perhaps that it has not spoken with a unified voice in the past, as some other regions have. Let us consider the lobbying of the Welsh or the Scots—not as regions, but separate nations—and of some parts of the north. Perhaps we have lost out in that respect.

Two years ago, we had a lively debate on the subject, occasioned by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office. The hon. Member for Northavon also referred to a debate that he initiated in 1998 on the subject. He relayed the usual horror stories. There is no difficulty in finding such stories, and I accept that every one of them is an inconvenience to the people involved. However, I travel from London to the south-west and the majority of my journeys have been successful. The trains have been on time. They have not always been as clean as I would have liked, nevertheless my experience of the service generally has been very good. That has also been the case in trains that I have used when carrying out ministerial duties. The operators had not known beforehand that I would be using the trains. Not all journeys are bad. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there are sufficient bad journeys to cause concern. However, to suggest that the whole service is poor paints a false picture. Although it is fraught with problems, there are also many successes in our rail system.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I want the rail service to improve. For years, under British Rail, the rail industry was widely regarded as being in gradual decline. There was never a golden age, some 50 years ago, when the rail service delivered everything that people today say that they would like. Then the industry was privatised. The emphasis was on reducing subsidy rather than on looking for growth or improving passenger and freight services. For the first time in generations, the industry started to grow—just as the private sector took over. An additional problem has been caused by there being considerably more people in employment: since 1997, 1.5 million more people have been travelling by train to work or for pleasure and leisure, putting additional strain on the system.

Following privatisation, there was no strategic leadership. The Strategic Rail Authority was therefore set up to provide that leadership and to take a new strategic approach to providing rail services. The hon. Gentleman said that he did not want to be fobbed off with references to the SRA. However, the authority's objectives, as set out by the Secretary of State, are to provide clear leadership and the co-ordination that the hon. Gentleman talked about, to improve performance across the network, and to provide a clear and focused approach to franchising. I think that the hon. Gentleman would welcome those objectives. If he thinks that 50 years of neglect can be turned around in six years, I have to tell him that it cannot—although there are many signs of improvement.

In contrast to the previous fragmented approach, the SRA is getting to grips with the problems that rising prosperity has brought. Since 1997, passenger rail journeys have increased by just over 20 per cent. The increase in the amount of freight on the network has been similar. The hon. Gentleman did not have time to mention that, but I am sure that he would join me in welcoming it. Use of the rail network is now much higher than before, but for decades the network has been deprived of necessary investment.

All of those pressures threaten the drive to improve performance. We have made the structural changes that are necessary to achieve that improvement. The SRA has a clear plan and a clear strategic direction. Network Rail is now working in the public interest—working to overcome the legacy of Railtrack. We have to remember that the handover to Network Rail was very recent.

Mr. Steen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jamieson: No, I will not. The hon. Gentleman has not been in the Chamber long and many hon. Members who have been here would like their questions to be answered.

I shall comment on the performance of First Great Western and South West Trains, the main providers of rail services between London and the south-west. The latest statistics that the SRA has published, for April 2002 to October 2002, show that the operators' performance in the quarter from July to September was an improvement on their performance in the corresponding quarter in 2001. However, late last year a considerable number of problems arose. In this country, we like to laugh about certain problems, but some of the weather and flooding was exceptional. Not only did that upset the rail system, it flooded houses and roads. As we know, the famous Dawlish problem was prominent again last year for Virgin trains. As the hon. Gentleman will know, it can take only one train being delayed to have a knock-on effect throughout the whole system.

The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) said that Virgin Voyagers were not all they were cracked up to be. Those trains are considerably better than the rolling stock that was used before. They are much more reliable and comfortable. If the hon. Gentleman does not believe that, he should go and sit first in one of the old trains, then in one of the new ones, to test which is better. I can only think that he has not used one or other type of train.

The hon. Member for Northavon talked about the failure to deliver the service that the passengers have a right to expect. That is sometimes true, but not always. Lamentably, it is true too often. That is the reason for our current level of investment in the infrastructure. The hon. Gentleman will know that central and local government budgets for improvements are finite. However, he must admit that no other Government in the past 50 years have put the type of investment into the rail system that we have done, or invested at the same level.

The hon. Gentleman wants various projects to be brought forward. Given that funds are finite, I challenge him to decide which of the projects currently being undertaken he would not proceed with. Would he put a stop to some of the investment that is being made in the west coast main line? That has an effect on the whole of the south-west. If trains from Bristol to Birmingham and further north are delayed, there will be a knock-on effect in the south-west region.

I notice that the hon. Member for Bath was extremely coy when we talked about more funds. I look forward to his proposals in the next few days. He has said that he will announce extra funding. Only a short time ago—the hon. Gentleman will not like this—the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor), who is the Liberal Democrat Treasury spokesman, told his colleagues in a confidential paper that they could no longer assume that spending pledges could be funded unless they satisfied five conditions. One of those was that the pledge could be funded within current budgets. Previously, when I have asked in this Chamber how much extra money the Liberal Democrats would make available, I have been told that there would be no extra funding. I was also interested in something that the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) said.

Mr. Don Foster: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. The Minister is clearly not giving way. Hon. Members must not heckle.

Mr. Jamieson: I will not give way to the hon. Member for Bath. As the Liberal Democrats do in this Chamber, he took longer for his speech—nearly 13 minutes—than I have been allowed and longer than the hon. Member for Christchurch. There are other people we need to listen to.

On the question about Filton junction, the scheme is being developed, and once the SRA knows the costs and benefits of the project a decision will be taken. We are aware of the problems at the Chipping Sodbury tunnel, which are causing considerable difficulty. A pumping system is in place, but I am told that the difficulty is where to pump the water once it comes out. I think that a problem with creating wetlands is the possibility that flooding might result. The matter is being given careful consideration because of its importance to the whole network.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) stressed the importance of the line going west from Exeter and I agree, of course. That is a part of the Government's view of the matter. Good-quality links in that direction are vital, particularly as the lines run through Devon into Cornwall—which has, after all, objective 1 funding.

Several hon. Members mentioned the Exeter to Waterloo line. We shall be considering what improvements can be made to capacity utilisation, to make better use of the existing track. I also take the point about keeping Members of Parliament better informed. I shall consider devices for that. If the hon. Lady has any suggestions I shall be happy to take them forward.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) talked of the Oxford to Bristol service. I know that he will be disappointed—as I think we all are—at the prospect of the service being withdrawn. I should be happy to meet a delegation, but we should need to consider how to increase the use of the service. At the moment, only 43 people, on average, use a large train. That is a low level of use. If we can increase it, a case for improvement may be made. I am, of course, happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman about the matter if that is helpful.

With the little time that I have to sum up, I have not covered many hon. Members' questions. However, if they want me to take up particular points and are happy to do so by correspondence, I shall, in the usual way, try to answer them most thoroughly.

Policing (Cornwall)

3.30 pm

Andrew George (St. Ives): I am delighted to have secured this important debate on local policing for my constituents and those of other hon. Members in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

I emphasise first my strong support for the work of the police in Cornwall in particular. I keep in close contact with the district commanders on my patch and with the chief constable—we now have a new one—because policing is a matter of concern to many of my constituents. I regularly visit local police stations to discuss issues of local concern and I join police from the local constabulary on night patrols and other occasions to see their work at first hand. I am grateful to the local constabulary for enabling me to do that.

The purpose of the debate is to raise a number of policing matters that concern my constituents. I was advised by the Table Office—I am sure correctly—that many policing matters are the responsibility of the constabulary rather than the Home Office, which is why I specifically requested a debate on Home Office responsibilities for policing in Cornwall. I am sure that the Minister, in replying to my questions, will know far better than I do where the constabulary's responsibilities end and the Home Office's begin, and will advise me on that.

I have informed the Minister's office of the three issues that I intend to raise in the debate: the first is the clarity needed when defining an offence, particularly with regard to replica guns, knives, extending police batons and so on; the second is how to contact the police if one fears that an offence has taken place or is likely to take place; and the third is how the police can fund their response—in other words, their budget.

What is an offence? I want to reflect the deeply felt and widely expressed public concern about a shop that recently opened in Penzance. Two weeks after it opened there was a peaceful protest outside its front door, and on an extremely wet Saturday afternoon in December, one of my constituents, Mrs. Lucy Duveston, collected more than 700 signatures. I have the petition here and will happily give it to the Minister after the debate. It expresses the deep concern felt by local people about the laws relating to the sale of replica guns, knives, police-style extending batons and drugs paraphernalia, which are now being sold openly on the high street in Penzance. The petition calls into question where the boundaries of the law lie and whether it is being made to look an ass in this respect.

I asked the local constabulary for a briefing, and before Christmas a local police constable, PC John Fahy, provided me with a briefing on the situation. I wrote to the Home Secretary seeking further clarification. Although I appreciate that the matter raises many complex issues, I look forward to receiving a response in due course. I have also had a further meeting with the chief inspector, Mike Fowkes, the district commander for Penwith and the Isles of Scilly, at which I raised these issues. The local constabulary needs to know when the police can act and whether the regulations can be tightened to make it clear where they can intervene.

The kind of baton being sold at the shop is one that is extended by being simply flicked out, in the same way as a police baton. I understand that if a baton is extended by means of a button, spring or other mechanical device, it is illegal to sell it. As the local police have pointed out to me, it does not matter how the baton is extended—the fact that it can be extended and that it is a potentially lethal weapon is a matter of deep concern. There is another aspect of the law that needs to be considered. Once the baton is out on the street, it is an offensive weapon no matter how it is opened. Why allow it to be sold in the first place? There is no good reason. Why would someone want to have it?

There is also an issue with knives. The shop sells a large selection of knives and swords, many of which have very long blades and some of which can be concealed on a person in the street. They can be sold quite legally because the shop does not suggest that they are fighting knives or suitable for combat in any way. The fact that they are not sold as combat knives means that they can be sold to a person in a shop. As I understand it, the law relating to carrying offensive or dangerous weapons acknowledges that there are reasons why someone might be carrying knives and swords publicly. For example, one can do so if one is a chef or for ceremonial and national costume purposes. Apart from such instances, it is an offence to carry such weapons. Again, why sell the weapons if there is no good reason to have them? One cannot use them publicly, other than for ceremonial or other specified purposes. Clarification on that would be helpful.

I understand that the issue of replica guns was raised in the debate on gun control this morning. In the shop in question, many of the replica guns for sale are so close to the originals that even experts cannot tell the difference. Local policemen have made the point that a toy should be made to look like a toy and that the police should be empowered to seize anything that looks like a real weapon. There are serious issues here, and I am sure that the Minister takes that on board.

On drugs paraphernalia, it is argued that section 9 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 is out of date and that it is perfectly reasonable to come to a conclusion that eight-inch cigarette papers, huge rolling machines, sets of scales, mouthpieces, bongs and various other paraphernalia, all carrying a cannabis leaf design, will be used to prepare and smoke drugs, rather than tobacco. Those things are openly on sale in the local shop and many of my constituents are very concerned about that. It would be extremely helpful to have some clarity in relation to that area of the law. Do the Minister and his Department propose to review such matters and tighten up the law on the sale of such items?

I will move on to the issue of how the police can be contacted when there is a suspected offence, but it is not an emergency. As the Minister knows, I am raising the issue of the non-emergency police phone number, which is 0870 577 7444. Many of my constituents, local authorities, parish councils and neighbourhood watch groups have complained about the system. Many responsible citizens who fulfil their public duty to the community by reporting matters to the police are deeply frustrated by their experiences.

Mr. Anton Barkhuysen from Stithians, which is just outside my constituency, sent me a copy of a letter relating to a recent incident. His letter says:

"this week's West Briton carries a report of thieves who are targeting houses locally, and a statement from a PC Wheeler as to their possible technique. Yesterday my rather isolated house was visited by a couple who exactly fitted the description, and I noted the registration of the car which they had driven onto my property. On reporting this to your Crimestoppers hotline, with a request for PC Wheeler to phone me for the details, I was told to phone your inquiry line, where I was eventually told I was number eleven in the queue. As this would have involved at least a half hour call at national rates to your non-geographic number, which cannot be accessed by discount network providers at the reduced rate, I gave up."

I am afraid that that is the experience of many of my constituents. Waiting times are unacceptably long. The police are aware of that—they have accepted the criticisms and have attempted to reduce waiting times. However, the latest figures that the constabulary gave me in November—for September 2002—show that, of those calls that the switchboard answered and put through to the call-handling centre for inquiries, 46,328 were connected. Of those, 34,139 held on until their calls were answered. However, almost a quarter of those who phone are unable to get through or simply give up because of the expense.

The issue is about long waits and people simply not wanting to hang on because they feel uncertain. They have no confidence in the system and are concerned about the cost. As I understand it—and I recently sought clarification from the constabulary on this—the police can make a small profit by using an 0870 number—chatlines use the same system—so a call not only costs people money, but additional money goes to the constabulary. Indeed, it profits the constabulary to keep people waiting.

That is not a satisfactory system. I understand that the Minister's Department is looking at a national call number, which is to be piloted from April 2003. Although the constabulary is aware of the problems with its call-handling system, which severely dents local people's confidence, it would be helpful if the Minister set out the timetable for the roll-out of the national number. The constabulary might go to great lengths to improve or change its system at great expense only to find out that there is a national number, so some co-ordination would be helpful.

Once a person has decided that an offence has taken place and has managed to get through to the police, the police must be able to respond. There was a great deal of trumpeting at the proposed settlement for the local constabularies at the end of last year. However, the police have additional costs that perhaps the Home Office does not fully appreciate.

In the far west of Cornwall, it is quite clear that if the constabulary is providing an emergency service and there is a severe emergency, it cannot call on support from the north, west or south, because all there is is sea. The cost of ensuring that the panoply of services is available to respond to serious issues in a place such as the far west of a long peninsula in a constituency such as mine will be an additional cost that other constabularies do not have to meet.

The proposed settlement is due to be confirmed on 3 February. I urge the Minister to review whether the settlement is adequate for the constabulary of Devon and Cornwall. Government funding represents a 3 per cent. increase, which is equivalent to £4.7 million. However, that leaves a considerable shortfall when compared with the unavoidable increase in costs, which the chief constable has told me is £4.2 million for police reform impact. Inflation costs are £5.7 million and national insurance increases amount to £1.2 million. Those and other costs can be funded only by a significant increase in council tax. That excludes funding for additional police officers over and above the crime fighting fund allocation. The police authority has set an aspirational target of 3,500 officers by 2006, but that would require a further £2.6 million in 2003–04, making a total additional cost for the next financial year of £13.7 million, compared with the proposed increase of £4.7 million.

At this stage, it is obligatory to brandish a copy of the *Western Morning News*. The Minister will notice that it points out that the police authority estimates the increased cost of local tax payers' contribution to the local constabulary at between 30 per cent. and 40 per cent. Clearly, the question that Maria Wallis, the chief constable of Devon and Cornwall, is asking is, having broken the figure down to a weekly rate, are people prepared to make that additional contribution in the future?

We want people to support their police. However, in his response, the Minister must recognise that, in low-wage areas, the Government have obligations. Although many of the improvements are welcome, if they impose additional costs on constabularies, those should be reflected in the announcement of funding support on 3 February.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): I thank the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) for securing this debate and for his obvious involvement with and support for his local police force. I am sure that that is appreciated by his constituents and by the police themselves. They need to see that politicians support their work on behalf of the communities that they seek to protect.

I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's comments about problems relating to call handling within the Devon and Cornwall constabulary. It is encouraging that in the past three months the force has achieved its 90 per cent. target for handling 999 calls within the required response time. The number of non-emergency calls answered by the switchboard has also increased over the past couple of months. The force has achieved a target of answering 90 per cent. of those calls within 30 seconds.

I agree, however, that waiting times after the switchboard has received the call remain unacceptable, and I fully understand why the management of call handling within the force has caused concern to some members of the local community, the police authority and the command team. I am confident that the establishment of the call management and communications department will improve performance. The hon. Gentleman may know that a review of the supervisory structure within Devon and Cornwall's control rooms is being completed. I hope that it will ensure that the resources allocated are used efficiently and that real improvements to the services offered in that area will result.

[Mr. Bob Ainsworth]

We must ensure that the police service is properly funded. It will remain a top priority for the Government. The settlement announced for 2003-04 continues that commitment and builds on substantial investment over the past three years. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Devon and Cornwall constabulary has been provisionally allocated £164.4 million in general grant for 2003–04—an increase of £4.7 million. All police authorities were guaranteed at least that level of increase. The force also benefits from continued funding from the crime fighting fund of £6.37 million, and £3.13 million goes to Cornwall from the rural policing fund. That is 10 per cent. of the overall pot, so it is not true that we do not recognise or try to address some of the problems that sparsity and geography impose on the police service. Continuing the £30 million allocation for rural policing through the rural policing fund demonstrates our commitment to addressing those issues properly.

Specific initiatives also provide funding for Devon and Cornwall, including £390,000 towards the cost of Airwave. Forces have been invited to bid for further funding for community support officers, and funding has been provided for this year. The force has also been invited to pilot the detention powers for CSOs. We await a reply as to whether we shall receive a bid for CSOs for future years.

Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): The increases in the past two or three years have been very welcome, and police numbers, as I am sure the Minister will point out, have finally reached record levels. However, the chief constable is specifically warning that this year's increase of £4.7 million is substantially short of the amount that she needs to find for the nationally agreed pay rise and national insurance and pension costs. Short of people in this low-wage area being asked to pay even more on their council tax bill, above the amounts that the Government have allowed for, she will have to cut police numbers.

Will the Minister at least accept that there is a financial problem this year, in that there is a difference between the amounts needed to meet the nationally agreed pay rise and so on, and the amounts that Cornwall is receiving?

Mr. Ainsworth: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman at least acknowledges that there is an agreement at national level as to the necessary funding for the enhancements and the introduction of the police reform agenda. A funding level has also been agreed through the machinery of the police negotiating board.

A legitimate debate is taking place in Devon and Cornwall about what level of precept there should be. Currently, because of the priorities in the area and decisions that have been taken locally, Devon and Cornwall's precept is 13 per cent. below the national average for shire areas. The new chief constable has obviously triggered that debate. Whether or not the local community wants that to be changed or the force should be given an opportunity to increase the precept, I hope that the Liberal Democrat party and Members locally consider that there must be a local element to such decisions. They cannot all be taken at national level and imposed on local areas. The level of precept is not a matter for the Home Office, as the hon. Gentleman recognises.

Quite rightly, the discussion is taking place in the locality. Do we want to continue, because of the specific problems, with a below average precept for policing in Devon and Cornwall, or is there an argument for a substantial increase up to the national average or even beyond?

Andrew George: Irrespective of whether the precept should be set at the average level, or above or below it, the fact is that it would be helpful for the Minister to state clearly whether he believes that it is the responsibility of Government at least to attempt to fund those elements in the police budget that are the result of Government decisions. I am referring to increases in salaries and pensions, and other improvements in standards that are Government-driven, not locally driven.

Mr. Ainsworth: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that we place outside each area the machinery that has been established to decide what funding level is necessary to pay for all those initiatives and improvements that we want to see? He accepted that there is machinery through the police negotiating board, and that a level of funding has been agreed. There ought to be a residual debate about what level of precept should be set for the people of Devon and Cornwall. I do not fully understand what he is saying. Is he saying that, quite separately from that discussion, additional payments ought to be made to areas, and that those nationally agreed systems of setting funding should be abandoned? *[Interruption.]* He seems to be indicating that he does not agree with that. He must articulate exactly what he is asking for. If he or his party wants to make some suggestions as to how the methodology can be changed, we shall be more than happy to listen. However, we cannot have hon. Members making demands for an area that are completely outwith what they then agree ought to be a national framework for taking such decisions. The hon. Gentleman needs to come clean about what exactly his position is.

The force will also receive a share of both the £50 million pot for basic command unit funding and the £38 million pot for the special priority payments element of the PNB agreement.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned our serious concerns about the sale and use of imitation weapons, airguns, real guns, and other items. We have recently made announcements about discouraging people from carrying illegal weapons. The Home Secretary has announced the introduction of a minimum sentence of five years for those who carry illegal weapons in a public place. That will be enshrined in legislation as soon as possible. We intend to give the police the power to challenge people on whether they have a reasonable or lawful excuse for carrying either air weapons or imitation weapons, and where appropriate to arrest people and confiscate those weapons.

We have not gone down the road of a total ban on imitation weapons—there is a constant debate on that in the House—because of problems of definition. I am more than happy to continue considering that issue, but unless there is a legal definition that bans imitation weapons of the type that the hon. Gentleman talked about but does not impinge on toys, there will be serious problems with a total ban. By doing what we are doing, we are giving a power to the police and relying on the good sense of a constable to use that power appropriately. Where someone is carrying an imitation weapon in a public place without good reason or lawful excuse, they can be challenged, the weapon can be confiscated and they can, if necessary, be arrested. That avoids some of the definitional problems and gives us a tool to use. We are also planning a long-term review of all the firearms legislation. We cannot rush that or do it immediately.

Andrew George: I appreciate that response. However, outside the replica weapon issue is the issue of lethal weapons such as knives and extending batons. That is a serious matter, and it would be helpful to have some indication that the Minister would be prepared to clarify the law to help the police.

Mr. Ainsworth: Let me just say to the hon. Gentleman—I am not sure that there is confusion on the matter, but we can obviously consider it if the local police say that there is—that flick knives are offensives weapons. It is illegal not only to carry them but to sell them. Other items, such as batons, swords and knives, including hunting knives, are not illegal and it is not an offence to sell them. However, it is illegal for people to carry such items in a public place, and they could be arrested for carrying an offensive weapon. There is a problem. Exactly what do we want to ban and what do we not want to ban? Items are often sold for legal and proper reasons, and sometimes they are sold totally inappropriately, as the hon. Gentleman said.

Northern Cyprus

4 pm

Mr. John Lyons (Strathkelvin and Bearsden): First, I put on record my appreciation of having been given time for this Adjournment debate. I confess that I am not an expert on the missing in Cyprus. In fact, the matter was first brought to my attention when, like millions of others, I visited the island as a holidaymaker. I was shocked to see in Nicosia mothers parading every day with photographs of the missing around their necks. When I first heard about the numbers involved, I thought that they must be exaggerated and that the story could not be exactly right. However, it is important that we consider the human, personal and humanitarian consequence of the missing in Cyprus.

It is a long time since 20 July 1974, but that does not diminish the horror of the situation and the nightmare that relatives and friends of the missing must have gone through. When the Turkish army invaded, Cyprus was a sovereign, independent state and a member of the United Nations and of the Commonwealth. After the cessation of the war between the invading Turkish army and the civil population, about 1,600 people were taken and made prisoner. The 1,600 included some 900 reservists and soldiers, and more than 500 civilians, including men, women and children, some of them United Kingdom citizens. I could not believe that when I was told.

Many of the missing were taken from their homes or places of work—that was confirmed by eye-witnesses who saw all these events. Those people were taken to Turkish concentration camps and prison. Relatives and friends have gone so long without knowing what happened to the missing, and it is no exaggeration to say that a despicable, cruel crime was foisted on the people of Cyprus.

Since the Turkish army invaded Cyprus, the UN has said much about the situation. It has passed six resolutions relating to missing persons, all of which sought an early solution, and it understands the humanitarian scale of the problem. The UN also set up bodies, including the Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus, to look into the matter. Those bodies tried to unlock the problem of Turkey approaching Cyprus and discussing what had happened. Kofi Annan and others thought that that might bring out some truth in the matter.

The matter of the missing in Cyprus has also been referred to the European Court of Human Rights. In a judgment of 10 May 2001 in Cyprus *v.* Turkey, the Court stated that Turkey was guilty of a denial of the right to life, a denial of the right to liberty and a denial of the right of citizens not to be subjected to inhumane and degrading treatment. That was a proper and important decision.

About 1,600 Greek Cypriots are missing—men, women and children—among whom are British citizens. There is indisputable evidence that most of those people, who will never return, were detained by Turkish soldiers and/or armed Turkish Cypriot elements under the command and control of the Turkish army during the invasion. There is evidence that captured Greek Cypriots were held in concentration camps, and even the Turkish authorities do not dispute that. They have

[Mr. John Lyons]

issued lists of Greek Cypriot prisoners of war, but some of those people were never released and Turkey gave no explanation of what happened to them thereafter. People who were on the International Committee of the Red Cross list as prisoners of war or enclave persons in Turkish-occupied areas of Cyprus were not released. Greek Cypriot prisoners who sent messages to their families over the illegal radio systems are still missing.

The UN has taken a sharp and focused view on the matter. The General Assembly passed resolution 3450 in 1975 and expressed concern

> "about the fate of a considerable number of Cypriots who are missing as a result of armed conflict in Cyprus".

It reaffirmed the basic human need for those people's families in Cyprus to be informed about their fate.

Despite repeated attempts by the Government of Cyprus, relatives of the missing and international organisations, the Turkish Government have refused to provide information about the missing in Cyprus, which is contrary to international law. Turkey's insistence that it knows nothing about the fate of the missing persons has been proven internationally as nonsense—it is a lie. Turkey does know what happened, but is unwilling to reveal it.

David Hamilton (Midlothian): Does my hon. Friend agree that, given that Turkey is trying to join the European Union, progress would be made if the new Turkish Government started to find people and bodies in order to identify them and put people's minds at rest after nearly 30 years?

Mr. Lyons: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who knows much about Cyprus. He makes an important point.

Even after so much time, the international community wants Cyprus to take the initiative and come forward with information on missing persons, and wants the relatives, friends and family of the missing to do the same. As we hope to move towards resolving the outstanding issues, it would be a major plus if Turkey told us what happened. The time is right for the Government to say to the new Turkish Government, "We, as part of the international community, want some explanation about the missing persons. We have to be told exactly what took place and what the circumstances are."

The UN Assembly has taken a keen interest in the missing persons in Cyprus, as have international organisations. It questioned the Turkish authorities at length on several occasions, and even the European Parliament has taken a keen interest by discussing, debating and concluding on the matter.

Some of the 1,600 people were reservists and civilians, and accounts say that they were taken from their homes and workplaces. They were not involved in military activity. They were nothing more than citizens going about their daily work and normal activities, but there has been no explanation of why such people were caught up in the conflict, apart from the fact that they were prisoners of the Turkish army.

The question of the missing in Cyprus has been brought to international organisations' attention, and I quote a presentation made by the Cypriot Government when it came before the European Court of Human Rights:

> "In the present case, the relatives of the missing persons have been left without information about the latter's fate for a period of 25 years. In view of the circumstances in which these persons disappeared following a military intervention during which many persons were killed or taken prisoner and where the area on which the disappearances took place was subsequently sealed off and became inaccessible to the relatives, the latter must no doubt have suffered the most painful uncertainty and anxiety. While their state of distress was most acute in the first period after the 1974 events, it has not vanished with the passing of time."

Of course, it will not pass with time.

I shall give a simple example. We have all lost either a child, a relative or a friend temporarily, even if only for five or 10 minutes. When someone loses a child, even for such a short time, their sense and logic disappear completely, and they go into a fearful state—a panic. We all know that feeling, and we would never want to recreate it. Imagine, then, the nightmare experienced by someone whose relative has been taken from them for all those years, and imagine not knowing whether that person has been imprisoned, tortured or killed.

We need to find some way to assist the Cypriot Government and international organisations in coming forward, and we should put more pressure on the Turkish Government to say exactly what happened. The relatives need to know the truth; they need closure after so long. We should not allow the passing of time to result in the relegation of the issue. It must be kept at the forefront. It is up to us—the humanitarians, the democrats and those who are interested in people—to raise the matter at every opportunity, within and without Parliament. That is a responsibility on us all.

I do not intend to discuss at length the presentation made at the European Court and its decision, which I have already mentioned. However, I quote from page 234 of the report:

> "Turkey has not conducted either a prompt, or an efficient, investigation. Turkey's duty cannot be discharged through the Committee on Missing Persons, a body which in any event does not function due to a pre-condition imposed by her local administration."

It is, of course, the Turkish Government who have imposed that condition in Cyprus. The quote continues:

> "In any event, the Committee's scope of investigation is too limited to satisfy Article 27".

We should take every opportunity to insist that international organisations step up the pressure on the new Turkish Government.

The evidence before the court is extensive, and compulsory reading for those interested in the matter. We should make sure that people read it, because the case is about not what the Turkish Government think, but what the European Court thought after listening to the evidence. It based its judgment on the tragic tale that it heard.

David Hamilton: Does not my hon. Friend feel that the British Government have a special role in the matter, as they are the third party in Cyprus? We still have bases there and, irrespective of the fact that humanitarian and European organisations rightly argue for disclosure of the whereabouts of the people concerned, Britain alone should take up the matter, because of its special relationship and links. Our country has a specific responsibility.

Mr. Lyons: That is an important point, and that is why I want the British Government—alone and regardless of other considerations—to tell the Turkish Government that we held a special responsibility for the island, and so bear a special responsibility for the missing. For that reason alone, we should approach the Turkish Government. We should also ensure that the Cypriot Government know what we are doing about the matter.

Finally, I want to refer to the Dillon report for the United States Congress. It extensively considered the question of the missing and came to the same conclusions. The truth must be told and the Turkish Government are the only people who can do that. I urge the British Government to put additional pressure on them.

As I said earlier, we all understand the panic of losing a child. Fifteen hundred families, relatives and friends want to know what happened to the missing of Cyprus. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that the case is publicised every day and that every assistance is given so that we can discover what has happened to them.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Bill Rammell): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Strathkelvin and Bearsden (Mr. Lyons) on securing this debate on Cyprus and on the passionate and articulate way in which he put his arguments. The issue concerns many of us in the House, and it is right to draw attention to it.

The debate comes at an apposite time, as negotiations under United Nations auspices intensify for a settlement of the long-running Cyprus problem. Talks between Mr. Clerides and Mr. Denktash, which restarted in January 2002, are now nearing the endgame. On 10 December, the UN Secretary-General tabled his proposals for a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement in Cyprus. He rightly urged the two leaders to reach agreement, based on the proposals, by 28 February. The British Government fervently hope that that will be possible.

However, as my hon. Friend so effectively reminded us, the issue of missing persons in Cyprus, known more commonly as simply "the missing", is a particularly human one. It is not about structure of government, percentages of territory, treaties, protocols or any of the other matters that we are used to discussing in government or dealing with as politicians or diplomats, but a very real human issue. It is about people and their families and bringing some relief to a human tragedy.

I wish to point out that people are missing from both communities. Significant numbers of Greek and Turkish Cypriots fit the category.

Mr. John MacDougall (Central Fife): Will my hon. Friend comment on the effectiveness of the United Nations Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus? Does he believe that it can make effective progress in improving the situation? What measures should be taken? Would he also comment on the fact that support is weak and must be strengthened? We must get more people involved and committed to tracking the issue.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Strathkelvin and Bearsden (Mr. Lyons) on securing the debate and on the way in which he presented this very important case.

Mr. Rammell: I shall deal specifically with the role and practice of the UN Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus. The fact that the issue has not been resolved suggests that it has not made progress, but I believe that it is the appropriate vehicle for resolving the matter. I shall later discuss some of the ways in which we can help the process.

People have gone missing from both communities since the events that first wracked the island soon after its independence in 1960. As my hon. Friend the Member for Strathkelvin and Bearsden made clear, the missing are sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, uncles, fathers and grandfathers, none of whom has come back and all of whom leave behind loved ones who grieve their loss but are unable to mourn the dead. As my hon. Friend so eloquently made clear, they are unable to have closure. It is a genuine tragedy.

The issue is a reminder, if one were needed, to politicians, diplomats, mediators and others of the human cost of this political problem and of the imperative for an early solution. Every conflict bears a human cost, and Cyprus is no exception. Many thousands lost their lives as intercommunal fighting first erupted between 1963 and 1974, when extremists on both sides sought to destroy Cypriot independence. Then, in 1974, many more died in a nationalist coup backed by Greece, which sought to overthrow the elected President; and fierce fighting following Turkish military intervention some days later. Once the dust had settled on the events of 1974, Cyprus faced a division that still haunts it, and people from both communities remain missing to this day.

For the relatives of the missing, there is no respite. When one speaks to them, they say that they know, 30 and 40 years on, that their loved ones are almost certainly not coming back; but they do not know for sure. They are haunted by the thought that they may look up one day and see a familiar face again. That underlines the fact that it is a human tragedy and not a political issue.

There is growing evidence that that is now recognised in Cyprus. Indeed, at a meeting in January 2002 that was dedicated to the missing in Cyprus, Mr. Clerides and Mr. Denktash agreed that it should be regarded as a humanitarian issue—that was progress—and that it should be addressed separately from, but in parallel with, the political talks.

Unfortunately, it has not always been treated as a humanitarian issue. For too long it was treated by some, but not all politicians, on both sides of the line in Cyprus as an opportunity to score political points. That is not right. No one should seek to make political capital out of the pain felt by the families and relatives. The Government firmly believe, as do Mr. Clerides and Mr. Denktash, that the issue should be dealt with urgently as

[Mr. Rammell]

a humanitarian matter. We believe that all outstanding cases—they are real people who are missing—should be resolved quickly and with dignity, without recrimination and away from the public eye. Some people may have reservations about that, but that is the only realistic way that the issue can be resolved.

A forum has been established for dealing with these cases in that way—the United Nations Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus to which my hon. Friend referred, which is based in Nicosia. That three-person committee was established in 1981 to address impartially the issue of the missing, while retaining an international humanitarian focus. Both sides in Cyprus have referred cases to the UNCMPC, so that it can fulfil its remit in establishing what happened to the missing, and finally bring their families that much-needed closure. The committee is not part of the talks process or of any political movement or process. It is scrupulously independent. I take the opportunity to send the Government's—and, I hope, the House's—warmest appreciation for the many years' work done by Mr. Pierre Guberon as the third member of the committee.

Unfortunately, as we heard earlier, the UNCMPC has not been able fully to fulfil its remit. The committee has been able to work on only a small number of the cases referred to it. Procedural complications have dogged progress, as have political disputes, I am sorry to report. The Government call on all concerned to put aside such political and procedural concerns and to show the will necessary to resolve the outstanding cases. That is what my hon. Friend and the Government call for. In answer to my hon. Friend, I believe that the committee remains the best forum for fully addressing those concerns. I urge all to co-operate fully with the committee. There are no good reasons not to do so—only political ones.

There has been some progress, albeit limited, and I welcome the unilateral initiatives taken over the last few years to bring closure to the families affected by the tragedy. In particular, exhumations and DNA testing have enabled a number of families to afford their loved ones a proper burial, and have relieved the anguish of others by removing names from the list of Greek Cypriot missing persons. I urge all concerned to take this important work forward and to implement the agreement made on 31 July 1997 by Mr. Clerides and Mr. Denktash, which was that the two sides would exchange full information on the missing. That important point needs to be registered.

Although the issue is a poignantly humanitarian one, I believe that the political pressure of the UN settlement process, under which the two sides are in the final stages of intense negotiations, can help provide the impetus needed finally to resolve it. The UN settlement process, which is nearing its conclusion, provides the pressure and the impetus that we need finally to resolve the issue. I am pleased that the issue is being addressed in that UN settlement process. We understand that Kofi Annan's proposals of 10 December 2002 state that the two leaders shall, without delay, make every effort to resolve the issue of the missing persons by co-operating fully with the UNCMPC, exchanging full information on the missing, as agreed in July 1997, and completing any necessary inquiries, including exhumations.

My hon. Friend asked about our attitude and stance towards the Turkish Government. We can and will urge the Turkish Government to do all that they can. We must also be clear that the major responsibility for resolving the problem lies with the Greek Cypriots, the Turkish Cypriots and the United Nations—the three parties to the committee of the missing. We will make those representations to the Turkish Government. I also believe that the issue should be specifically referred to in the proposals of the UN Secretary-General, which my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have urged the two parties to accept as a basis for agreement. That is important because while the issue can and should be resolved outside the political process, the political process could none the less have a huge impact on the ability of both sides to resolve the issue. After decades of division there is an historic opportunity to heal old wounds.

Negotiations are under way to create a new state of affairs in Cyprus, which will lead to Greek and Turkish Cypriots bringing an end to their longstanding differences and joining once more as equals in a reunited Cyprus. There is clearly tremendous pressure at the moment for a settlement in Cyprus. Hon. Members will be aware of the march two weeks ago by approximately 50,000 Turkish Cypriots in favour of the plan. That is about one quarter of the population of Northern Cyprus. With that degree of support the chances of a settlement are greater than they have been for an awful long time.

Just as it is vital that the issue of the missing, which has haunted Cyprus's past and divided Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, is resolved, so it is vital that the future security of the two sides is assured. The Secretary-General's proposals provide for the physical and political security of both sides. That has been missing for a long time. Local—Cypriot—forces would be demilitarised and Greek and Turkish forces on the island would be scaled down. A new UN force would help to ensure that the implementation of the settlement talks takes place peacefully. The treaties of guarantee and alliance, to which the United Kingdom is a party, would continue. I am pleased to be able to tell the House that talks on the security aspect of the settlement between Greece and Turkey will take place on 5 and 6 February. I am sure that I am joined by all hon. Members in sending our strong support to both Greece and Turkey and our hope that they will finally be able to reach a settlement.

That bizonal solution for Cyprus set out in the UN proposals would ensure that Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots would be masters in their own houses with control over day-to-day issues that really matter to voters. The distrust and conflict of the 1960s and 1970s would finally be allowed to heal. We firmly believe that the United Nations proposals are fair and balanced and provide for a just and lasting settlement in Cyprus. Securing a settlement by 28 February by accepting the

UN Secretary-General's proposals of 10 December as a basis for agreement would allow a reunited Cyprus to sign the treaty of accession with the EU on 16 April, enabling all Cypriots to enjoy a more prosperous and peaceful future. We should not miss that opportunity. We have a real opportunity not only to take a divided Cyprus forward, but finally to bring closure to those families who have been waiting far too long to see the problem resolved. I hope that we, and everyone concerned with the Cyprus problem, can take that opportunity.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Four o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 30 January 2003

[SIR NICHOLAS WINTERTON *in the Chair*]

Democracy and Accountability in the European Union

[Relevant documents: Thirty-third Report from the European Scrutiny Committee Session 2001–02 HC 152-xxxiii, Third Special Report (Government Reply) and minutes of evidence from the European Scrutiny Committee Session 2002–03 HC 103-i.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Caplin.]*

2.30 pm

Mr. Jimmy Hood (Clydesdale): I am pleased that we have this opportunity to debate my Committee's report on democracy and accountability in the European Union and the role of national parliaments. The report is intended as the Committee's contribution to the Convention on the Future of Europe. We decided to focus on a specific aspect of the Convention's work—the role of national Parliaments and related issues of democracy and accountability—rather than cover all the main questions set out in the Laeken declaration.

Our inquiry was thorough, and it included 11 oral evidence sessions, some of which were held in Brussels. The political classes are not yet taking the Convention on the Future of Europe seriously enough, although how our lives are governed within the EU is at stake. The Convention has recently started drafting a new EU treaty, which will supersede the existing treaties. It is impossible to exaggerate its importance. For example, it is becoming clear that if the convention reaches a consensus on a new treaty, it will be difficult for member state Governments to unpick it.

Pressure is also building for a quick intergovernmental conference in 2003 to endorse the Convention's work, rather than waiting until 2004. Growing recognition of the Convention's importance is reflected in the increasing involvement of high-ranking Ministers, such as Germany's Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, and we will watch with interest to see how the Government view it and how they involve their Ministers when the Convention finishes its work.

Drafting a new treaty inevitably puts at risk the hard-won compromises incorporated in existing treaties. If other member states agree a new treaty, the position of any country that likes the old treaties, but not the new ones, will be uncomfortable, to say the least. It has to be said, too, that while the Convention process is welcome in that it allows open debate, the Convention itself is not representative. Some of its working groups have produced strongly integrationist reports, notably working group 10, which advocates qualified majority voting in matters such as criminal law. The Convention is therefore hugely significant for the United Kingdom and there is a great deal at stake in the next few months. There are, of course, opportunities as well as risks, which is why the analysis of the recommendations of my Committee's report is so important.

Instead of going through the report in detail, I intend first to say a little about the underlying problems that it examines and then highlight seven aspects of the report, taking account of developments since it was published and putting questions to the Minister. The Committee is likely to return to some subjects shortly.

The central problem that the report seeks to address is the disconnection between citizens and EU institutions—as reflected, for example, in the low turnout for European parliamentary elections. The Prime Minister, among others, has suggested that one remedy is a greater role for national Parliaments in the EU. The Committee strongly agrees, because national Parliaments generally have a much closer relationship with citizens than any of the EU institutions. National Parliaments reflect the history and culture of the country, and have fewer electors per Member. Also, Members can spend more time in their constituencies and deal with the majority of subjects that interest people.

National Parliaments, through their relatively close relationships with citizens, can help to remedy the EU's problem of democratic legitimacy. At present, democratic legitimacy rests on elected national Governments represented in the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament, but there are problems. Ministers in the Council act as legislators on their own, without most of the safeguards of a parliamentary Chamber. Most of all, they usually meet in secret. As for the European Parliament, the electorate have little knowledge of its activities and tend to vote on national issues in European Parliament elections.

Parties and individual MEPs are not held to account for their actions at EU level. On the other hand, national Parliaments have no formal role in EU law making. Their main role is to ensure that their own Ministers are made accountable for their activities in the Council, which is extremely difficult because the Council nearly always meets in secret. Unless national Parliaments acquire real influence in EU decision making, through their own Ministers or in other ways, they will never be in a position to strengthen the EU's democratic legitimacy.

Angus Robertson (Moray): To maintain intellectual consistency with that argument, does the hon. Gentleman agree that if the Council of Ministers is to be opened up to allow full transparency and accountability, the concordats regulating the relationship between the United Kingdom Government and the devolved Administrations—in which that interrelationship is secret, not transparent—should also be opened up?

Mr. Hood: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman who, along with other Committee members, actively seeks such transparency.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): My hon. Friend will recall that we discussed that topic when we met the Scottish Parliament's European Committee. Will he confirm that we recommend in the report further consideration of privileged access to the Commission for the devolved Parliament's executives and that the

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topics discussed in meetings on the concordat should at least be listed?

Mr. Hood: Yes. We pursued that issue in Committee.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): I always enjoy listening to the Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, because he speaks for us all when he says that we want a greater role for national Parliaments. Will he tell the House what progress he has made in testing the temperature in similar European Scrutiny Committees? How do they view the importance of the role of national Parliaments and increasing the responsibility that they take for their citizens, rather than delegating it more and more to Europe?

Mr. Hood: I thank the hon. Gentleman for tempting me down that road. I could put my speech away and talk for a couple of hours on that subject. Through the work of the Conference of Community and European Affairs Committees of Parliaments of the European Union, or COSAC, a realisation of the situation has been achieved, especially in respect of the work of the Convention. As a consequence, other member states are more conscious of the role of their national Parliaments, and we should welcome that.

I move on to the first of the seven issues that I intend to mention, which is the need for the Council to meet in public when it legislates. That basic principle of democratic government is observed everywhere except North Korea and, shamefully, the EU. No EU member state would tolerate for a moment any state legislating on domestic issues behind closed doors, and they should not tolerate it in the EU. Apart from it being repugnant in principle, it has specific harmful effects that are listed in the report.

Ministers are evading responsibility, believing that they can blame Brussels. Compromises can be made that suit the interests of the Governments, but those contain no genuine accountability of government, which makes the Council mostly invisible and too remote from its citizens. We welcome the fact that the UK Government favour the Council meeting in public when it legislates and we support the modest steps taken at the Seville Council to open up proceedings, but more needs to be done.

Openness should apply to all legislative procedures, including the common agricultural policy and other policies that are not subject to co-decision. It should not be necessary to go to Brussels to find out what Ministers are saying and doing. Both a *Hansard* report and a video recording should be available. Will the Minister tell us where the opposition to that is coming from, what the Government plan to do and how soon greater openness will be achieved in the Council?

Secondly, steps are needed to stop presidencies rushing through controversial legislation without allowing sufficient time for scrutiny by national Parliaments and other interested parties. As we say in the report, procedures often combine the worst of both worlds: extremely long delays when Governments are unable to agree and a lack of time for scrutiny when it is needed most.

We emphasise that time for scrutiny by national Parliaments is not an optional add-on, but a fundamental aspect of accountability. It is in the Government's interest, as well as ours, to sort out the problem, as Ministers who are pressed into agreeing proposals before those are cleared by the Committee are usually called before us to explain their activities. I am told that they do not enjoy that experience.

Our report suggests that either national scrutiny reserves should be incorporated into EU procedures or there should be a minimum time between consideration of a text by the Committee of Permanent Representatives and agreement by the Council. In either case, there should be tightly drawn provisions for urgent cases.

The Convention's working group on national Parliaments has made a proposal on giving greater force to national scrutiny reserves, and the Committee intends to reconsider the matter in order to make a more specific proposal. We should ensure that that does not fall off the Convention's agenda. One problem is that some national Parliaments make little attempt to hold their Ministers to account. Some presidencies do not understand the importance of parliamentary scrutiny, and we have sought to deal with that through COSAC.

Thirdly, the Committee supports the view that the EU six-monthly presidency should be replaced by something longer-term, which, as well as being more effective, would remove the incentive for presidencies to rush through proposals toward the end of their six months so as to clock up presidency achievements. The EU presidency has proved to be controversial, mainly because smaller countries fear that larger ones would dominate a new-style presidency, but it should be possible for an arrangement that safeguards smaller countries' interests to be made.

The Committee also notes how badly organised the Council of Ministers and, especially, the European Council are. The European Council showed evidence of inadequate preparation for meetings and bouncing items on to the agenda. We call for greater professionalism.

Fourthly, we examined the case for electing the President of the Commission, and we are against for two reasons. First, it would weaken the Commission's ability to rise above sectional interests, which is the main reason for having a Commission, and, secondly, it would change the balance among EU institutions by giving the President greater authority while making him or her less accountable in practice, but do little to reconnect citizens with EU institutions.

We were least attracted by the option of MEPs electing the Commission President. That would do nothing to remedy the disconnection of citizens, but it would create the possibility of a politically motivated President backed by a majority in the European Parliament. It is said that the French and their German friends support that proposition, and I invite the Minister to tell us whether the Government support the alleged Franco-German plan.

The fifth aspect of the report is the step to bring the European Parliament and its citizens closer together, which the Convention and its large contingent of MEPs have so far ignored, although it will become more important if the European Parliament is given more power through the extension of the co-decision process.

An important aspect of the problem is the election of MEPs through party lists in multi-Member constituencies, at least in the UK. Will the Minister tell us how the change to the election system in the EU has affected the relationship between MEPs and constituents? The system needs to be re-examined. The UK electorate have universally rejected proportional representation. If the political classes ignore the electorate, they will have little to complain about when the electorate return the compliment by disengaging from the electoral process. That is why the Committee recommends a return to the British tradition of using first past the post for European elections.

Mr. Connarty: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way once again. Does he agree that although a spectrum of opinions was expressed during the Committee's debate, most firmly suggested moving away from the current system, which has disengaged people? If we do not move toward the Committee's recommendation on first past the post, we must have a system that at least has constituencies, so that constituents believe that they have a representative rather than somebody chosen from a large list to go to Brussels who then loses touch with the electorate for ever.

Mr. Hood: Yes. My hon. Friend has a valid point. I am sure that all Members have been burning the midnight oil while avidly reading the Committee's report, and they will have noticed that that recommendation was carried by the Chairman's casting vote. I was also voting on behalf of absent members of the Committee.

We will not help to promote the involvement of the electorate by confusing people with different systems of election for different democratically elected bodies—local government, devolved Parliaments and national Parliaments. All the evidence that I have seen suggests that people prefer first past the post because they are used to, and comfortable with, the system and because it allows them to make a decision.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Perhaps the Chairman of the Committee remembers that the amendment that led to that great change in the report was prompted by a suggestion of mine. The amendment was carried, which shows that we are considering a genuine all-party Committee report in the national interest and on a matter that goes to the heart of democracy in the United Kingdom. I concur with what the hon. Gentleman says.

Mr. Hood: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out, as a matter of record, that his amendment was made, with the help of my casting vote. That amendment succeeded, but, if I remember rightly, his other 152 failed.

Mr. Colin Challen (Morley and Rothwell): Did the Committee take evidence from European countries that operate PR systems to elect MEPs and ask whether they agreed with the Committee's conclusions?

Mr. Hood: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful point. In my experience, when we discuss COSAC countries, we do so with other member states. Member states with PR sometimes look in envy at the UK system, which produces a majority Government. Many would like a system better than their own.

I joined the Select Committee on European Legislation two years after the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash). I met Mr. Andreotti in 1989, when he was the Italian President, although I do not know where he is now, or whether he is in prison yet. He had been an elected Member of Parliament since 1946 and, some 40 years later, had been in every Government during those years—there had been 53 elections. That is a fairly strong point against PR, but I do not want to concentrate too much on that aspect. I feel that I have given it fair coverage.

Angus Robertson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hood: I will, if it is on a different point.

Angus Robertson: No, it is on the same point.

Mr. Hood: Then I will not give way.

The report argues for more effective enforcement of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. Paragraph 106 gives a convincing explanation of why no EU institution is willing to comply with the principle of subsidiarity. The report points out that, in contrast, national Parliaments have no in-built institutional interest in transferring powers to the EU. We therefore conclude that national Parliaments should have a role in enforcing the principle.

The Convention's working groups on subsidiarity and on national Parliaments have since supported that by proposing an early-warning mechanism, whereby if a specified proportion of national Parliaments object to a proposal on the ground of subsidiarity, the Commission would have to re-examine it. In principle, that is a major development. It would give national Parliaments a formal, but small, role for the first time. In practice, however, it is not clear that it would have much impact, as there is nothing to prevent the Commission and other institutions from pressing on regardless.

If national Parliaments are to be subsidiarity watchdogs, they must be able to bite as well as bark. Will the Government support efforts to give a specified proportion of national Parliaments the power to block a Commission proposal? We considered ways of giving national Parliaments greater influence in EU policy-making, although such proposals tend to bring MEPs out in hot rashes. Some can even be caught foaming at the mouth.

I should emphasise what we are not proposing. We specifically reject the idea of a second Chamber and we do not want national Parliaments to get involved in the detail of scrutinising EU legislation and expenditure. Even if anyone wanted that to happen, MPs would be too busy to do it. We are not suggesting a change to the lines of accountability in the EU, and we are certainly not suggesting the creation of a new EU institution to tangle up the legislative process.

What we have in mind is national parliamentarians having a role in scrutiny and consultation that does not put too great a burden on national MEPs and that contributes to greater knowledge of, and interest in, EU matters in the national Parliaments. Rather than taking

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anything away from MEPs, that would strengthen the ability of national Parliaments to represent their citizens on such matters and to influence Ministers.

Members are well aware of the low level of interest in EU matters at Westminster. That is a serious problem, and it should concern us all. The European Scrutiny Committee advocates meetings that would bring together MEPs and MPs to scrutinise the Commission's annual work programme and question Commissioners on it; scrutinise other annual programmes, such as those of the European Council; and consider major reports, such as the annual report on the common foreign and security policy. MPs would be able to ask questions and put views directly to senior EU figures, although their role would remain one of scrutiny.

Mr. Steen: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the low level of interest in the work of this Parliament and of the Committee is not alleviated by the fact that the Committee's meetings are held in private?

Mr. Hood: That is a valid point, which, as the hon. Gentleman knows, the Committee addressed in its report. The Committee is committed to examining ways in which more of its work can be done in public. However, the Committee meets in public more often than in earlier years and many of its evidence sessions are televised. We are doing our little bit, but we want to improve.

Giscard d'Estaing, President of the Convention, proposes a congress. That proposal has encountered strong opposition, but the precise mechanism is not crucial. The congress could be a development on existing co-operation between the European Parliament and national Parliaments. At present, that co-operation consists of the European Parliament calling meetings—when it feels like it, on whatever subject it wishes and without consultation—and then complaining if national parliamentarians do not attend. National parliamentarians need a real stake and a real voice in that co-operation, but they lack those at present.

It is time for MPs and MEPs to decide what should be in the inter-parliamentary agreement proposed in the European Parliament's Napoletano report. I believe that the fears of MEPs are unjustified, and the EU has a lot to gain from involving national parliamentarians more.

It would be nice to end on an optimistic note, but I do not believe that it is realistic to do so. Despite the excellent work of the representative of the House of Commons, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), who chaired the Convention working group on national Parliaments, it is not clear that the Convention is likely to make any proposal that would make a significant difference to the role of national Parliaments. If that is not put right, the Convention will not achieve the aim of reconnecting citizens with the EU. National Parliaments could contribute greatly to a more democratic and less remote EU, but only if they are given the opportunity so to do.

2.59 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): We are all grateful to the hon. Member for Clydesdale (Mr. Hood) for his exposition of the issues at stake. I entirely agree with his remarks about the importance of the Convention, on which I serve as a representative of the House of Commons. The Prime Minister said that the decision whether the United Kingdom joins the euro is the most important constitutional issue facing the country. The outcome of the Convention will be of equal importance for the future of Parliament, our courts and our self-government as a country.

The developments in the Convention over the past few weeks added to my alarm that we are not fulfilling its prime purpose, which is to create a more democratic Europe that is closer to its citizens. That mandate was given to the Convention in the Laeken declaration, and pious words were spoken at the beginning of our proceedings back in February about the importance of re-engaging the ordinary citizen and closing the democratic deficit, but recent events have somewhat obscured that mission and old vested interests and institutions are increasingly reasserting their requirements for more powers and influence at the expense of the primary role of creating a more democratic European Union.

It was useful to have attended, and indeed given evidence to, the European Scrutiny Committee, and to have read its reports. I have frequently quoted from those reports in meetings in Brussels. In the plenary session on 28 October, I quoted directly the remarks of the hon. Member for Clydesdale, who responded critically to the proposals to give national Parliaments a greater role over subsidiarity. He described the proposals as inadequate and a major disappointment, and both I and my co-representative, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), used his opinions and those of the Committee to strengthen our demand for Parliament to have a greater say. We know that most ordinary voters exercise their democratic choices primarily at national level. Many, including myself, would say that to create a supranational democracy in a continent as diverse as Europe is probably impossible, certainly in present circumstances. I do not know whether that is true, but we certainly need to rebuild the democratic credentials of the European Union on the firm basis of parliamentary democracy.

Mr. Cash: Will my right hon. Friend acknowledge that it is a pity that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) is not here today? There may be some good reason for that, but given what emerged from the working group on national Parliaments that she chaired, the proposals are almost a waste of time. The further recommendation that European Union proposals could be blocked by two thirds of national Parliaments is constitutional nonsense.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The hon. Lady is probably not here because she is in Brussels. She is a member of the Praesidium.

Mr. Hood: To be helpful, my hon. Friend was in the House earlier this morning and has sent her apologies because she has to attend a family funeral.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I know that the hon. Lady would want to be here. To pick up on what was said in the Committee's deliberations last year, in favour of stronger rights than simple consultation on the subsidiarity principle, she and I are both trying to strengthen those proposals. She has proposed a yellow card and red card system, in which a small number of national Parliaments could request, and a larger number could require, that the Commission withdraw proposals that breach the subsidiarity principle.

Angus Robertson: The right hon. Gentleman may, because of his close involvement in the Convention, know better than I and other hon. Members where we might find the proposal. The conclusions of working group 4, which was chaired by the hon. Lady, include no express mention of yellow cards, red cards or any system that can be associated at all closely with that characterisation.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The hon. Gentleman is right in his implication that the proposals are not firm. Certainly, they have not been taken up formally by the Convention. Indeed, I share the view of the hon. Member for Clydesdale that the original recommendations of the working group were inadequate. A reason for that—and this perhaps follows from a remark of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash)—is that policing the subsidiarity principle may be desirable, but it is too modest an aim. After all, that principle has been in treaty law for 10 years now. It was included under the Maastricht treaty. Giving national Parliaments the job of enforcing it is really an admission of defeat, in that the principle has not been observed. It is too modest a concession to give those Parliaments the job of doing something that should have happened anyway for the past decade. We must bid much higher.

Mr. Steen: My right hon. Friend is describing the principle of subsidiarity as a sort of Moriarty and Sherlock Holmes battle—no one quite knew who survived that. Conservative Members believe that subsidiarity should be strengthened and that national Parliaments should have an increased role, while the role of the Commission and the European Parliament should decrease in matters that are peculiarly significant to the member state. Could he give us some idea whether, as the Convention has developed, other member states have felt that national Parliaments and subsidiarity are as important as we in this country know them to be?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I am not an expert on Sherlock Holmes, but that particular battle was, I think, never wholly resolved. There was always another book coming out in which the final battle was to take place. So it is with subsidiarity.

Despite the fact that the principle has been in the treaty all these years, there has been a steady accretion of power by the European Union and its institutions. Even if we manage to do things better in future, there remain in the acquis communautaire many breaches of the principle. There is no appetite in the Convention for revisiting the past and putting right the breaches.

To give a direct answer to my hon. Friend, very few other member states have the same tradition of parliamentary democracy and instinct for self-government that drive this House in its demand that we should find a better way of deciding things, nearer to the citizens. Therefore, we—by which I mean myself and my co-representative, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston—are very much in a minority. However, I think that we are right and that we have public opinion on our side. We are fulfilling the Laeken declaration if we find new ways in which to bring powers nearer to the citizen, either at national or at sub-national level. There are strong demands from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and from local authorities to repatriate many measures that are decided in the remote tier of government in Europe.

Angus Robertson: On that point, will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the British Government's representative is not in favour of powers being passed down to sub-state legislatures and has made no attempt to support measures that would bring that about?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I cannot speak for the Government, but I can speak for my party. We want to make a reality of devolution. One does not devolve powers to the citizen by taking more powers upwards to the European Union. That is what has been and is going on, and it has to stop. The only way in which we can get powers to the Scottish Parliament or to the Welsh Assembly, which is an internal matter for the United Kingdom Parliament, is to bring them back to the UK from Brussels. I shall join the hon. Gentleman in that endeavour, if he wishes.

I strongly support what the Committee has said about the need to go further than simply trying to ensure that subsidiarity is observed. We must get national Parliaments into the legislative process. At present, we are at the end of the food chain. A deluge of legislation is initiated and passed above our heads, and we have no real mechanism to stop or influence it. The volumes are increasing and many of the proposals are not only inadequately debated but not debated at all.

One of the Committee's earlier recommendations was that A points should be considered. Those are decisions that are agreed at official level in the European Union and are then passed without any discussion by the Council of Ministers. I was pleased to see that the Committee recommended that that should be considered. Sadly, it was not supported by the Government's response. To show the scale of the problem, a parliamentary written answer says:

> "The list of A points requiring clearance from London over the past five years amounts to over 8,000 items."—[*Official Report*, 14 May 2002; Vol. 385, c. 513W.]

That is a submerged part of the European Union. There are literally hundreds of working committees in Europe making important decisions about technical standards or implementation and compliance in which Ministers are not involved at all. I know, because when I was a Minister at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office my responsibilities included Europe. I admit that I failed to bring that huge area of decision making under even the vestiges of democratic control. The agenda and minutes of those committees are not published, and nobody knows where they sit or what they do, but they take important decisions affecting the people whom we represent. The Committee was right that the Convention looks down into that submerged part of the

[Mr. Heathcoat-Amory]

EU and tries to bring it under at least ministerial if not parliamentary control. That has not been supported by the Government.

Mr. Cash: Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the reasons why the European Union is going nowhere economically is the over-regulation that emerges from the failure of the system to control what comes out of the bureaucracy? That is going to accumulate. It has now reached proportions that are so vast that it is impossible to imagine how anybody would ever be able to gain control over it.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Yes. The European Union's itch to regulate and legislate is enormous because it has the luxury of legislating while the pain of raising the taxes to pay for it falls on national Governments, and that is having the most unfortunate economic consequences. One of my concerns in the Convention is that the economic future of Europe is not getting anything like the same attention as its political future. That is very noticeable in the debate in Germany. Last year, Germany re-elected a left-wing Government, but unemployment has continued to rise and it is now well over 4 million. The German Chancellor said that they cannot reduce interest rates because of the euro, and they cannot raise expenditure or cut taxes because of the stability pact—what the President of the Commission calls the stupid pact—so they are left with deregulation. At present, the European Union is introducing more measures on temporary and agency workers that will further restrict and regulate German and other European labour markets. There is complete disjunction between what the Germans say is necessary for their economy and the practice of the European Union.

Mr. Wayne David (Caerphilly): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the great success of the European project to date has been the successful completion of a single market that has created more jobs and more prosperity than we have ever seen? That is why so many countries want to join it.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The single market is being overtaken by world trade talks and by the creation of global free trade; the tariff wall between member states and the outside world is very low compared with when we joined the European Union. The significance of the customs union is much less than it was. Many crimes have been committed in the name of the single market; it has given the green light to enormous and unnecessary over-regulation, which is regrettably reflected in high unemployment. By world standards, the European Union is a low-growth, highly regulated, high-unemployment zone, and the Germans are extremely worried about it even if the hon. Gentleman is not.

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the regulations introduced by the European Union have broken down all the barriers to trade between the 15 member states? Every regulation that is introduced in Europe supersedes regulations that would have stopped trade at national level: they have facilitated the growth of the European Union, not hindered it. Apart from this country and Denmark, most countries feel that regulation is working and is benefiting them. It is also significant that this country and Denmark are not in the euro and do not benefit from the abolishing of different currencies, which is another barrier to trade.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: That is a highly selective reading of what is happening in Europe. I do want to engage in a discussion on the euro, but I must observe that the Germans whom I meet on the Convention are extremely worried about their economy. We should all be worried about German unemployment. It matters less when a small country slows down, but when the economic motor of the European Union records almost zero growth and when its unemployment stands at well over 4 million, the rest of Europe is in danger of catching an economic cold. The Germans attribute the problem to the over-regulation and rigidities that are at least in part attributable to the European Union. There is nothing that they can do about it, as they cannot get out of the euro. The stupid pact is still in the treaty, and deregulation means that it will require the consent of all other member states before they can start to dismantle the barriers to new jobs. I am afraid that I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's analysis.

To return to my central point, Parliament should be even more ambitious in its demands on the Convention. It is becoming a bargaining session between the existing institutions, and national Parliaments are in danger of missing out. The Commission has a well-organised lobby and is represented in the Convention. All the working groups have Commission representatives, whose sole task is to defend and extend its interests. The European Parliament, too, thinks as a cohesive body. National Parliaments are not European institutions, however, and cannot organise themselves in quite the same way.

Moreover, member states, and particularly the Franco-German alliance, are beginning to assert themselves. Our last plenary session devoted a great deal of time to debating the French-German plan for two elected presidents—one for the Council and one for the Commission. That will do nothing to link the European Union with its citizens; it will simply create more presidents and politicians, giving more titles and status to the elite class that runs the European Union. The plan will not address the democratic deficit at all.

I thought that it was British policy to resist an elected Commission President, and the Committee certainly opposed such a proposal. Page 7 of the Government's response records that the Committee was

> "not in favour of the Commission President being elected."

That comes from paragraph 80 of the original report. At the time—last year—the Government supported that view, and page 7 of their response states:

> "We therefore do not believe it would be sensible to politicise the Commission through the election of its President."

There was a happy elision of the Government, the Opposition and the Committee against an elected Commission President. However, it has not lasted.

In the recent plenary session, the Secretary of State for Wales, who represents the Government, supported the French-German proposal word for word. I was sitting near him at the time, and that is exactly what he said. His speech is reported in the 111th edition of the *Brussels Bulletin*, which is put together by British officials for hon. Members' guidance. The Government now support the French Government plan, including the proposal for an elected Commission President.

That is a regrettable development, because it will be impossible for the Government to retrieve any concessions that they subsequently regret. The Convention is turning into an intergovernmental conference, partly because of the institutional bargaining to which I referred, and partly because France, Germany and other member states are engaging at Government level. It will therefore be impossible for the Government to retrieve matters at a subsequent intergovernmental conference, as they seem to believe that they can.

Mr. Hendrick: Does the right hon. Gentleman not recall his Government rejecting the proposed presidency of Jean-Luc Dehaene and insisting on Jacques Santer? We all know what happened to him. Is it not perhaps better to leave it to people in Brussels who know who they are dealing with to choose a Commission President?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The election of Jean-Luc Dehaene would have been a disaster for this country. A more powerful Commission making mistakes on an even bigger scale would have been detrimental to British interests.

The corruption and mismanagement of the Commission that eventually brought about its downfall were deeply rooted in its mode of working and its structure, which long pre-dated Mr. Santer's accession to the presidency. It is flawed as an institution, and that could not be cured by making the least democratic European institution—the Commission—more powerful by making its president elected and therefore making it able to assert itself over other institutions and national Parliaments. That is why I entirely agree with the earlier observations about that, and I regret that they are not now supported by the Government.

I cannot recall whether the Committee Chairman referred to the ever closer union clause in the treaty, but the Committee recommended that it should be removed. I agree with him: it is prejudicial to include in the treaty a presumption in favour of ever closer union, to be used by the European Court of Justice as a reason for further transfer of powers. That is why the Committee, I and a number of members of the Convention from other member states agreed that that should go.

Again, I was disappointed that the Government did not support that recommendation, and the response was simply a waffly reference to the need to ensure that the language of the treaties provides a clear and transparent guide to the policies and objectives of the European Union. We can all agree with that, but the Committee thinks that the clause should go, and I agree. There is a chance that it will go, but I am afraid that it will not be because of pressure from the British Government.

On the existing scrutiny procedure, it is important that we in the national Parliaments do our bit to make a reality of our existing powers. Indeed, I am glad that that has the Government's general support: they agree that we need to influence the Council of Ministers in such a way. However, their response does not do full justice to the long list of examples given on page 22 of the report, which says that the scrutiny process is something of a shambles because of the late submission of documents—or, in my experience, because of wrong documents being submitted. I remember attending a Standing Committee to debate the European arrest warrant that had to be adjourned because the Department for Trade and Industry had supplied the wrong documents. It meant that when scrutiny did take place, it was only a day or two before final decisions were to be made. In no realistic sense was the House able to express an opinion and hon. Members could not get their reservations and recommendations acted on by the Government.

We must be more ambitious in our demands. Such things as the scrutiny reserve ought to be respected and enforced, perhaps in the treaty, so that it cannot be overridden, except in extreme and unusual circumstances, by the Council of Ministers. The Commission ought not to have the monopoly of initiative on legislation. It is absurd, in a so-called democratic Europe, that 20 people in Europe, none of them elected, have a monopoly on legislative initiative. If a member state with such a system was to apply for membership of the European Union, it would undoubtedly be turned down because it would be in breach of the Copenhagen criteria on its democratic structures. Therefore, the European Union is not fit for membership of the European Union. We must bring scrutiny under the control of an elected Parliament.

Mr. Hendrick: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I wish to conclude. I know that other hon. Members wish to contribute, but I have two final points to make.

I say to the Minister that the United Kingdom Government must back the Committee's demands. I have given several examples of how the Government have not acted on even modest recommendations by the Committee. That is clear from the response that they have given and their actions in the Convention.

Finally, the Government must make no more concessions in the Convention that they will be unable to retrieve. If we are to create a democratic Europe, they must be bolder in their demands; resist the community method taking over from the intergovernmental method of decision making; and improve—indeed, democratise—the intergovernmental method to involve national Parliaments and those whom we represent. If we do not do that, the Convention's very purpose will have failed.

3.31 pm

Mr. Colin Challen (Morley and Rothwell): It has dawned on me only in the past 20 minutes or so that I am probably the only Back Bencher present who is not a member of the Committee or here for some other purpose connected to Europe or their position. I have not fled—I am still here, and I congratulate the Committee on an excellent report. Much of it, in

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language that is plain and easy to understand, deals with the internal arrangements for decision making in the European Union. There is no doubt that the internal decision-making processes are necessarily complex, and they probably will remain so. That suggests that the task to make the EU more publicly accountable, at a time when it is being greatly enlarged, will be very difficult.

Enlargement is having the immediate effect of reducing democracy in the EU, inasmuch as the Europewide limits on MEPs are leading to a reduction in representation in existing member states. I note that in paragraphs 92 and 93, in which the Committee considers the relationship between the European Parliament and citizens, the only method suggested to enhance MEPs' relationship with voters is to bring back first-past-the-post elections. In such a good report, I regret that that is such a slim section. Much more must be done, and the voting system does not have much to do with it. MEPs who are trying to represent more than 500,000 voters effectively will still find that a tall order, and it is not helped by their having to do so in two different Parliament buildings, hundreds of miles from each other. Moreover, the media show little interest in any European matter, unless it is bad news.

There should be greater representation, not less. However, that does not necessarily mean more MEPs. We only have to look to the role of our Select Committees to see that parliamentarians can develop their representational role without increasing numbers. The question is how to apply that model to the EU. There could be EU Select Committees, and I see no reason why they should not include national parliamentarians. I cannot see why they could not also bring on board expertise outwith elected Members.

We must develop a strong interrogative culture in the EU. Perhaps I have not read enough on the matter, but I am not aware of any external scrutiny being deployed to investigate EU corruption, the amount of waste that goes on, or the inefficiencies, which some people might see as normal for such a large, multinational organisation.

Mr. Cash: The hon. Gentleman may or may not be interested to know that, nearly 10 years ago, I promoted a campaign in the House to try to get the functions of our Public Accounts Committee, which has a first-class record of investigating fraud, replicated elsewhere in the European Union, culminating in the Court of Auditors. He will not be surprised to hear that there was anything but enthusiasm for that, because, frankly, most of the other countries do not want anyone to investigate the fraud in the first place.

Mr. Challen: I am grateful for that intervention. It would be better for the hon. Gentleman to find allies in other member states before he launches such a proposal. However, a good point is that national Parliaments across the European Union have different models of scrutiny that the EU could employ. As the report suggests, it is difficult in the EU to pin down responsibility, so we should look for those new models. The EU's relationships might be enhanced if citizens panels or juries were established to consider proposed legislation and, just as important, the impact of legislation. The report says that 70 per cent. of European legislation is prepared by junior civil servants. Once drafted, such legislation will no doubt develop a life of its own, with only professional lobbyists aware of its progress or able to influence it. When it is passed into law, how is it monitored? Does anyone stop to ask whether it is working?

We must all be aware of the debate now raging over EU legislation on health food supplements. The matter has led to one of the largest postbags that I have had since being elected. Since the source of the law is European, I suppose I could just tell my constituents to contact their MEP about it, but it falls to national Governments to implement EU legislation, and that is where one of the major problems occurs in accountability. How do we tell people, and not least those who are perhaps not motivated to vote, where all the different responsibilities lie, and that an MP has little influence over such things?

It can be argued that decisions ultimately rest with representatives of national Governments in the Council, but that is true only in a limited sense, whether or not Council meetings are held in public, as they should be. The EU is more than the sum of its parts. Although our national representatives can be questioned, Parliament has little power to do much about it.

What if the legislation is badly drafted or misconceived? There seems little possibility of independent examination or critique that could remove the suspicion that behind the scenes the whole thing has been cast in stone well before it emerges into the public domain. An enlarged EU might well add to that perception. Thus when matters reach a certain level of controversy—the health food supplements directive is a good example—the whole matter should be called in for full, open and transparent examination by citizens' panels, which could include democratically elected representatives.

I can think of other matters that could benefit from such an approach. In pursuit of a single postal market, our services now face a make-or-break test, which, when it has been applied elsewhere in Europe, has led to unwanted consequences, such as higher costs, reduced services and redundancies. What opportunities are available to any citizen to influence such decisions, apart from a vote every five years? I suggest that citizens' panels be given not only the power to investigate issues but powers similar to those of an ombudsman to force the institution in question to respond and take action. Failure to do so could be referred to the European Court of Justice.

To ensure that such panels carry out their duties properly, they should have their own staff, separate from those answerable to the Commission. They could be chaired by MEPs. National parliamentarians, with their vast wealth of experience, could also play a part, adding gravitas and wisdom, and ensuring that a strong relationship develops among representatives at all levels. Although I support Statewatch's call for a European freedom of information Act, I can see that some documents might have to remain confidential. Citizens' panels, however, should be given access to all documents and officials. They should be able to see records of all contacts between EU officials and lobbyists, and all such contacts should be minuted. They should be able to follow the audit trail of any decision from start to finish, without fear or favour. The creation of citizens' panels is one proposal that I hope will be taken seriously. Indeed, perhaps it already is, and I claim no originality for the idea.

I believe there is an institutional weakness in another area, too. We hear much about the Europe of the regions, but it has no meaning in a parliamentary sense, at least as far as England goes. The Government have recognised that the English regional democratic dimension is missing, and it is appropriate that that should—as far as European matters go—be dealt with immediately. I say that not least because the electorate are a long way off giving their approval for the establishment of regional assemblies.

Much of our regional economic development strategy has a European dimension, and we should have regional European parliamentary bodies that comprise the relevant Members of both Parliaments and are empowered to oversee regional economic developments. That would remedy the problem with the present arrangement, whereby MPs seem to act only as consultees as and when a strategy is up for review. Directly elected regional assemblies may adequately fill the democratic deficit when they are created, but MPs and MEPs should have a greater role to play, especially in those regions that choose not to go down the assembly route.

The European Union's democratic deficit must be tackled openly and honestly, from both within the institution and without. If the public are not engaged more in the EU's processes, its credibility with them will continue to slide. People should be able to make choices without being bombarded with messages and methods that are cynically designed to get the right result. Criticisms can be levelled, for example, at the way in which the Irish were forced to vote twice for the Nice treaty because the turnout in the first referendum was said not to be high enough. On the basis of that argument, a great many MEPs in this country would be forced to stand again for election. Democratic legitimacy, it seems, is a variable thing.

Denmark will probably hold a referendum on joining the euro in a couple of years' time. However, it is being suggested that the question will be whether to join the euro or leave the EU altogether—one that is guaranteed to get the right result. I wonder whether the Swedes will be asked to consider the same kind of proposition. Presumably, we in Britain will at least have a referendum on a question that springs from a study of the famous five economic tests. We can therefore look forward to much transparency and objectivity when it is our turn to vote. The irony, of course, is that the euro referendum will take place to satisfy the needs of internal party politics more than anything else, and I am not referring only to the Labour party.

People stop voting when they think that it will make no difference. As far as the EU goes, the old anarchist slogan, "Don't bother to vote, because the Government always wins," is coming true by default. Now, as it faces radical enlargement, the EU needs a radical reassessment of its relationship with European citizens. If it thinks that it can plod on with a few internal adjustments—shuffling the cast of characters and making some a tad more accountable—it is making a big mistake. It will be like throwing open the first-class salon of the bureaucratic Titanic to its third-class passengers just as the ship hits the iceberg.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next speaker, I should note that I intend to start the winding-up speeches at about 10 minutes to 5, so we do not have that much time. I therefore call on hon. Members to show some self-discipline so that all those who are keen to participate can do so.

3.43 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stone): My concern about the Select Committee report is reflected in the minority report, which I published with my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Angela Watkinson). I agreed with a substantial portion of the report. However, I have been on the relevant Select Committees—the European Scrutiny Committee and its forerunner, the European Legislation Committee—since 1985 and I have undertaken other activities in the House over most of the past 20 years. I have therefore become somewhat familiar with the subject, and I was stimulated to table something in the order of 130 or 140 amendments to the report. I can summarise them in one word: democracy. Ultimately, they all pointed to the fact that, when we considered the necessary recommendations, the element that was lacking was not whether criticisms had been made but what action would be taken. That is crucial. The Chairman of the Committee made a splendid speech, but we keep hearing suggestions about investigation and that we must analyse the matter further, and the plain fact is that that is no longer enough, and it has not been for a long time.

I go back to the Maastricht treaty, not to mention the Nice and Amsterdam treaties, to which, collectively, I tabled about 500 or 600 amendments, none of which was frivolous. In fact, the Minister's predecessor was good enough to write a personal note to me, in which he commended the nature of my amendments to the Nice treaty. Such matters are serious and go to the heart of our democratic system.

We must decide whether the proposals in the report and the tendency towards the European constitution, which has been virtually stitched up by the European Convention and is exceedingly unrepresentative of public opinion both throughout Europe and in this country, show that an extremely heavy locomotive is thundering along the rails, as we speak. Anyone with a smidgen of realisation about the political implications of the report would be staggered by its lack of intelligent observation and analysis. The European Scrutiny Committee, as a whole, ought to be commended for the seriousness with which it tackled so many such questions, but it has not come up with sufficient answers.

I understand the problem. The whole European integration process, the role of the Commission and its draft treaty proposals duck the fundamental question of accountability and how questions can be asked of unelected Commissioners, for example. I am glad that the report reflects the problems of the lack of transparency in the proceedings. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) told us of his experiences when he was Minister for Europe and the difficulties that he experienced because of the

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activities of Coreper and the A and B list points system. Such procedures are undemocratic, and that matters very much indeed.

I suspect that the train will crash into heavy buffers because of the massive over-regulation that has resulted from a lack of scrutiny and accountability. That will lead to an economic decline that will generate high unemployment. I have written about the matter and make no apology for saying again that the unemployment levels that will follow in the wake of such a regrettable state of affairs will stoke up again the dreadful spectres that we have seen in the past. We will have a mixture of high unemployment, authoritarianism and a lack of democracy.

In certain parts of Europe developments have emerged such as the regrettable advance of Le Pen in France and Haider in Austria. Germany has serious problems in that respect, too. If they escalate as a result of a lack of accountability and scrutiny, if the safety valves of the national Parliaments are taken away—as they are—by the progress of European integration towards a European constitution, and if the democratic deficit continues to increase, there is no doubt that there will be a serious political crisis in Europe.

Angus Robertson: Does the hon. Gentleman welcome the fantastic success of the democratic and pro-EU parties in Austria in its recent general election? They all gained at the expense of the Mr. Haider's anti-EU Freedom party.

Mr. Cash: I do, but I also notice that Mr. Haider has not given up. The circumstances that I described are more likely to lead to difficulties in the future, which will not be confined to the countries that we have mentioned. I have great respect for the many European countries that have done fantastically well in developing their democracies. However, those democracies may not all be as deeply rooted as we would like, and by definition not as well rooted as in this country, and we must be extremely wary about how combustible a lack of democracy can be in disadvantageous economic circumstances.

On the question of national Parliaments, the whole concept of ministerial responsibility and accountability has been severely diminished by the way in which the EU has progressed in its constitutional quest. The qualified majority voting system affects each country. There are now some 27 member states, if and when the new accession countries decide to hold their referendums. Poland may say no—we shall see. Qualified majority voting means that decisions taken by Governments in Cabinets such as in 10 Downing street are continually overridden.

When one moves way from the less difficult areas of commerce and trade—although those are not without difficulty—to accepting qualified majority voting on foreign policy matters, which the Prime Minister has virtually agreed to do in today's *Financial Times*, one moves into very dangerous waters. That also applies to defence and in respect of the levers of government as a whole. Hon. Members, even some members of my own party, may be glad to hear the consequences of such actions. I remember well that in 1991, Chevénement said to Lord Hurd, "If the Maastricht treaty goes through you will no longer be able to go to the Gulf." We have heard exactly the same sort of statement from the French Minister only 10 days ago.

The Minister is shaking his head or looking puzzled, I am not sure which, but I assure him that I have the facts at my fingertips. One must be able to carry through the national interest, especially in these dangerous and difficult times. The Prime Minister recognises that there are issues of massive national interest involved and he is struggling to find ways of solving them, as we saw in yesterday's exchange in Prime Minister's Question Time with regard to article 3 of the European convention on human rights. He knows that article 3 must be addressed. That is an uncomfortable subject for him, because by the same token, in a rather Janus-like fashion—or is it a third way? I can never work out which is which—he is promoting the European idealism that is expressed in the remarks that he made in the *Financial Times* today. He is promoting the European security and defence policy and integration more and more. I challenged him when he returned from St. Malo, and I hesitate to suggest how often I have had to challenge him on the Floor of the House in relation to this further integrationist process. The plain fact is that one cannot have it both ways. One cannot say that one wants more integration, yet still deal with such problems as terrorism that are implicit in the European convention on human rights.

There is a question about legal personality, which I do not need to talk about in detail because it is a rather arcane subject. I have been called on to give advice on that matter in another capacity. I say an emphatic no to legal personality in respect of the European Union because that would emasculate national Parliaments. The problem would go further—this is my real point—and the people who vote in general elections would be emasculated, because if their representatives cannot reflect their views in Parliament though the principle of accountability and our parliamentary process, everything is brought to nothing. That is exactly what is going on.

By the way, Mr. Deputy Speaker, whether you would agree with me is a matter that others must establish from the records of the House, but all I can say to you is this: the bottom line is that the matter is ultimately about democracy itself.

The problems of the concentric circles plan and the whole business of the enhanced co-operation procedure, which is endorsed further and deeper by the European constitution, are yet further examples of creating massive barriers to the right to ask questions and accountability. The question in the report about how to adjust procedures to make things better is not just technical. We need the procedures because as Maine said in the famous book "Ancient Law", justice is to be found in the interstices of procedure.

We also have to examine the historical and political landscape in order to make a judgment about practical considerations. I mentioned that the Prime Minister is on the rack over asylum and immigration and the connection of that with terrorism. One cannot just make a statement on pieces of paper subject to the acquis communautaire, which means that they cannot be changed, and then turn round and say, "Well, actually, we've got a real problem here. Terrorists are rife in our land and there is the prospect of more to come." We could not do anything about that because the charter of fundamental rights, which is to become legally binding, and/or the European convention on human rights bind us in a fashion that is reminiscent of what Rousseau said about a social contract: why do people bind themselves in order to be free?

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the most fantastic U-turns made by the Government relates to the charter of fundamental rights? We understand that our representative at the Convention, the Secretary of State for Wales, who was previously Minister for Europe, said that the British Government would accept its incorporation into a treaty as long as that did not apply in UK law. My hon. Friend will know that that is nonsense in practice.

Mr. Cash: Indeed, it is complete nonsense. Mr. Richard Plender QC appeared before the Committee when the former Minister for Europe, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz), said that the charter of fundamental rights would be no more than the *Beano*—I had words with him about that in Committee. Subsequently, we had the expert opinion from Mr. Plender, who said that whether or not that was made legally binding, it would be interpreted and used by the courts in a similar fashion. We now know that the Government are committed to the principle of a European constitution, with everything that that involves in respect of diminishing and depriving the people of this country of their right to vote, and incorporating the legal phantasmagoria that comes through the charter of fundamental rights.

Mr. Hendrick: I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Gentleman, even though I disagree with him on many things. However, I wish that he and the leader of the Conservative party would not indulge in this fire and brimstone stuff about terrorists being rife in this country as a result of our having relaxed the immigration laws. He will be aware that we have not signed up to the Schengen agreement—the UK is one of the few EU countries that has not done so. I wish that he would withdraw from the kind of stuff that he is coming out with.

Mr. Cash: I am more than happy to accept the hon. Gentleman's gentle rebuke. I understand the spirit in which he made it, but he knows as well as I do that there is no one in the House who is less racist than I. I take enormous interest in the third world and I have done much in practice about it. We are faced with problems that the Prime Minister has acknowledged in stark terms, and of which we need to take account in the context of the legislative process that we are considering.

The present issue is intimately connected with how the treaties were scrutinised in Parliament—that scrutiny was, by and large, inadequate—and with the implementation of the directives and the other pieces of legislation, many of which emerged from one line in a treaty that produced a plethora of further legislation. The questions of the party list system and proportional representation have already been discussed. I am strongly opposed to the party list system, which is another form of tyranny that needs to be overcome.

I have the gravest concern that the papers that are coming from the constitutional convention under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), charming as she may be, are wholly inadequate to deal with the question of how we get back accountability for national Parliaments. The absurd suggestion, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned and which came first from the Foreign Secretary and is now endorsed by the hon. Lady in her latest emanations on the subject, that two thirds of national Parliaments might use a red or yellow card system, is an outrage in constitutional terms. It is nonsense to imagine that one could get Parliaments together. The Foreign Secretary referred to these matters in a suggestion in his article in *The Economist*, and proposals are being developed, so we know that things are progressing all the time. It is constitutional nonsense that does not need any further explanation. The key point—*[Interruption.]* I would be happy to give a full explanation, but Mr. Deputy Speaker would, quite rightly, not want that.

I say no to this constitution—no, full stop—and to the referendum. If we must have referendums, they should be held in this country and in all European countries. I do not want a Europewide referendum, as suggested in these fake proposals, thanks very much. This is ultimately about the supremacy of Parliament and therefore of democracy. The proposals, including all the matters relating to national Parliaments and to the scrutiny process, must be renegotiated drastically so that we can achieve a consistent scrutiny process that will work in the interests of the individual Parliaments and recognise the importance of political co-operation in Europe.

The veto by national Parliaments must be reaffirmed. In the light of such an historical political landscape, we must examine these questions and do something about them—we must have more political will. The Prime Minister is on the rack over the European convention on human rights and, under the Lord Hoffmann judgment of 1999, it is crystal clear—as I have said in the House from the Front Bench—that this Parliament has an absolute right to legislate subsequent to the 1998 Act in any manner that we choose, providing that we do so expressly and unambiguously. That was a clear statement by Lord Hoffmann in the House of Lords. The same will have to apply to the European Communities Act 1972 because we are heading towards a situation in which the European constitution will absorb this country into a federal system. As Churchill said, we should be associated but not absorbed.

4.5 pm

Mr. Wayne David (Caerphilly): I warmly welcome this report because I firmly believe that Europe matters. To the people of this country, it matters that the European Union works. That is because the economy of this country is now inextricably linked to the economies of other European states. The single market is a reality. It is becoming ever deeper and increasingly successful. In my constituency of Caerphilly in south Wales, manufacturing is now the bedrock of industry. Most of what is produced is exported to the single market. We

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want that market to deepen and I want more jobs to be created in my constituency as a consequence. It is important that Europe works.

Some issues concern us all. I am thinking about the environment. We are all concerned about pollution and we are all aware that pollution does not recognise national boundaries. If we want a cleaner world, it is important to tackle such issues on a transnational and, especially, a European basis. Issues such as immigration and asylum loom large in our consciousness. Does anybody seriously believe that, in today's world, we can tackle such complex and sensitive issues on a nation-state basis? We cannot. We have to co-operate with our European partners to ensure that we have policies that are responsible, humane and truly effective.

Europe is a reality. It is with us and I want it to be successful. That is why this report is extremely important. It acknowledges that, although Europe is a reality, it is not popular with the people of this country. One of the main reasons for that is, as the report says, a disconnection or disengagement between the people and the European Union institutions. The report contains a number of realistic and practical proposals to bridge that gap—to remake the connection between the people and the institutions. The central thesis of the report is 100 per cent. correct: national Parliaments are the best-placed bodies to make that connection.

The report makes a number of specific proposals and I want to focus on one or two of them. The report refers to all EU institutions. The Council of Ministers is arguably the most important one and it should meet in public when it is making legislation. That is a fundamental point of tremendous importance. On a similar issue of democracy, the European Commission could be more transparent, and the European Parliament, which is engaged more and more in the legislative processes of co-decision, should be more transparent and open.

The report also refers to other matters. It touches on some of the debates about the Convention that have focused the minds of hon. Members. It makes no sense for the Council of Ministers to continue to have a six-month presidency; there should be more permanency. The Council must adopt a more strategic role in developing the EU, and I welcome the suggestion that there should be a president of the Council of Ministers. That would provide a greater sense of purpose for the Commission.

I should like to focus on the national Parliaments. Debate has moved on since the suggestion made by the Prime Minister in his speech in Warsaw that there be a second Chamber of the European Parliament consisting of national parliamentarians. However, credit must be given to our Prime Minister for raising the matter of the importance of the role of national Parliaments in the European architecture at that critical time. MEPs, of course, are also parliamentarians. In fact, I am a former MEP. We need to get away from the all too frequent sniping between MEPs and national parliamentarians, and should recognise that MPs and MEPs have a joint mission to ensure greater democracy and parliamentary involvement. The report's proposals are, therefore, warmly to be welcomed. In fact, I would like there to be a Grand Committee of this House, to which MEPs were regularly invited to participate in on an equal basis with hon. Members.

The working group chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) proposed that national Parliaments should play a key role in ensuring that the principle of subsidiarity is upheld, and that is important. Although I certainly concur with the earlier comments about the need for the watchdog to have real teeth, it is firmly established that national Parliaments have a key role to play in ensuring that the principle is upheld. I warmly welcome the fact that we are having a debate about the possible introduction of a red or yellow card system. I recommend that members of the Convention support that proposal and make sure that it is beefed up.

Mr. Cash: Will the hon. Gentleman explain, either now or at a later date, how that process would work? Subsidiarity has not worked so far, and national Parliaments do not have a cohesive or corporate identity.

Mr. David: I would be happy to elaborate on that now, as that was my next point, anyway. If we are serious about extending the role of national Parliaments, it is important that we have a dual perspective, and envisage the role of national Parliaments increasing not in each member state, important though that is, but internationally. There is scope for developing the Conference of Community and European Affairs Committees, the body charged with responsibility for links between the European Scrutiny Committees of different member states. I attended a meeting of COSAC this week. It must be said that it was a difficult meeting, but progress was made on that front.

It was agreed this very week that, in future, COSAC will make decisions on the basis of qualified majority voting. Why? Because, realistically, that is the only way that we can come to any sort of determination at European level on meaningful issues. Agreement has been reached on that and I hope that, in the next few months, there will also be agreement on the establishment of a secretariat to ensure that COSAC works properly and that information is provided to national parliaments, which will effectively police the principle of subsidiarity.

Mr. Hendrick: Regarding the concept of a red or yellow card, I can see where my hon. Friend and the Government are going, but I find it difficult to accept a red card; perhaps there should just be a yellow one. I am all in favour of a watchdog, but not particularly of one with teeth. I should like to see a scrutiny body that could, perhaps, bark and give the Government or the European Parliament a good gumming, but nothing more.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Before the hon. Gentleman replies—I do not want to interrupt the flow of debate—if hon. Members who want to speak are to be fitted in, there has to be a certain amount of self-discipline in not being provoked to ask questions of those who are speaking.

Mr. David: I will try not to take the canine analogy too far, but I would say that we must have institutions that can bite.

The process of European scrutiny has to be undertaken at national as well as European level. I should like to make a few closing remarks about our work in this Chamber. The European Scrutiny Committee does an excellent job, but there is scope for its powers to be increased. The Government should take the scrutiny reserve far more seriously, although the fault lies not so much with them as with the processes at European level, which need to be changed so that it can be formally recognised and incorporated into European proceedings. In addition, our engagement with Coreper can be increased substantially and made far more streamlined and transparent. Perhaps we can discuss that at a future date.

In conclusion, the report is important. Nation states are the building blocks of the European Union. I am firmly committed to the European principle. I recognise that sub-national bodies have an important role to play, as do national bodies that do not have full legislatures. Nation states are the anchors of the European Union. This House should take European issues and European scrutiny far more seriously. For example, this important debate should be taking place on the Floor of the House, not in Westminster Hall. It is a sad reflection of the lack of priority that the House of Commons gives to European issues that that is the case. Nevertheless, I am glad that the Government have responded in a largely positive manner to the report. Above all, it is important to see the debate not as an end in itself but as part of an ongoing process. All the members of the European Scrutiny Committee are determined to take the matter forward; I hope that we can take other Members of this House with us.

4.18 pm

Angus Robertson (Moray): I welcome the chance to take part in the debate. As a member of the European Scrutiny Committee I should like to put on record my appreciation of the professional and convivial convenorship of that Committee by the hon. Member for Clydesdale (Mr. Hood). I associate myself with almost everything that he said in his opening speech, but beg to differ on the issue of proportional representation. The Committee took a decision when only half of its members were there and, with the Chairman's casting vote, decided against the Government's standing policy. I also put on record that I, like other Committee members, believe that an increasing amount of the Committee's work should be done in public. I appreciate that that may not be possible in every circumstance, but I would welcome moves to see more of its work being done in public.

We are discussing the role of national Parliaments, and it will be no surprise if someone speaks on behalf of the Scottish National party or Plaid Cymru. I find it rather curious, when talking about national Parliaments, that no other right hon. or hon. Members have talked in any detail about the role of the national Parliament of Scotland, the National Assembly for Wales or of Northern Ireland's democratically elected Parliament, which, under the right circumstances, we all hope will reconvene soon.

The hon. Member for Caerphilly (Mr. David) made a passing reference to sub-national bodies while looking in my direction, so I assume that he believes that Wales is sub-national. Perhaps that explains why his previous candidacy was unsuccessful. He was campaigning in one of the safest socialist seats in Europe, but was defeated by my sister party, Plaid Cymru, which views Wales as a nation and not as sub-national.

Mr. David: The hon. Gentleman did not listen carefully enough. I referred to sub-national bodies, but also to national bodies that do not possess legislative powers like those of the House. I gently remind him that elections to the National Assembly for Wales will be held in a couple of months time, and I have absolute confidence, given the small blip that occurred in Wales, that those traditional Labour seats will nevertheless return to the fold.

Angus Robertson: I am grateful for that intervention, although I am sure that the Labour party did not view losing one of its safest seats as a minor blip. However, the hon. Gentleman has now put that on record.

It is a statement of constitutional fact that we have other national Parliaments within the United Kingdom, which is why I was a little confused by the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) when he said that it would be impossible to create a supranational democracy. That was from a unionist and a member of a unionist party, which I suppose espouses the union of the United Kingdom and says that it is a good working example of supranational democracy—or perhaps the Conservative and Unionist party does not view Scotland as a nation.

While on the subject of supranational democracy and the inclusion of sub-member state Parliaments or assemblies, I would like clarification on an issue that has been widely discussed. What has happened with partnership status for sub-member state nations or regions? Is it supported by the Government? It is often said that the measure is blocked by Spain, but I was under the impression that one of the closest working relationships in the EU was that between the British and Spanish Prime Ministers. Perhaps that relationship does not go far enough to overcome the difficulties that the Spanish Government have with the subject.

Of course, the background to today's debate is a movement throughout Europe—of powers going up to the European level. Indeed, the hon. Member for Caerphilly rightly pointed out that in important areas, like the environment, but also on key issues, such as terrorism, if we did not have the European Union we would have to invent it. I am sure that we could all come up with a list—some short, many longer—of improvements that we would like to see, but there is undoubtedly a need for a confederal international organisation for our continent. On one hand, powers are going up; but on the other hand, they are going down by being devolved.

Although in general I am glad that the UK and other European countries are seeking to improve Governments through the EU, the union has made some profoundly damaging decisions. I represent a fishing constituency, in the extreme east of which up to 40 per cent. of jobs depend on an industry that could be nearing its end. I warn the Government most strongly that those who seek to improve Europe should make every effort to reach the right decisions in order to convince everybody in our communities that the EU is

[Angus Robertson]

to their benefit. I am not convinced that that was the case in the UK's involvement in fishing negotiations. Those involved did not even seek to get the subject put on the agenda at the most recent meeting of the Council of Ministers.

One of the issues mentioned in the report was openness, and a comparison was made between the EU and North Korea: the decision-making process is not transparent, not accountable, not democratic and subsidiarity plays no part in it. I draw the Minister's attention to a systemic and fundamental breakdown of the four principles, not in the EU but in the UK, in how we seek to scrutinise and have democratic oversight of policy. That follows on from the report on scrutiny in the House of Commons because this is about the role of national Parliaments. Although I would like the Scottish Parliament to have the powers of a normal Parliament over all EU matters, unfortunately, this Parliament retains the say on them. The European Scrutiny Select Committee recommended:

> "The Government should relax the confidentiality provision in the concordat sufficiently to be able to indicate in EMs whether discussions have taken place with the devolved institutions and, as far as possible, on what subjects."

The Government's reply agreed:

> "In future, where an Explanatory Memorandum states that a minister from one or more devolved administrations also has an interest, the Government intends this to indicate that those devolved administrations have been consulted on the terms of the Explanatory Memorandum and on its subject matter".

This has cross-party support on the Committee, and it was reinforced by the Committee chair earlier and by the hon. Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) in an intervention.

Mr. Connarty: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Much as I enjoy my friend the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) raising that point, and I call him friend because we are from the same country, the debate is on a completely different report. He is holding a debate on the report by the same Committee on scrutiny in the House of Commons and not on the report on democracy and accountability in the EU.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have noted what the hon. Gentleman has said and I have no doubt that the hon. Member for Moray has as well. I am convinced that he will bring his remarks entirely into order.

Angus Robertson: I am grateful for the guidance of the Chair and am addressing myself to the role of national Parliaments. It is a hugely important issue. If there is to be a role for national Parliaments—and I wish that it were not this Parliament—in deciding European issues, we need clarity from the UK Government that the system to which they have agreed is working. I cite in evidence several explanatory memoranda that the European Scrutiny Select Committee had to deal with recently. This is important because not one Member of the House is elected with any mandate to decide on matters of agriculture, fisheries and several other issues that are wholly devolved to the Scottish Parliament, yet we have oversight when it comes to the interrelationship with the European Union. That is beyond debate and dispute—it is enshrined in the Scotland Act 1998. However, following the agreement of the UK Government that we on the European Scrutiny Committee are to be expressly told that the devolved Administrations are included in discussions—and I take these only as examples—there has been no mention whatsoever of the Scottish Executive's involvement in the common agricultural policy; the CAP review of milk quotas; the execution of confiscation orders, which is a matter of Scots law; and fisheries. The fisheries representatives in my constituency, the people elected to deal with the matter, are interested to know why they have not been involved.

The Scottish Executive is involved in one area. The Scottish Executive's Justice Department is included in discussions with the Lord Chancellor's Department. I welcome that, because it allows members of the European Scrutiny Committee to have oversight of policy and understand that there has been co-operation, which has been enshrined in the concordat, although it is said that that should be confidential.

The answer may be that the Scottish Executive have not shown the initiative to seek input in the CAP, the common fisheries policy and the Scottish legal system. The political consequences of that are for the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats to answer. It is a Labour Government in the UK, and a Labour and Liberal coalition in the Scottish Executive. In fact, it is a Liberal Democrat Minister who is responsible for the CFP and the CAP. We need clarification.

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): Is the hon. Gentleman seriously venturing the proposition that Ross Finnie, the Liberal Democrat Minister for Environment and Rural Development, played absolutely no role in arguing the case for a better deal for Scottish fishermen in the context of the CFP at the recent negotiations?

Angus Robertson: Ross Finnie's bag-carrying role in representing Scotland in Europe is well known. The fact that he has never led a delegation at a European discussion, despite representing more than 70 per cent. of the fishing industry in the UK, is well understood in fishing communities. The fundamental breakdown on that important issue lies either here or with Edinburgh. I hope that the Minister, in his winding-up speech, will help us understand where that breakdown lies.

I move on to the Convention, which many previous speakers have mentioned. I wish to put on record my appreciation of all members of the Convention, be they representing the UK Parliament or other bodies. Members present would not expect me to ignore the important role played by Professor Sir Neil MacCormick MEP, the only democratically elected Scottish representative on the Convention.

I seek clarification on the famed yellow and red cards. The Committee Chairman, the hon. Member for Clydesdale, talked about the need for bite and bark. I agree with the suggestion made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) that such a system is an improvement, although I note that the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) is not especially convinced. My confusion arises from the fact that I do not know from where the proposal is coming. If one reads the conclusions of the working group that the hon. Lady chairs, no mention is made of a new and specific system.

Mr. Cash: I can enlighten the hon. Gentleman. As far as I know, it is contained in the Foreign Secretary's article in *The Economist*. That is Government policy in the making, and has been translated into the words of the person who represents the Government and Parliament on the Praesidium.

Angus Robertson: I am grateful for that clarification, but I am still waiting to see the legal text. It is important for all Members to consider that proposal in some depth so that we can come to a considered view. However, on balance it would be a move of progress to have a system that guaranteed subsidiarity for state Parliaments. Speaking as someone who believes in a confederal Europe and in the independence of member states in the EU, which will soon include many countries from central and eastern Europe that regained their independence only recently, I welcome the constitution. Those countries will maintain their independence within the EU, even under the proposed constitutional treaty. I join those who say that it is necessary to hold a referendum on something that is so important to every part of the EU. It is up to each member state to decide how to verify important constitutional changes. I would not dream of telling other EU states which method they should choose. However, I would favour a referendum in this country so that the argument can be had on the workings of the EU and its future.

In conclusion, I should like to add my support to the report that the Committee Chairman introduced. I think that it is a valuable contribution to a greater understanding among a greater number of people of the workings of the EU and the role of the democratic process in that. I should like to ask the Minister three specific questions. First, on the workings of EU business between the Government and the devolved Administrations in the UK, are the Government in favour of the concordat being reviewed, as was supported by the European Scrutiny Committee? If the Government support the review, reform and opening up of the concordat so that we shall have transparency, accountability, proper democracy and subsidiarity in the UK, when will that happen and when will the House be able to consider the proposed changes to the concordat?

Secondly, on the involvement of national Parliaments, what is the UK doing to support the role of the Scottish Parliament in EU business? At the next meeting of the Convention at the beginning of next month, will the Secretary of State for Wales argue vigorously that Scotland should be able to have full partner status within the EU if it so wishes? Similarly, will the Secretary of State argue at that meeting for the improved representation and rights of sub-member state regions and nations? Thirdly, do the Government support the Scottish Executive having the automatic right to raise cases at the European Court of Justice?

4.38 pm

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): Much as I enjoyed the rehearsal of all the arguments to do with the questions at the sub-state level, we must consider the Committee's report on democracy and accountability in the EU, which was excellently introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Clydesdale (Mr. Hood). Before talking about that topic, I shall say a few words about the Chairman, sparing his blushes. It has been a privilege to have him on the Committee. The fact that he chose to remain with us—he is a former member of the Defence Committee—has brought great benefits. With the two reports, one of which is not before us for scrutiny, we have made a major contribution to the debate on Parliament's role in European business. That has certainly had an impact on Departments. I had the privilege of going to a seminar on European scrutiny at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and found that it was on its mettle in looking to keep itself from being called to the attention of the Chairman of our Committee for misdemeanours. We are certainly making an impact.

I also commend the work of my hon. Friends the Members for Caerphilly (Mr. David) and for Preston (Mr. Hendrick), former Members of the European Parliament. They have added breadth to the way in which the Committee carries out its business and have lent a great deal to the report. I have learned much from their contributions.

The right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) over-egged the pudding. He started off so well by correctly signalling the worry of most British citizens about the methodology of the European Union in legislating. The Commission, the generator of almost all legislation, is an oligarchy. It is not a democratic institution. It may have been correct to start like that—as my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly said, we were forming a common market. However, now we are into so many other fields it is wrong to leave the burden of power in the Commission's hands.

The other part of the process that we are trying to make democratic and accountable is the Executive—which are the Governments. In reality, Governments are not the same as Parliaments. They cross that divide. They take the king's shilling, or the president's shilling—it depends how one describes the Prime Minister. Parliaments carry out the orders and programme of Governments. To our great cost and embarrassment—this sometimes happens even in the Labour party—it is not always the same programme as we thought we were elected on. Nevertheless, it is carried out.

There is the oligarchy of the Commission and the programme of the Executive. Then we have the Parliaments, and that is where the Committee comes in. That is who the Committee tries to speak for. It is the parliamentarians, who do not have the burden of office or the responsibility of collectively carrying out the Executive's programme, who speak for the citizen. As the right hon. Member for Wells said so well at the start of his speech, they tell us of the problems with the machinery of the European Union.

That is one of the reasons—it is not the only reason—why people do not turn out for elections. Most people do not know who their MEP is. It is easy for people with a particular allegiance, because they can name their member of the Praesidium because he is a member of their party. Most citizens do not have that connection because they are turned off from politics partly by the media and partly by politicians.

[Mr. Michael Connarty]

The question is who should scrutinise. I believe that it is the job of parliamentarians. It is our job. As the Chairman said, the report mentions that we should be scrutinising annual work reports for the Commission, but in a larger forum led by the European Scrutiny Committee, possibly in alliance with the Foreign Affairs Committee and other Members of Parliament.

Mr. Cash: Would the hon. Gentleman agree—I think that we get on well on these matters—that it is not enough to scrutinise, but that Parliaments should insist, so that a measure of political will goes with it? If they do not like something, particularly in the context of qualified majority voting in other countries, scrutiny necessarily carries with it the right to say no—that is, to continue to use the veto.

Mr. Connarty: I take a different view. The hon. Gentleman said that we get on well. I think that we have basically rubbed many of the sharp edges off our personalities over the past three or four years as members of the Committee. I can remember some very heated exchanges at the start, and we still have some now. On the question of veto, we would probably continue to fall out. Qualified majority voting has favoured the United Kingdom in about 97 per cent. of cases. As a member of a larger organisation—I think that the larger European Union is a democratic institution as well as a market—we have to give and take. If we are winning 97 per cent. of cases, we should accept that the system favours our country's point of view.

We are beginning to get a grip on pre-Council scrutiny and post-Council scrutiny. We are beginning to demand better written responses from Ministers about what went on in Councils of Ministers. I have said, on the subject of departmental briefings, that obfuscation is of no use. A smartly presented civil servant's reply to Parliament that leads us to ask what exactly people meant by what they said, will lead also to citizens not trusting the Council of Ministers. We need clear written responses and we need more evidence sessions or debates on Council business before people will believe that there is democratic accountability.

I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Rothwell (Mr. Challen) has returned. There is one point on which I agree with the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash). I am deeply disturbed that the opportunities that Standing Committees offer for any parliamentarian to put any Minister from any Department under scrutiny on any topic that the Committees choose, and the opportunities to debate the substance of that topic, are not often taken up. Few non-members of Standing Committees go along to them. I want to say on the record that many members of Standing Committees only go along to them because the Whips tell them to. They do not want to be there and they do not take part in debate or scrutiny. They simply attend to their mail, allowing the Opposition, and only the Opposition, to quiz the Minister. However, if a Parliament has a large majority from one party, and if no members of that party are quizzing the Minister, the majority party is failing in its duty. The Opposition is in opposition precisely because it represents a smaller number of people. The majority party, and not the Opposition, is responsible for representing the concerns of most people on the EU.

We have to consider the operation of the European Standing Committees. People should become members of those Committees because they volunteer to and because they are interested in Europe and in representing the views of businesses and individuals in their constituencies. Parliament has a long way to go before it gets accountability right.

Paragraph 47 of the report is on scrutiny. The explanatory memorandums that we receive are based on information from the Commission. That information does not come quickly enough and it is not full enough. We are not able to see how an initial idea leads to a decision being made in the Council. We say in paragraph 47 that we should be allowed to intervene more effectively in that process and that we should have enough time to do so. Scrutiny should not be regarded as being all right as long as it does not slow the Minister down in getting his policies through, or slow the Council of Ministers down in reaching agreements. We have the right to scrutinise.

In paragraph 50, we say:

> "We emphasise that any deadlines set by the European Council and the timing of the negotiations intended to meet such deadlines must provide enough time for national parliamentary scrutiny in advance of Council decisions on new texts."

Does the Minister agree with that? If so, what will he do to ensure that that happens while we are in government?

We did not want a Commission president. Everyone was agreed on that. But now someone has done a backflip, because the Germans and the French have come up with a different proposal. We were clear. We wanted there to be a president of the Council, who would obviate the wasteful process of having six-monthly cycles of new presidencies. If there were a proper rolling programme, it would not matter who was wearing the president's hat, as long as the programme was kept to. If that programme were agreed correctly, we could debate it properly and see it progressing. The president—elected by the Council—would ensure that the programme was kept to. We would be able to hold that person accountable. What we said in paragraph 80 of the report has now been overturned.

I want to finish by speaking about the European Union election system. The Chairman made an important point and I am sadly disappointed about the fact that we went over to the system of proportional representation in large blocks, so that there was one list for Scotland. It does not make any sense at all. People in Scotland do not know who their MEP is, unless they have a party affiliation to that MEP. That is the reality. They do not know if there is anyone they can go to or if anyone is carrying their flag for them or raising issues for them. We have lost the connection between the citizen and the European Union.

I go along with the Chairman because we lost the vote on the casting vote of the Chair. The Committee report says that we should have a first-past-the-post system. Paragraph 93 states that we should have

> "a critical re-examination of the system"

and that we should have an electoral boundary, so that people know who speaks for them in Europe. If we do not have that, we cannot work for the citizen. As parliamentarians, we and the Government have a role to take into account the needs of the citizen, not ignore them. When they vote on European matters—not many people bother doing so at the moment—they must feel that they have a connection with Europe. Otherwise, they will feel that it is not worth participating in such elections.

4.50 pm

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty), whose comments, by and large, I support, although he will not be surprised to learn that I disagreed with some of them. He made a passionate case for the role of Parliament to be expanded to take account of what goes on in Europe in our name and the names of our constituents. The report is timely and thoughtful, and I commend the hon. Member for Clydesdale (Mr. Hood), my political neighbour, for the work that he and his Committee have done and the debate that they have provoked.

The Committee was right to place emphasis on the disconnection between ordinary citizens and the institutions of the European Union. We always agonise about being disconnected from our voters. That is even more of a reality for the different parts of the European Union. The Committee made important observations about some of the problems that the European Union inevitably has as a result of its size and the unique combination of supranational and member state authority. Many issues are at the forefront in the Convention on the Future of Europe, which has been tackling a range of different issues. Again, the Committee was right to focus its report on disconnection and how national Parliaments can play a stronger role.

In his opening speech the hon. Member for Clydesdale, the Chairman of the Committee, highlighted many of the failings of the current situation and I agree with much of his analysis. Where I would part company with him and the hon. Member for Falkirk, East is on the issue of the elections to the European Parliament. I recognise that there are difficulties. The hon. Gentleman made a valid point about the loss of connection between individual citizens and their MEPs but, under the previous system, with vast regions in Scotland, many people had no idea who their MEP was, particularly in the south of Scotland, which I represent in part.

While there are limitations and difficulties, if we move back from a system of proportional representation to one of first past the post, we would create difficulties for the representation of political opinion in Britain in the European Parliament.

Mr. Connarty: The hon. Gentleman will have noted that the previous position of the Committee was somehow to bring in a new constituency configuration. It would not necessarily do away with proportional representation, but it would make people re-connect with the person for whom they voted.

Mr. Moore: I apologise if I have misrepresented the thrust of what the hon. Gentleman was saying. There are ways of improving what we have, which perhaps could deal with his concerns and still retain proportionality.

In just over a year, we will see a significant enlargement of the European Union, and it is right that we are focused at present on the reform agenda. The European Union is often too remote, unaccountable and distant. It is often hard enough for Members of Parliament to relate to it, never mind the wider population. We have all had experience of gaining access to different parts of the European Union. Some of the Commission's buildings are commendably open—more so than Whitehall. However, it is difficult to penetrate the cordons that surround meetings of the Council of Ministers. I agree with the thrust of many of the contributions to the debate: we must open up the meetings that operate in our name. We must have the ability to scrutinise the Council of Ministers when it is in legislative mode.

Angus Robertson: Does the hon. Gentleman's party agree with the European Scrutiny Committee that the concordats dealing with European Union business between the United Kingdom Government and devolved Administrations should be opened up, so that that business is transparent, too?

Mr. Moore: The principles of transparency and freedom of information should extend between the Scottish Parliament and Westminster as they should between Westminster and Europe. I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman, although I suspect that we have different motives for supporting such a proposal.

There are many ways in which the Commission and the Council of Ministers can become more accountable, but we are debating the future structures of Europe and are in danger of being sidetracked by concerns about the presidency of the Council, and whether that will rotate on a six-month basis as it does at present and whether it will have an elected president. We must listen to the views of many of the smaller countries in the European Union about the proposals that we have heard so far from France and Germany. It seems that the Government support those proposals, and that is bad news. Can the Minister confirm the position?

The right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) referred to the morass of unaccountable bodies in Europe that make many decisions. Sadly, we are ignorant about their activities and have no potential to understand what they do. The Committee is well represented in the Chamber. It does sterling work and tries to deal with many of the inadequacies of the scrutiny process. As a collective body, we must make a stronger fist of holding Ministers to account.

The hon. Member for Falkirk, East made an important point about the limited number of times that people attend European Standing Committees. Most of those present today are the usual suspects, who have a great interest in Europe and who turn out regularly for such debates. The Minister has great European credentials, but I hope that he will keep arguing with his colleagues in the Government that there are perhaps better ways in which to look at business in the Council of Ministers before it is concluded. We should have more time to discuss European business on the Floor of the House, and not always be remaindered here in Westminster Hall, where the opportunities to discuss Europe are too infrequent. At present, we have to put up with a debate every six months ahead of the European

[Mr. Moore]

Council. We do not have the chance to debate matters when there is an interim meeting in Brussels every three months. The inadequacies are legion.

We must insist on the principle of subsidiarity and that must be the focus of the reform process. It is essential that we make decisions locally, when possible, and that that is done nationally if necessary. We should make decisions at a European level when appropriate—examples of that have been given throughout the afternoon. We must clarify what subsidiarity means and ensure that there is a model that gets the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales built into the process.

A constitution for Europe is the right way to do that. If a charter of fundamental rights is included, citizens will know the part that they play in Europe. If we combine those principles and if the Convention is allowed to do its work properly, the Europe about which we are worried at present will be reformed and a better place.

5 pm

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): I warmly congratulate the Chairman and members of the European Scrutiny Committee on producing the excellent report and their scrutiny of European legislation. That is often a difficult job, but the Committee does it with much competence, and that is valued by all Members. I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), who contribute eloquently to the Convention's proceedings.

The European Scrutiny Committee's June report was excellent. The bulk of its recommendations were pragmatic and wise, and would certainly strengthen democracy and accountability in the European Union if they were put into practice. Several Members made that point in excellent speeches, and in an ecumenical spirit, I mention the thoughtful speech of the hon. Member for Morley and Rothwell (Mr. Challen).

The report points the right way forward and gives a sense of direction to the European Union on ways to increase greatly the role of national Parliaments. The Conservative party is in sympathy with that approach, as it is the way to tackle the disconnection between the EU and its peoples and to restore ownership of its institutions to member states. The point made by the hon. Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) about elections and representation in the European Parliament is important. I note that the Liberal Democrats are moving away from their diversion to proportional representation. I suppose that that is about as categorical a statement as we are likely to get.

Mr. Moore: I know that the hon. Gentleman would not wilfully misinterpret something. He will find our enthusiasm undiminished, but our recognition of reality slightly more focused.

Mr. Spring: A recognition of reality would be a major achievement for the Liberal Democrats.

It is therefore all the more disappointing that the Convention on the Future of Europe is, in reality, taking insufficient notice of those who want the EU to be opened up and those who understand that national Parliaments are the political bodies with which most people in Europe identify. That point was powerfully made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells. The Laeken declaration called for the European Union to be brought closer to citizens, but that can happen only when national Parliaments are involved more closely in the EU's workings. My hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) rightly pointed out the ultimate consequences of the continuation of that disconnection.

The European Union will become closer to its peoples and more democratic only when its leaders and elite understand that there is no pan-European demos. Frankly, our electorates do not think politically in Europe-wide terms. The political institutions to which they look first for democratic redress are our national Parliaments.

Romano Prodi may hope for an advanced supranational democracy and many on the Convention may be engaged in building a European state that they perceive to be democratic, but if they succeed in building their dream, they will have made something that cannot be truly democratic by its very nature. It will have been built from the top down rather than the bottom up. If the EU has an institutional failing, that is it. Too much of its progress has involved doing things for people, not letting its peoples take the lead and giving our citizens a sense of proper involvement and ownership.

It is to the national Parliaments that we must look if we hope to democratise the EU. Of course, we recognise that they are not perfect institutions, but at least the people of Europe understand them, which is more than can be said for European bodies as a whole.

It is symptomatic of much thinking in Europe that the Franco-German contribution to the Convention mentions national Parliaments only as an afterthought. We must be realistic. The pattern of thinking and the architecture set out by the Franco-German alliance seem inevitably to carry the day in the absence of a clear vision of such architecture from our own Government. That has been further borne out in the three texts concerning the role of national Parliaments that have emerged from the Convention: the working group reports on subsidiarity and on national Parliaments, and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's draft constitution.

Much has been made of the proposals, especially by the Government, and I agree that they are good as far as they go, but it is a depressing fact that they do not go very far. Indeed, they are badly inadequate. The working group on subsidiarity rightly recognised that the question of subsidiarity is political. I acknowledge the work of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston and others, but the proposals would give the national Parliaments no real power. I am glad that there has been some fresh thinking, which has been alluded to this afternoon, on the ability of national Parliaments to stop Commission proposals. All institutions have a natural tendency to want more power for themselves, and it is not hard to understand that, unless national Parliaments have the right not merely to warn against breaches in principle, but to enforce measures to address that—enforcement, not just warning, was the word rightly used by the Committee in its report—the EU's centralising tendencies will continue.

Reservations on subsidiarity expressed by a third of national Parliaments, for example, should be enough to halt legislation if, after the exchange of views proposed by the working group, that legislation was still deemed to fail the subsidiarity test. The issue needs further exploration, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stone is right. The rigidity of the whipping system in so many of the national Parliaments causes difficulties that must be addressed if we are to make the proposition viable.

The national Parliaments also have a crucial role to play in ensuring that the exercise of power in the EU is made accountable. Our European Scrutiny Committee performs excellently in circumstances that are not always ideal, but it has long been a just criticism that too much EU business is done in a way that is convenient for Governments and bureaucracy, but not in the best interests of everyone else.

I am glad that a cross-party consensus—indeed, a European consensus—is emerging and that those involved believe that the European Council should be much more open and transparent. That openness must apply at the parliamentary end. The working group on national Parliaments made many sensible suggestions on how that could be done, especially regarding the better communication of documents, but we should go further. Echoing the sentiments of the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Mr. David), we have repeatedly urged the replacement of the civil service Coreper representative with a senior Minister fully answerable to national Parliaments. That is a sure way to allow our Parliament to hold the Government to account for what they agree to in Brussels.

Mr. Cash: Has my hon. Friend noticed that there are severe criticisms of the fact that the Convention and its working group on national Parliaments has not produced anything of sufficient practical value to make a difference to how national Parliaments influence matters? That is a serious and devastating indictment, and I use strong language because, unless success is achieved, our assumption that national Parliaments lie at the heart of the democracy of Europe will completely evaporate.

Mr. Spring: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. Officially, the view is that national Parliaments can vet or return Commission proposals, but not veto them. We have heard about red and yellow cards, but the issue has not yet been spelled out categorically, as the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) said. I hope that we get more details.

The essential point that my hon. Friend the Member for Stone makes is that unless real power is vested in national Parliaments to deal with the problem of legislation in the EU, the process of disconnection, about which we are all alarmed, will only grow worse. I agree with my hon. Friend on that. We need better communication between this place and the British delegation to the European Parliament so as to monitor the progress of legislation and to provide a check on gold plating. Furthermore, there must be more room for parliamentary scrutiny of European legislation before it goes to the Council.

The reforms that I suggest, which the Conservative party has often put forward, are positive and practical steps to make the EU more accountable and democratic. They would give the people of Europe a greater sense of ownership over institutions that too frequently seem to have the attitude that Brussels knows best. I urge the other parties and the Government to ensure that their representatives promote them vigorously at the Convention and the subsequent intergovernmental conference. The Committee's report rightly insists that the phrase "ever-closer union" should be removed from the treaties. Few things contribute more to the disquiet that British people feel about the European Union than the sense, justified by that phrase, that the EU is about sucking ever more powers to the centre. It is heartening that that fact is now widely recognised and reflected.

In contrast, the election of the President of the Commission or the establishment of a permanent President of the European Council would do nothing to bring the European Union close to its people. Both issues involve centralising measures and strengthening the exercise of power from the top down. The first would increase the politicisation of a body that is supposed to be impartial and the second, which is a pet project of the Government, although they borrowed it from the French, would establish yet another powerful central figure with only tenuous democratic legitimacy. That would raise great fears among our smaller European partners. One thing that we have learned recently, particularly in view of the EU's enlargement, is that we simply must protect the smaller EU nations. That is particularly true given the strengthened influence of the Franco-German relationship.

The EU has as its core aims the promotion of peace, stability and prosperity in Europe. Of course, it has had considerable success in that. However, in view of the challenges on the issue of democracy, we cannot afford the EU to assume state-like powers, including a written constitution—a first for this country—a vastly increased role in justice and home affairs as well as, to quote the Prime Minister, a "unified foreign policy". I do not believe that the British people would accept that.

Such a change would be extraordinarily important to the fundamental relationship between the member states and the EU, and would demand a great deal of popular consent if it were to have democratic legitimacy. After all, there have been referendums in Scotland and Wales, and even locally in London. I echo the hon. Member for Moray in saying that any European constitutional treaty should be tested by a referendum in the nation states that comprise the members of the EU. I hope that Members of all parties agree. It would be shameful if the Government denied us a referendum, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

5.14 pm

The Minister for Europe (Mr. Denis MacShane): This has been a good discussion, but I am not sure whether it has been a debate in the sense that we have heard the arguments for and against a concrete proposition. In fact, one saw all kinds of interconnectivities arising from discussions on the general feeling of disconnectedness among people in the EU.

[Mr. Denis MacShane]

The hon. Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring), who spoke for the official Opposition, made common cause with the nationalist from Scotland, the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson), in calling for a referendum and with my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), who is opposed to that charming and poetical call for an ever closer union. The hon. Member for West Suffolk also made common cause with Mr. D'Amato's French socialists, who want to see some mighty Minister sitting in Brussels covering the gamut of government policy and reporting back to his Parliament. That shows how the EU can produce some odd and interesting connections.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clydesdale (Mr. Hood) put the key questions to us. His report is good. It was published last June, and I agree with Members that it is not right that we have had to wait until the end of January to debate it. I believe strongly that we should debate European matters and I regret that we do not have more debates on Europe in the Chamber.

In my first five weeks as Minister for Europe, I appeared some 13 times in the House of Commons and the Lords—full debates in the Chamber, Westminster Hall debates, Adjournment debates, a scrutiny Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Lords scrutiny Committee and Standing Committees galore. I felt that I was the most "scruted" Minister in the Government. I thought that, as Minister for Europe, I would be dashing around European capitals, explaining the great ideas and policies that Britain wants to see adopted. Instead, I find myself spending my time in the House of Commons. That is as it should be and it is certainly a pleasure, because I like the House.

It has been announced today that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales, the Government representative on the Convention, will table practical proposals, including:

> "A role for regions and localities in monitoring the application of subsidiarity; treaty amendment to acknowledge the role of regions and localities in relation to the subsidiarity principle; mandatory consultation of regions and localities by the Commission on policy matters affecting those regions and localities; reform of the Committee of the Regions to give it more influence."

Those are just some issues that the Government are advancing—that is the right way forward.

I had a very enjoyable meeting with representatives from England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and local government bodies some weeks ago to discuss how they could become more involved in Europe. Some wanted to focus on devolved Administrations and others wanted to focus on the English regions. Those representatives want to speak for their great cities and boroughs, and it is right that all of them should have a powerful say. Someone, however, has to bring it all together, and until such time as we cease to be a united kingdom, the House of Commons and the Government should make the decisions.

Mr. Cash: How will the Government deal with the doctrine of the occupied field and the question of shared, and other, competences? The occupied field is now so overgrown with legislation that there is little room left for manoeuvre. In relation to subsidiarity, which corner of the field will be reserved for the national Parliaments?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I hope that the Minister can make sense of that.

Mr. MacShane: I was coming to that. One of the problems is that one uses the most absurd jargon for profoundly difficult issues that have always confronted all Governments throughout time. At what level does one take decisions? Subsidiarity works up to the point at which someone says, "This is so important that it must go further up the governmental chain."

On Monday, I attended a meeting of the General Affairs and External Relations Council, at which we discussed agriculture. I said to myself, "Wait a minute. Agriculture is not really foreign policy." However, two countries—Ireland and France—demanded, as of right, that the CAP be placed on the Council agenda. I am glad to say that both France and Ireland withdrew their objections to the Commission's speaking for Europe as a whole at the Doha round of World Trade Organisation negotiations, when it put its view—I expect that it is the view of this House—on the need to phase out agricultural subsidies and open up our markets to products from the third world. I was confused, but it was important for France and Ireland.

To save a bit of time, I shall answer the question of the hon. Member for Moray before he poses it. The issue of fisheries continues to be raised at the highest levels of the European Union. If we want subsidiarity, it has to stay with the Agriculture and Fisheries Council and not be put to either the Council of Ministers representing the Heads of Government or the General Affairs and External Relations Council, which represents Foreign Ministers.

Angus Robertson: May I ask—

Mr. MacShane: No, I shall move on because I have little time to deal with a lot of points. I quote from what the Foreign Secretary wrote in *The Economist* on 12 October:

> "National parliaments could quickly review each EU proposal, judging whether action is being taken at the right level and in the right way. This would not amount to a veto. But if a majority of national parliaments judged that a proposal infringed subsidiarity, the commission would be expected to re-examine its approach."

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) has introduced the metaphor of red and yellow cards. They talk about football a lot in Birmingham, and such metaphors make sense. However, I think that I heard from the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) that that was a Conservative idea. There we have a co-joining of the Conservative party and the Foreign Secretary, although I ask myself why all these ideas have arrived since that party has been the Opposition. Why did it not advance them between 1979 and 1997?

Several hon. Members spoke about an elected President of the Commission. We are talking about proposals, and many proposals are made in the Convention. The Government have not yet taken a view on how the President should be chosen or selected. I give way to the right hon. Gentleman because he is a distinguished member of the Convention.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Will the Minister answer the point that in my hearing, and as recorded in the independent *Brussels Bulletin*, our Government representative on the Convention said that he agreed with the French and German Foreign Ministers' contribution word for word? That more than implies that he agrees with the Franco-German plan. It destroys public confidence if Ministers say one thing there that is then denied by other Ministers here.

Mr. MacShane: The difficulty is that we do not have Mr. Villepin's text or that of Mr. Fischer in front of us. Both their countries have put forward the notion of the European Parliament being involved in the election of the President of the Commission. It is an idea that is dear to many people in Germany. Until now, it has been strongly opposed by the French.

We are concerned about excessive politicisation. We want a strong Commission, and we must find out what the specific modalities are. Members are right to ask questions. We have not come to the end of the Convention and we have not had concrete proposals. We are not yet at the intergovernmental conference, where we shall get into treaty detail about how things should be done. There is also the proposal—a British idea—to have a standing chair of the Council of Ministers. My view is that that person will probably come from one of the smaller countries, perhaps a new member state. He or she will speak English and one or two other languages, and come from a tradition of building consensus and bringing people together. Therefore, that person will probably not be from the United Kingdom, given our fanatical devotion to the adversarial system of parliamentary duels.

The chair will ensure the Council's continuity. That is necessary because, as the report highlights, having 25 member states means that each one would hold the rotating presidency only six or seven times a century. It is possible that the EU will expand to include Bulgaria, Romania, some Balkan states—Croatia is keen to start accession talks—and Turkey, about which there is some discussion. That would reduce still further the sense that we have a rotating presidency.

In many of my discussions with Governments of so-called smaller countries, I have found an increasing understanding of and sympathy for the notion of a chairperson. Such a chairman or chairwoman—I do not know what they are called in the different languages—could represent the elected Governments of Europe, and we would want to put such a person under scrutiny in terms of what Europe does. Of course, the Government support the Committee's proposal for greater openness.

We discussed the election system for MEPs, but I do not want to get into that. There are differing views. I can never recall the name of the MEP who represented me before the last election. In Yorkshire, we have David Bowe, Linda MacAvan and Richard Corbett. They are sound, wonderful people who should all be voted for in 2004. Some MEPs are excellent former Members of the House, such as John Bowis, Timothy Kirkhope and Edward McMillan-Scott, and there is Daniel Hannan, about whom we always read. They are real personalities, just as the Liberal Democrats Chris Huhne and Nick Clegg are, and the country knows about them. Under the old system, a massive protest vote led to the election, on a first-past-the-post basis, of a quite disproportionate number, and they went to Strasbourg. However, the numbers did not reflect the political spectrum in this House, so I am not sure that that was the right way.

The right hon. Member for Wells made his points in his forthright way and talked a lot about the German economy. My hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Rothwell (Mr. Challen) talked about the need for citizens, panels, and that is an interesting and useful idea. The strength of the Convention—it is not an intergovernmental conference—is that it allows us all to look at such ideas.

The hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) recalled a conversation between Jean-Pierre Chevénement and Douglas Hurd, who was Foreign Secretary. The French socialist said, "As a result of Maastricht, you won't be able to participate again in a Gulf war." Well, French soldiers were in Kosovo and French planes were in Afghanistan. I am tempted to tell Members to watch this space as things develop over the next few weeks and Saddam Hussein continues to defy the United Nations and the international community.

On issues such as asylum and combating terrorism, we need international solutions. The environment does not respect national borders, and, indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Mr. David) talked about the need for transnational legislation. He reminded us that the Prime Minister has raised the central role of national Parliaments, and we should be proud of the contribution that my right hon. Friend, Ministers and hon. Members are making.

I would like to see more link-ups between parliamentarians and their opposite numbers in the rest of Europe, including in the new member states. The House's new regulations make that more possible. I had the pleasure—with a spokesman from the Conservative party and one from the Liberal Democrats—of talking to our ambassadors to all of Europe, not just the EU. I insisted that I wanted our embassies to help all hon. Members who undertake visits to make contacts.

When talking about Europe, the hon. Member for Moray was elegant and visionary, and he showed his great experience of Austrian politics. When he returned to the subject of Scottish nationalism, however, he sounded like a nationalist. He asked about the concordat, and it is constantly under review, as it should be. It is a living thing, not something that comes and goes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) referred to non-participation of members of the Committee. I do not know whether this suggestion is feasible, given the budget allocation, but more of its members might be tempted to come along if the

[Mr. MacShane]

Committee met in other European capitals. None the less, it does a good job, and I am not saying that just because the Chairman is here or because I want to be nice to members of the Committee, before which I hope to appear in a few months. It does one of the best jobs of any Committee in the House, and, as I told the hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore), its work shapes our debates.

It being half-past Five o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 398 (Part 2)

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AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FIFTY-FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
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SESSION 2002–03

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20 January 2003

Written Ministerial Statements

Monday 20 January 2003

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Balance of Funding Review

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): In fulfilment of the commitment that we made in the December 2001 White Paper, "Strong Local Leadership—Quality Public Services", we are establishing a review to examine the balance of funding between locally raised and centrally provided sources of revenue for local government.

The review will consider what are the key issues associated with the balance of funding, review the evidence and look at reform options.

The Minister of State for Local Government and the Regions, will chair the review steering group. The first meeting of the steering group will be in April 2003. We will announce the membership of the steering group, which will include ministers, senior figures from local government and others able to make a strong personal contribution to the discussions, ahead of the first meeting.

We expect the review to last for about a year. We envisage that the final report of the review will summarise the main issues discussed by the steering group and will set out the pros and cons of a range of options for changing the balance of funding.

I am placing a copy of the review's terms of reference in the Library of the House of Commons.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Animals (Scientific Procedures)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): The Government have today published their reply to the report of the House of Lords Select Committee on animals in scientific procedures published on 24 July 2002. Copies of the Government's response (Cm 5729) have been placed in the Library.

The Government welcome the Select Committee's report, which deals with important and sensitive issues concerning the use of animals in scientific procedures. The Select Committee's report is comprehensive, makes an important contribution to the ongoing debate, and provides a credible basis for all concerned to consider where we should be going from here.

The Government notes in particular, and endorses, the Select Committee's finding that animal experiments are currently necessary to develop human and veterinary medicines and to protect humans, and the environment. We also welcome the Select Committee's recognition of the progress that has been made since 1987 in reducing the number of animals used in scientific procedures and in establishing a culture of care in establishments designated under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, which is widely regarded as the most rigorous piece of legislation of its type in the world. The Government also accepts that more needs to be done and we reconfirm our commitment to the fullest possible application of the 3Rs—the refinement of scientific procedures, the reduction in numbers of animals used and their replacement wherever possible. We also agree that the case put forward by the Select Committee for a United Kingdom centre for the 3Rs focused largely, but not exclusively, on toxicity testing, as a complement to other initiatives in this area, is worth exploring further. At the same time, we remain firmly of the view that the development of the 3Rs must continue to be an integral part of mainstream research programmes and toxicity work, and should not be seen as a separate activity.

The Government also notes the Select Committee's view that the United Kingdom should aim to have the best regulation of animal procedures, properly enforced, rather than the tightest regulation. The Government already strives for the most efficient and effective regulation. However, we believe that it is right that the 1986 Act imposes stringent criteria to be satisfied before licence authorities are granted. We further believe that this approach is essential to generate and maintain public confidence in the regulatory system. At the same time, we accept that the administrative burden must be kept to a minimum without compromising the welfare of the animals used. We will revisit this matter with the research community, with a view to the production of a revised application form/licence that all concerned accept is as simple and short as it can possibly be to meet statutory requirements.

The Government also shares the Select Committee's view that there is a need for more open and better informed debate about the use of animals in scientific procedures. Government departments, industry, the scientific community and funders of such research all have an important role in explaining their legitimate use. We also believe that more good quality information should be made available to the public explaining the scientific work that is done using animals and the reasons for it. Subject to safeguards for personal and confidential information, we are, therefore, proposing to publish summaries of project licences as part of the Home Office publication scheme. However, we are conscious that there remains a significant level of concern in the scientific community about the implications of repealing section 24 of the 1986 Act, as the Select Committee recommends. We, therefore, intend to consult further with the scientific community before reaching final decisions on its future.

Commission for Racial Equality

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. David Blunkett): Recruitment of a new Chair for the Commission for Racial Equality has been completed and I am pleased to announce that Mr. Trevor Phillips has today been appointed.

Trevor Phillips is currently an elected member of the Greater London Assembly, Chair of the Assembly and Managing Director of Pepper Production. The appointment is for four years initially.

Trevor Phillips was selected after a rigorous and thorough process. He has a clear understanding of the challenges of race equality and how they link to a wider diversity, community cohesion and regeneration agenda.

I am confident that he will provide the leadership that the Commission needs to play an active role in the race relations agenda, while strengthening and focusing its internal organisation.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Horticulture Research International

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): We are grateful to the Quinquennial Review team for their detailed and incisive report published on 23 September on which we have now consulted widely. The review team have considered the responses to the public consultation exercise which concluded on 18 November and produced an addendum to their report, which I am placing in the Library of the House.

We understand the importance of reaching early conclusions from the viewpoint of HRI's staff, their customers and other stakeholders. This interim announcement, pending further detailed study and negotiations, sets out our intentions.

The Government broadly accept the general tenor of the review team's analysis and recommendations. There is a clear need for skilled and strategic horticultural science to underpin our policies and industry needs. HRI is a substantial asset of horticultural science excellence. In its present form, however, HRI is not viable and needs to be rationalised.

DEFRA will now enter into detailed discussions with HRI and other parties, in particular the University of Warwick and the East Malling Trust for Horticultural Research, to establish whether the scenarios recommended by the review team are achievable and affordable, and whether any further Government investment is necessary.

We hope to reach detailed decisions in principle about the future of HRI by the end of March 2003. Matters for consideration will include the remit and research capacity of the successor arrangements; ownership of land and buildings; staffing and pension matters; and income sources. Subject to satisfactory negotiations, the plan would be to put in place the new arrangements for HRI's future by 1 April 2004.

In the meantime, HRI will continue as currently constituted. A programme of research is in place from DEFRA, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council and other funders. We shall take steps to ensure that any transfer to successor organisations occurs as quickly and as seamlessly as possible in a way that enables HRI to meet all of its commitments.

Written Ministerial Statements

Tuesday 21 January 2003

TREASURY

Inheritance Tax

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): In proceedings in Finance Bill Standing Committee on 25 June we announced that work was in hand to allow inheritance tax to be paid out of an estate before probate is granted. We have now reached agreement in principle with the British Bankers Association and the Building Societies Association on a direct payment scheme for inheritance tax. Broadly, where the deceased person has sufficient funds to their credit, participating institutions will be ready to transfer funds direct to the Inland Revenue to pay the inheritance tax due. We are now working with the associations to finalise the detail of the processes concerned, and help their members prepare for the launch. The Government hope to see the maximum possible take-up of this welcome scheme, which will start later this year.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Regional Innovation Fund

The Minister for Employment Relations, Industry and the Regions (Alan Johnson): We have published today the interim evaluation of the regional innovation fund which was carried out by DTZ Pieda Consulting on behalf of the Department of Trade and Industry.

Broadly, the report examines processes, efficiency of funding and initial outputs to inform consideration of value for money and the regional development agency single pot spending strategy.

DTI is to meet with the regional development agencies over the next few months to discuss the findings of the evaluation and its impact on programme delivery within the single pot funding regime. Copies of the evaluation report have been placed in the libraries of both Houses.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Water Price Limits

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): I have today issued initial guidance to the Director General of Water Services setting out the Government's water policies in England for Ofwat's 2004 periodic review of water price limits. The review will produce price limits, set by Ofwat, for the years 2005–2010. The Government will assist the review with policy guidance at key stages.

This first instalment of guidance specifies all the policy areas that the Government expect to affect water and sewerage companies' obligations in the years 2005–2010. In particular, it sets out a number of potential improvements that companies may be expected to make in their water resources policies, on drinking water quality and to help environmental water quality.

The guidance is about ensuring regulators and water companies take account of future policies affecting the water and sewerage industries, be they environmental, social or economic. Previous periodic reviews have produced ambitious and successful programmes of improvement in water and environmental quality. The Government will expect these gains to be maintained and, where possible, further improvements to be made.

In deciding how far and how fast to take improvement programmes the Government will also take account of the effects on customers. The guidance identifies some of the themes that will be of increased importance in this review. First, there will be greater attention paid to the existing water and sewerage system, including issues of asset maintenance, leakage and sewer flooding. Second, the Government wish to see some further improvements in the water environment, based on sound information. Thirdly, policy choices must give due weight to the economic and social effects of water policies, especially on those who are most vulnerable.

The water companies and regulators should next work together to design and cost the measures that would be necessary to deliver the possible range of policies set out in the guidance. This work should include consideration of the cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness of measures.

Many of these policies will arise from European or other statutory obligations, but there are still many policy choices to be made. In the light of further advice from the regulators in the second half of 2003 on the benefits of policies and their potential impacts on customers' water bills, I will take decisions on what policies should proceed. I will then issue my principal guidance on this early in 2004.

Ultimately, the people who matter most in this review process are the customers and it is their interests which most forcefully inform the policies contained in the guidance. Customers are concerned with more than simply paying their water bills, but also in being able to enjoy the benefits of clean water through the tap and in the environment, and it is important that our policies strike the right balance in their interests.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Benefit Fraud (Rotherham)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Malcolm Wicks): On behalf of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) inspection report on Rotherham metropolitan borough council was published today and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The BFI undertook a first inspection of Rotherham metropolitan borough council in October 1999, and the report was extremely critical of the council's housing benefits service.

This follow-up report finds that the council has failed to implement the majority of the BFI main recommendations from the first inspection. The council has not implemented a prosecution policy and no sanctions have been applied. There is still no management-checking regime and the council has failed to introduce the verification framework despite having plans to do so after our first inspection.

While there are some improvements in overpayment work, the lack of management information meant that BFI could not report in any detail on this area.

The council has developed an action plan for improvement. It has also completed a performance standards self-assessment of all areas and drafted a prosecution policy, which has been approved by Members. However, the council's track record raises doubts as to whether improvement will be achieved within a reasonable timescale.

In 2001–02, Rotherham metropolitan borough council administered approximately £56.5 million in housing benefits. This is approximately 13 per cent of its total gross revenue expenditure.

The report makes recommendations to help the council address the remaining weaknesses and to further improve the administration of housing benefit and council tax benefit, as well as counter-fraud activities.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

14–19 Next Steps

The Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Charles Clarke): We are today publishing our response to the consultation on the Green Paper, "14–19; *extending opportunities, raising standards*", which we published in February 2002.

The response document, copies of which will be placed in the Library of the House today, sets out our proposals for reform of this critical phase of young people's education. We have three key objectives:

> Our immediate task is to give assurance to students and the wider community that the existing system is stable and effectively managed—this remains our short term priority.
>
> In the medium term, we will make practical changes to introduce more flexibility and choice so that students' programmes can be better tailored to their needs and aptitudes.
>
> For the longer term, we need to discuss and implement reform that will put in place a system that is fit for 21st Century needs.

THE SHORT TERM

Mike Tomlinson's two reports following his independent inquiry into last summer's A-level problems provide a sound basis for restoring confidence in the A-level system. In his final report, he offered an assurance, which we accepted, that the actions he has recommended would secure the standards and integrity of the 2003 examinations. The QCA and the relevant awarding bodies are urgently taking forward those recommendations to secure the effective delivery of this year's examinations and to ensure that the problems of last summer cannot be repeated.

NEXT STEPS FOR THE MEDIUM TERM

We will make changes to the curriculum, which will give students greater freedom to choose programmes of study that better meet their needs and strengths. We will reduce the number of compulsory subjects in key stage 4 to English, mathematics, science and ICT, with an entitlement to study another language, design and technology, an arts and a humanities subject. We announced our broader conclusions on modern foreign languages in our language strategy in December. All 14–16 year-olds will learn about work and enterprise, and will also continue to be taught citizenship, religious education, sex education, careers education and physical education. Students will be entitled to study literacy, numeracy and ICT up to age 19 until they have achieved a level 2 award (equivalent to a good GCSE). But we have decided not to proceed for the present with our proposal to introduce a new A "with distinction" grade at A-level, preferring rather to support advanced extension awards.

We will further improve the choices open to young people by developing "hybrid" GCSEs that combine traditional general subjects with their vocational applications. We will discard the unhelpful distinction between "vocational" and "academic" GCSEs and A-levels. We intend to improve and expand modern apprenticeships so that by 2004 28 per cent. of young people will be able to enter them.

We will develop a consistent approach to teaching and learning across the whole 11–19 age range in schools and colleges. We will pilot a range of measures, building on the proposals set out in *"Schools: achieving success and Success for All"*, drawing on existing best practice and the opportunities presented by e-learning.

These reforms will be delivered through local innovation and partnership, bringing together different learning institutions and employers. The Green Paper proposed a programme of 14–19 pathfinders to test local delivery in a range of settings. We have announced the first 25 year one pathfinders across all regions in a variety of local circumstances to expand collaboration in innovative ways, building on the increasingly distinctive specialisms of local schools, colleges and training providers. We expect all of them to be in place by the end of January 2003. We will shortly be inviting expressions of interest for a second round of pathfinders to begin in September 2003. We will introduce a range of measures to support local delivery of the 14–19 agenda, including practical changes in inspection and performance management arrangement and funding flexibilities.

REFORM FOR THE LONGER TERM

These measures will help to improve participation and achievement while avoiding further major upheaval in a system that has undergone substantial recent change. We are clear that, in the longer term, further changes must address:

the need for a much stronger vocational offer;

the requirement for more manageable assessment, which recognises all of a young person's achievements;

the aim of broadening choice and stretching students, with a unified framework of qualifications designed to provide opportunities for young people of all abilities.

We will appoint a working group for 14–19 reform, under the chairmanship of Mike Tomlinson and with its membership drawn from those with direct experience of 14–19 education, higher education and industry, to consider and make recommendations on these longer term issues. We have asked Mike Tomlinson to report the group's interim conclusions within one year, with a view to finalising its work within 18 months.

Together these immediate and longer term reforms will help us realise our vision of a 14–19 phase of flexible, yet structured provision, delivered by schools, colleges and others working innovatively together to meet the needs of all learners and of the economy.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Crime Reduction and Drugs Misuse

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. David Blunkett): I am making a total of £144 million available for crime reduction spending and combating drugs, in the light of local needs. In addition, following my statement on 3 December on the updated drug strategy, we will be spending £46.2 million on expanding services to refer people into treatment through the criminal justice system.

I am announcing the allocation of £94 million on local crime and drugs spend for 03–04 on building safer communities. The co-ordination between the current funding streams (the safer communities initiative, communities against drugs and partnership development fund, along with the drug action team (DAT) development fund) will be enhanced, and I am consulting whether they should be merged into a single pot. This would help devolve resources and responsibility to the local level; further the Government's policy under the review of area based initiatives of reducing the number of funding streams, to enable local partnerships to focus on reducing crime rather than on paperwork. I hope to make a further announcement about this very shortly. These funds will include money specifically earmarked to strengthen partnerships "and drugs teams" capacity to deliver, through training and other support, to ensure those fighting crime and drugs are as well equipped as possible in their efforts. They recognise the integration of DATs and crime and disorder reduction partnerships (CDRPs) and the need to streamline their working practices.

Enhanced co-ordination will encourage partnerships to look at both aspects of the problem, and the misery it causes communities, as one issue to be tackled holistically. The money can be used in a huge variety of ways.

Partnerships are showing that they can use our programme funding to deliver a wide range of interventions. They are using it to reduce gun crime; to disrupt drugs markets through direct police work; running activities designed to divert children from getting involved in crime and drugs; paying for more CCTV cameras or targeted campaigns on particular crimes or drugs hotspots, or for warden schemes. These are just examples and the views of the community are key for informing local decisions.

Partnerships can spend less time dealing with the paperwork, separate reports for each funding stream etc, and more on driving down crime and delivering safer communities.

Today's announcement also includes the details of what each basic command unit (BCD) will receive from the £50 million BCD Fund, with shares ranging from £590,000 to £30,000. This annual fund is designed to help police meet the individual crime reduction needs of their local area and tackle the priorities set out in the national policing plan—which includes combating gun crime. The fund can be spent on crime prevention work such as targeted police operations, youth diversionary schemes, or security advice campaigns for the public.

Seventy three million pounds of the money is going direct to Partnerships with a further £21.7 million available locally for capacity and training purposes for them and drug action teams. The £50 million BCD fund should be used to complement this expenditure to tackle the priorities set out in the national policing plan and in local crime reduction strategies.

I said on 3 December that we would be introducing a comprehensive end-to-end approach to refer people into treatment via the criminal justice system in the highest crime areas with the worst drug problems. These areas will be those containing the 30 basic command units with the highest rates of acquisitive crime. A total of £46.2 million will be spent in these areas to deliver a range of services I outlined in my previous statement.

I have placed a copy of the allocations and a note summarising the proposed interventions and a list of the 30 BCUs and the relevant DAT areas in the Library and the Minister for Policing and Crime Reduction is writing to hon. Members with further information about the allocations.

Written Ministerial Statements

Wednesday 22 January 2003

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Boundary Commission

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Paul Murphy): I am pleased to announce that Mrs Joan Ruddock, OBE has been re-appointed as a member of the Northern Ireland Parliamentary Boundary Commission. Her warrant of appointment will run until 31 December 2006.

Mr Richard Mackenzie, CB is the other Commission member. His warrant of appointment will run until 29 October 2006.

Foot and Mouth

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Ian Pearson): I am publishing today the response to the PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC) review of the 2001 outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) in Northern Ireland.

The publication will provide details of the Government's response to the review which was published 26 July 2002. Most of the recommendations have been accepted and have either been, or will be implemented. The response highlights a number of areas where work continues to ensure that we are better prepared to respond to a similar animal disease outbreak in the future.

FURTHER INFORMATION

A copy of the response has been placed in the House Library. Copies will be sent to stakeholders. Consultation will take place on the revised contingency planning arrangements for dealing with epizootic disease and other initiatives being taken forward in response to the 2001 outbreak of FMD.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Benefit Fraud Inspection (Oxford City Council)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Malcolm Wicks): The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) inspection report on Oxford city council was published today and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The BFI published its first inspection report on Oxford city council in August 1999. The Department monitored Oxford's progress after the inspection but when the council failed to make progress, the BFI carried out a further inspection.

This follow-up report finds a substantial improvement in counter-fraud work, but serious weaknesses in housing benefits administration.

The council installed a new housing benefit IT system and a document image processing system at the same time as implementing the verification framework. The conflicting priorities were poorly managed. Measures to bring the work under control included unlawfully allowing claims to overrun the maximum benefit period of 60 weeks.

This report finds a substantial backlog of work and that performance had deteriorated since the first inspection in many areas, including claims processing and verification. The council also failed to ensure that all relevant claims were referred to the Rent Service, and the incorrect DWP subsidy was being claimed in respect of many homeless persons. A new overpayments recovery system proved inadequate and had to be replaced after a year, causing serious delays and rising debts.

The council has implemented all BFI's recommendations from the first inspection for counter-fraud work, which has improved substantially. However, prosecution of some fraudsters was impeded by the council's policy of allowing claims to overrun.

A new head of revenues and benefits had just been appointed at the time of the BFI follow-up inspection, and a restructuring of management and staff was under way. The poor performance in housing benefit administration had been recognised by the council and plans were progressing to address the problems, although it was too early for BFI to judge their effectiveness.

In 2000–01, Oxford city council administered approximately £39.4 million in housing benefits. This is approximately 33.8 per cent. of its total gross revenue expenditure.

The report makes recommendations to help the council address the remaining weaknesses and to further improve the administration of housing benefit and council tax benefit, as well as counter-fraud activities.

I am now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Disability Rights

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr. Andrew Smith): Later this year I plan to publish a draft disability Bill with the intention that it should undergo pre-legislative scrutiny, before being taken forward as part of the Government's legislative programme later this Parliament. This will be a further and very major step to ensure we meet our manifesto commitment on extending rights and opportunities for disabled people.

The draft Bill will include new measures proposed by the Disability Rights Task Force building on the legislation that we have already introduced such as our establishment of the Disability Rights Commission and our new protection for disabled pupils and students. It will also make progress beyond our other plans for extending civil rights protection for disabled people. These include the introduction in 2004 of the Disability Discrimination Act's final duties on service providers to make reasonable adjustments for disabled customers and the laying of regulations later this session to implement the disability provisions of the article 13 employment directive which will significantly extend employment protection for disabled people.

The new measures in the draft Bill will include proposals that we outlined in our document "Towards Inclusion", such as changes to the DDA affecting the public sector, transport and premises, some widening of the definition of disability and more. The Government also intends to cover membership of larger private clubs in the DDA and will consult widely on how and when the practical changes involved would take effect. I will make further announcements in due course.

All these legislative improvements together represent the most significant and far-reaching package of legislative change to protect disabled people against discrimination ever seen in this country.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Space Strategy

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Ms Patricia Hewitt): The draft United Kingdom Space Strategy "Space for science, enterprise and environment" is being published today. It sets out proposals to enhance the UK's standing in space exploration, to promote the use of space in government and commerce, and to develop innovative space systems. The public is invited to comment on the draft by 30 April. Copies of the strategy and guidance on how to respond are available on the website of the British National Space Centre www.bnsc.gov.uk. Copies have also been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Overseas Trade Fairs and Seminars Programme

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Ms Patricia Hewitt): I am placing details of a £20 million British Trade International programme of support for UK company participation in supported groups at overseas trade fairs and seminars in the Library of the House. Sponsor organisations that bid for support to organise groups are being informed.

These overseas trade fair and seminar activities continue to be central to trade development work worldwide. British Trade International is conscious of sponsor organisations' need for flexibility in the way in which the funding is allocated. The operation of the programme during the 2003–04 financial year will continue to take account of this need for flexibility, within the overall budget provision, and the need for efficient administration.

DEFENCE

Atomic Weapons Establishment

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): I have decided that, following detailed negotiations, and as allowed for in the announcement of the existing ten-year contract for the management and operation of the Atomic Weapons Establishment with AWE Management Limited, the contract should be extended to 25 years, and that the contractor should, where necessary, have access to private capital. The extended contract will continue to give overriding priority to safety and security. The resultant long term partnering arrangement will allow the optimisation of investment in capital projects and will result in improved facilities, environmental improvements and efficiency gains.

Aldermaston and Burghfield will continue as nuclear licensed sites, subject to independent regulation by the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate and the Environment Agency. The Ministry of Defence compliance officer will also retain the authority and responsibility to cancel the contract and to instruct the contractor to cease operations if there is a serious breach of MOD's requirements.

All existing and completed new assets will be owned by the Government. The total value of the contract will be £5.3 billion.

The AWE workforce and their trade unions will be given details today by AWE Management Limited.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Right to Buy

The First Secretary of State (Mr. John Prescott): The Government fully supports the aspiration of the great majority to own their home (there are now nearly 1 million more homeowners than there were in 1997) and we continue to provide a range of schemes to assist still more people into home ownership.

The Government is fully committed to the principle of the right to buy, which has enabled 1.5 million tenants to own their house or flat, and has helped create stable, mixed communities, but the scheme must be kept up to date to reflect the current housing market. Right to buy has changed little since it was introduced in 1980, and the Government is particularly concerned about exploitation of the rules, and about the way the scheme is now working in areas of high demand for housing.

Right to buy imposes a substantial long-term burden on the public purse (last year's sales will, in due course, result in a long run cost of some £850m) so it is vital that it meets its objectives effectively. The Government has therefore decided to act to tackle abuses and to reduce the scheme's adverse impact on the availability of affordable housing, in both urban and rural areas.

I therefore intend to reduce the maximum discounts available to tenants in 42 areas that are under the greatest housing market pressure, as evidenced by a high incidence of homelessness and high house prices, and where there is also evidence of abuse of the scheme. The areas concerned, mainly urban and all in the south and east of England, are listed below. The maximum discount will be cut to £16,000, the same as the maximum discount available to assured tenants of housing associations under the right to acquire scheme.

We have today written to all the local authorities concerned, and to any housing associations in those areas to whom the social housing stock has been transferred, consulting them on our intentions. A copy of this letter has been placed in the Library of the House. It provides each local authority with the opportunity to provide reasons why the change should not be made in their area. I will consider carefully all representations received.

An order introducing the changes will be laid before Parliament next month, and will come into effect in March. Any tenant who has applied for the right to buy before the date on which the order comes into effect will be entitled to the current, higher, maximum rates of discount where they qualify for these.

The Government is also determined to ensure that more local people in rural areas can afford a home. The previous administration introduced constraints on the right to buy in some designated rural areas, all national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty, by restricting the resale of homes purchased under the scheme. The Government is now taking immediate steps to increase the scope of those restrictions on resale. We are removing the requirement for the area in question to have 3 per cent or more of stock as second homes and will be prepared to designate areas that include towns with up to 3,000 inhabitants (rather than the current limit of 2,000). We are writing to all local authorities and post-transfer housing associations to inform them that we are relaxing the criteria. A copy of this letter has been placed in the Library of the House. We expect more local authorities will take the opportunity this change now provides to protect the stock of affordable housing stock across much of rural England.

The Government will assess carefully the impact of the changes before determining the need for further modernisation of the right to buy.

London	*South East*	*East*	*South West*
1. Barnet	1. Chiltern	Watford	Christchurch
2. Bexley	2. Epsom & Ewell		
3. Brent	3. Hart		
4. Bromley	4. Oxford		
5. Camden	5. Reading		
6. City of London	6. Reigate & Banstead		
7. Croydon	7. Spelthorne		
8. Ealing	8. Tonbridge & Malling		
9. Enfield	9. Vale of White Horse		
10. Hackney	10. West Berkshire		
11. Hammersmith & Fulham			
12. Haringey			
13. Harrow			
14. Hillingdon			
15. Hounslow			
16. Islington			
17. Kensington & Chelsea			
18. Kingston upon Thames			
19. Lambeth			
20. Lewisham			
21. Merton			
22. Newham			
23. Redbridge			
24. Richmond upon Thames			
25. Southwark			
26. Sutton			
27. Tower Hamlets			
28. Waltham Forest			
29. Wandsworth			
30. Westminster			

Written Ministerial Statements

Thursday 23 January 2003

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

British Council Art Exhibitions Overseas

The Minister for Europe (Mr. Denis MacShane): The British Council, although not a Government Department, receives a substantial grant-in-aid from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The Council regularly organises or sponsors exhibitions overseas of works of art loaned from national galleries and private collections in the United Kingdom. It provides certain assurances or guarantees in respect of loss or damage while these works are on loan.

In the six month period ended 30 September 2002 the British Council provided such assurances to seven national lenders and undertakings to 156 private lenders. The value of the contingent liabilities that remained outstanding as at 30 September 2002 in respect of national lenders was £181, 233, 500 and £158, 734, 660 in respect of private lenders; these were, for the most part, attributable to the Constable exhibition which opened in Paris on 7 October. The exhibition closed on 13 January 2003.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Benefit Fraud Inspectorate

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Malcolm Wicks): On behalf of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) inspection report on the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham council was published today and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

This report finds that, while having some significant challenges ahead, the council is well placed to develop its benefits administration and counter-fraud performance into that of a high achieving authority.

The BFI was impressed by the clear focus shown by the benefit service management team. The council had or was addressing a range of significant problems.

The report finds weaknesses in the council's claim forms and in the way the evidence to support claims is verified. Both these issues require urgent attention by the council.

Some progress is being made in improving overpayments recovery but there are some problems in overpayment calculation and classification. Supervisory checks were found to be poor and management information flawed. A high number of old housing benefit and council tax benefit overpayments had not been recovered.

The report notes the good performance of the counter-fraud benefit investigation team. A large number of benefit fraud prosecutions had been undertaken, cautions issued and administrative penalties offered. A thorough case-review process had helped to ensure that the quality of investigations remained high.

In 2000–01, the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham council paid out £86.8 million in housing benefits. This is approximately 32 per. cent of its gross revenue.

The report makes recommendations to help the council address the remaining weaknesses and to improve further the administration of housing benefit and council tax benefit, as well as counter-fraud activities.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

PSA Grants

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): Following a successful pilot exercise, I am pleased to announce that the Government has signed a further 49 Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs) with individual councils, and that we hope to conclude Agreements with another 35 councils by the end of March.

I am today laying before this House a special grant report which seeks approval for pump-priming grants totalling £93 million which will help these councils to deliver their challenging LPSA targets to further improve their local services.

Electoral Pilots

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): The electoral pilot programme is a key part of the Government's efforts to modernise our electoral system. It will allow us to test the robustness of new voting methods, including e-voting, and build public confidence in them. In conjunction with the Electoral Commission and the Local Government Association, we have invited local authorities in England and Wales to take part in this programme by running pilots at local elections during 2003.

Today I am able to announce that I have accepted 18 applications to hold e-voting pilots at the May 2003 local elections. In addition, I have accepted a further 2 applications to hold non e-voting pilots in addition to the 41 contained in my previous announcement on 18 December 2002. The names of these additional 20 successful local authorities and the type of pilot that they are planning to hold are listed at the end of this statement.

In total, I have now accepted 61 applications, covering 6.5million electors. This is a significant increase over the 30 pilots (covering 2.5million electors) held at the May 2002 local elections. The next step will be for us, working with authorities and in consultation with the Electoral Commission, to draw up the statutory orders authorising these pilots.

We will shortly be concluding a competitive procurement, under the EC services directive, for a number of suppliers to be contracted as part of a framework agreement to support e-voting pilots over the next three years. A list of contracted suppliers will be placed in the Library of the House and on the Office's website. Local authorities conducting e-voting pilots will need to match up with suppliers on this framework agreement as soon as it is made public.

This year's local elections will be the largest test of the Government's e-voting plans yet, confirming the UK's position as one of the pioneers of e-voting in Europe. The 18 local authorities that will trial the new technologies produced proposals that demonstrated they are ready, willing, and able to offer their electors the opportunity to trial 21st century voting techniques.

We are building on the positive response to the relatively small-scale trials held by nine authorities last year, which demonstrated the huge potential that e-voting has for giving people wider opportunities to vote. This year's pilots which are being conducted on a much larger scale, will help us to gain a better knowledge and experience of e-voting with a much larger number of people.

The pilots are an important step towards our aim of holding an e-enabled general election sometime after 2006. These innovations will help to make elections more relevant, straightforward and accessible for voters.

Electoral Pilot Applications Accepted Today

Name of Authority	*Channels to be Piloted*
Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council	E-voting at polling stations & e-counting
Chester City Council	E-voting at polling stations
Chorley Borough Council	Touch-tone telephone, Internet & e-counting (combined with all-postal ballot)
Copeland Borough Council	All-postal ballot
East Northamptonshire Council	Postal ballot paper innovations
Epping Forest District Council	E-voting at polling stations & e-counting
Ipswich Borough Council	Digital TV, SMS text messaging, touch-tone telephone & Internet
Kerrier District Council	Digital TV, touch-tone telephone, Internet, e-voting at polling stations & e-counting
Malvern Hills District Council	Internet
Norwich City Council	SMS text messaging, touch-tone telephone & Internet
Rushmoor Borough Council	Internet
Sheffield City Council	SMS text messaging, touch-tone telephone, Internet, e-voting at polling stations & at Sheffield Public Data kiosks
Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Council	Digital TV, touch-tone telephone, Internet, e-voting at polling stations & e-counting (combined with all-postal ballot)
South Somerset District Council	Digital TV, touch-tone telephone & Internet (combined with all-postal ballot)
South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council	SMS text messaging, touch-tone telephone & Internet (combined with all-postal ballot)
St Albans City & District Council	Touch-tone telephone, Internet, e-voting at polling stations & e-counting
Stratford-on-Avon District Council	Internet & e-voting at polling stations
Stroud District Council	Touch-tone telephone & Internet
Swindon Borough Council	Digital TV, touch-tone telephone & Internet
Vale Royal Borough Council	Touch-tone telephone, Internet & e-counting

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Animal Movements Regime

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): The Government propose—subject to satisfactory further consultations with the livestock industry—to make significant changes to the animal movements regime in England and Wales with effect from 4 March 2003:

> A reduction of the 20 day whole farm standstill to six days for cattle, sheep and goats but with far fewer exemptions;
>
> A joint commitment by government and the industry to a package of measures to improve the level of biosecurity and disease surveillance; and,
>
> A readiness to increase the length of the standstill back to 20 days if the disease threat increases.

Scottish Ministers will be considering the Scottish position in the light of this announcement.

THE STANDSTILL REGIME

Since the end of the 2001 foot and mouth disease outbreak animal movement controls have been in place, underpinned by a 20-day standstill period for premises following the arrival of incoming animals. These controls were imposed on the basis of strong veterinary and scientific advice.

There have been successive relaxations and exemptions from the 20-day regime in England and Wales and separately in Scotland, notably a system of isolation or separation for incoming animals, in order to meet industry concerns about the costs imposed by the standstill rule.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE INDEPENDENT INQUIRIES

The two independent inquiries into FMD—the Lessons Learned and Royal Society Inquiries—reporting in July 2002 endorsed the retention of the 20-day standstill on disease control grounds, until such time as the Government had carried out a detailed risk assessment and wide-ranging cost-benefit analysis of the impact of different standstill periods.

As a result, Defra commissioned two interrelated assessments:

A risk assessment of the impact of different standstills on the "Silent Spread" of the disease, before it is known to be in the country;

A cost benefit analysis of the cost to the industry and disease control benefit to GB as a whole of different standstills;

Separately Defra had already commissioned a risk assessment of the probability of disease reaching GB livestock either from illegal imports or from meat imported legally from third countries; emerging results from that risk assessment were also relevant to this work. In its response to the FMD inquiries the Government said they would draw on the emerging findings from these studies to inform a decision on the movement regime for Spring 2003, because of the significant numbers of animal movements that take place at that time of year.

EMERGING FINDINGS FROM THE RISK ASSESSMENTS

These risk assessment and cost benefit studies have been tackling novel and complex problems, in a relatively short time. The emerging findings do not provide unequivocal answers to the questions posed.

None the less, on animal movements the risk assessment and cost benefit analysis provide evidence for four conclusions. First, they suggest that standstill rules can play a useful part in limiting the spread of foot and mouth disease during the period before its presence in the country has been identified. Secondly, however, initial disease spread is likely to be dominated by early animal movements over which standstills have limited impact, and by other spread mechanisms which they do not affect. Standstills therefore appear to have rather less effect than might have been anticipated in confining outbreaks to local areas. Third, in disease spread terms in the majority of scenarios the differential benefit between a six and a 20-day standstill is relatively small and in cost benefit terms a six day standstill is more effective in most (but not all) scenarios. Fourth, and perhaps most important, the model shows that the key factor affecting the ultimate scale of an outbreak is the time to detection of disease, not the length of standstill.

THE GOVERNMENT'S CONCLUSIONS

The Government's veterinary and scientific advisers do not consider that the currently emerging conclusions from the movements risk assessment are sufficiently robust definitively to determine the optimum length of standstill period. However, the balance of view of the experts in risk assessment is that, while the second phase of the risk assessment work should continue to the end of May 2003 as planned, there is unlikely to be a significantly better basis on which to make a decision about the standstill then than is available now. The Government therefore is faced with making a decision now on the evidence available to it, balancing scientific, veterinary, economic and other factors.

The Government consider in the light of the evidence that a standstill period provides a valuable long-term element in the movement regime. The emerging results from the cost-benefit analysis suggest a reasonably robust cost-benefit case for a six day standstill (compared with no standstill). But, bearing in mind the uncertainties on the movements risk assessment, the emerging results cannot at this stage provide a robust conclusion on whether or not the economic benefits of 20 day standstill (net of costs) are greater, or less, than for 6 days. The results do, however, strongly indicate that it is equally important to address factors such as disease surveillance, biosecurity standards on farms, in markets and in the transport of livestock, and above all efforts to raise awareness and commitment in the livestock community to reporting suspicion of disease.

It is recognised that an early move to reduce the standstill from 20 to six days would carry some risks. However, the Government have concluded that the best approach is to put in place a standstill of 6 days for cattle sheep and goats, with effect from early March, provided that over the next couple of weeks the industry demonstrates a commitment to an effective programme of controls and further work to improve disease detection and biosecurity. If we are to go beyond the most precautionary approach, there must be a real gain to be had from doing so. The 20 day standstill will remain in place for pigs.

MEASURES TO IMPROVE DISEASE DETECTION AND BIOSECURITY

The change Ministers are announcing today is therefore dependent on the adoption of an accompanying package of measures by early March, the main points of which are:

> a responsibility will be placed on lorry drivers, farmers and others to ensure that they, and the exterior of their vehicles, are clean when entering livestock markets;
>
> livestock market operators will be required to sign a formal undertaking to comply with strict operating procedures;
>
> there will have to be complete separation in time and space between dedicated slaughter markets and other livestock markets.

At the same time, most of the additional controls over the cleansing and disinfection of livestock vehicles introduced following the FMD outbreak will be maintained, and the current requirements for standards of biosecurity in markets will be maintained and kept under review. The Government are also introducing new rules for the individual identification of sheep and goats from 1 February.

The Government will also:

> tackle non-compliance more systematically by removing farmers' right to move animals under general licence if they break the rules; put in place a joint campaign with the

> industry to promote high levels of compliance and accepted tough treatment of those breaking the rules.

The Government will consult on the following proposals for possible introduction later in the year:

> the introduction of revised FMD biosecurity guidance by 1 July 2003, as required under the Animal Health Act 2002;
>
> a ban on animals being kept on market premises overnight;
>
> a requirement for all vehicles to be cleansed and disinfected before leaving markets and abattoirs;
>
> a requirement for market operators to ensure that a vet attends every market;
>
> a requirement for farmers to consult a vet at least annually for advice about disease detection, biosecurity and farm health plans.

The Government will commission further work into:

> the impact of dealers on the pattern of livestock movements, and the options for controls;
>
> the possibility of imposing a distance limit of (say) 150 kilometres on the movement of animals through markets, or of making such moves subject to special licences.

In addition, Government will work with industry, the veterinary profession and farm assurance schemes on a package of education and best practice guidance, covering in particular the recognition and reporting of disease, and the encouragement of farm health plans covering disease surveillance, biosecurity and movement records.

There would also need to be a commitment that the industry will engage constructively in consultations on the delivery of the animal health and welfare strategy and on future systems of risk sharing between government and the industry of the costs of animal disease.

At the same time, the Government recognise the need to maintain and enhance its efforts to minimise the risk of an FMD outbreak posed by illegal imports of meat and animal products, building on the illegal imports action plan and the conclusions of the risk assessment on illegal imports. We intend to consult further with stakeholders on a revised and updated version of the action plan.

RETURN TO THE 20 DAY STANDSTILL IF RISK INCREASES

The Government will also put in place arrangements—along the lines recommended by the Royal Society Report—for triggering a 20-day standstill should the threat of disease increase or the evidence base otherwise change so as to justify a longer standstill, or if there is significant non compliance with the new or existing biosecurity provisions. The regulations setting out the move to a 6 day standstill will have an expiry date of 31 July 2003, so that the position can be reviewed at the end of May.

The Government are publishing today a summary document describing the emerging findings from the risk assessments and cost benefit analysis and the advice we have received on them from peer reviewers and from our veterinary, scientific and economic advisers. We will also set out more fully the proposed new measures on detection and biosecurity. Detailed reports on the risk assessments from the external contractors will be published within the next couple of weeks when quality assurance is complete.

HEALTH

Medical Careers

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is today announcing proposals for a new framework of measures to improve rewards for national health service consultants and modernise medical careers in England. Copies of the proposed new framework have been placed in the vote office.

The new framework involves using the extra resources that the Department had previously set aside for implementation of a new consultants' contract (rising to some £250 million by 2005–06) to achieve the continued objective of giving greater rewards to consultants who do most for NHS patients and reforming the way the NHS delivers patient care.

To ensure that this extra investment delivers improvements in NHS consultant capacity, productivity and value for money—and helps reform ways of working—there will be a national framework within which local health services will have a choice of investing in local implementation of the contract negotiated with the British Medical Association in June 2002, where there is a high level of local consultant support; investing in new annual incentives for consultants who make the biggest contribution to improving patient care; and investing extra resources in the new system of clinical excellence awards that is due to be introduced from April 2004.

Within this framework, NHS trusts, primary care trusts and strategic health authorities will be asked to deploy the available resources in ways that most effectively support local priorities for improving the efficiency, quality and responsiveness of patient care.

The new framework will be accompanied by new standards for consultant job planning to help provide more varied and flexible medical careers and a more productive, collaborative approach to planning and reviewing consultant's work for the NHS. There will also be new standards governing the relationship between private practice and NHS work to improve transparency and prevent any potential conflicts of interest. Consultants will need to meet these standards to be eligible for the new incentive payments and to demonstrate that they are meeting the standards expected under the new clinical excellence award scheme.

In line with the objective of supporting medical careers, the Department will be introducing on a phased basis a new system of sabbaticals for consultants. Initially, by 2005–06, funding will be made available to enable around 800 consultants each year to have sabbaticals of around two to three months, with coverage extending as workforce capacity expands.

The Department will also be working closely with the medical royal colleges to modernise medical training, recruitment and career structures. Reforming medical careers in this way will help deliver in a more effective way the treatment patients need most and enable doctors to develop their skills to the full.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Act 2000

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. David Blunkett): I am pleased to say that Lord Carlile of Berriew QC has completed the report on the operation of part VII of The Terrorism Act 2000, which will be laid before the House today.

Detention Powers

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. David Blunkett): I have today laid before Parliament a draft Order to continue the powers of detention in the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 for a further 12 months. It will be debated, by both Houses of Parliament, early in March.

Where terrorism is concerned, our paramount responsibility is to ensure public safety and national security. So long as the present public emergency subsists, where a person is suspected of terrorism of the sort which led to 11 September 2001 and is considered to be a threat to national security but cannot currently be removed—and for whom a criminal prosecution is not an option—we believe that it is necessary and proportionate to provide for extended detention, pending removal. The person would be free to leave the UK if he wished to do so.

The Court of Appeal unanimously upheld our position on the need for these detention powers, last October. The Court agreed that the detention powers are not discriminatory and comply with the European Convention on Human Rights. The draft Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 (Continuance in force of sections 21–23) Order 2003 provides for the continuation of the immigration powers under Part IV of the 2001 Act to certify, and to detain pending removal, suspected international terrorists, subject to safeguards. The continuation is from 14 March 2003 until 13 March 2004.

Of the 15 foreign nationals who have so far been detained using the powers under the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act, two have voluntarily left the United Kingdom. The other 13 remain in detention.

My decisions to certify and detain these individuals were made on the basis of detailed and compelling evidence. That evidence will be examined by the Special Immigration Appeals Commission when the individuals' appeals are held, as provided for under the Act. The Commission is equivalent to the High Court. It has the power to overturn the certificates which I have issued in respect of those detained.

The detention powers in Part IV of the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act are a cornerstone of the UK's anti-terrorism measures. It is essential that we are able to take firm, swift action against those who threaten the safety of this country.

DEFENCE

Anti-Tank Guided Weapon

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Mr. Adam Ingram): The Ministry of Defence has selected the JAVELIN weapon system, produced by a joint venture of Raytheon and Lockheed Martin, as the preferred solution to the requirement for a new Light Forces' Anti-Tank Guided Weapon (LF ATGW). This follows a rigorous and comprehensive assessment phase, which included comparative live-firing trials between JAVELIN and the SPIKE system (offered by Rafael and MBDA). Taking all of these factors into account, JAVELIN provides the best overall solution to our LF ATGW requirement in terms of risk, affordabilty, operational effectiveness and value for money.

JAVELIN, which is already in service with the United States Army, will provide the British Army with a significantly improved capability when it replaces the existing MILAN system. The weapon system is highly manoeuvrable, man-portable and is capable of destroying the most advanced tanks and armoured vehicles at ranges up to 2.5 km.

The contract, subject to satisfactory conclusion of negotiations, will be placed shortly. It will be worth over £300 million and is expected to create or sustain over 300 jobs across the United Kingdom in a diverse range of manufacturing companies.

Written Ministerial Statements

Monday 27 January 2003

TRANSPORT

Aerodromes and Navigation Facilities

The Minister for Transport (Mr. John Spellar): In order to update the longstanding land use planning arrangements for safeguarding aerodromes, technical sites and military explosives storage areas the existing Circular and Direction to local planning authorities have been revised. This follows the announcement on 27 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 775–776W, by my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) that we would be consulting local government and others concerned about the revision of the consultation process which local planning authorities are required to carry out on development proposals which may have consequences for the safe operation of certain aerodromes and navigation facilities. A public consultation took place during 2001 and discussions with local planning authority and airport representatives continued into last year. We are grateful for their assistance in refining our proposals.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the Department for Transport and the National Assembly for Wales are today publishing the revised version of the Safeguarding Circular, for application in England and Wales. It incorporates a revised Direction to local planning authorities made by my right hon. Friend the First Secretary of State and the Welsh Minister for the Environment. The main change which the Direction makes is that where consultation is required the local planning authority must consult the aerodrome operator rather than the Civil Aviation Authority, with the Authority becoming involved only if the local planning authority does not wish to follow the aerodrome operator's advice. In addition, the Circular describes more fully than previously the importance of safeguarding and the hazards to aviation which can arise from particular types of development. The Direction comes into force on 10 February and the new Circular will replace DOE Circular 2/92 (Welsh Office Circular 5/92) on the same day.

DEFENCE

Gulf Veterans

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): Figures for Gulf veterans' mortality from 1 April 1991 to 30 June 2002 were published on 23 July 2002, *Official Report*, columns 909–10W in answer to a Question by my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron). The latest data, as at 31 December 2002, are shown in Table 1 below. As before, the data for Gulf veterans are compared with that of a control group, known as the Era cohort, which is made up of Armed Forces personnel of a similar age, gender, Service and rank who were not deployed. Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of deaths from cancer (malignant neoplasm) by anatomical site.

Table 1

Deaths to UK gulf veterans (Note: 1) 1 April 1991–31 December 2002

Causes (coded to ICD-9) (Note: 2)

ICD Chapter	*Cause of death*	*Gulf*	*Era*[3]	*Mortality Rate Ratio*[4]
	All deaths	**571**	**574**	**0.99**
	All cause coded deaths	**563**	**566**	**0.99**
I–XVI	**Disease-related causes**	**225**	**276**	**0.81**
I	Infectious and parasitic diseases	4	2	1.99
II	Cancers	97	109	0.89
III	Endocrine and immune disorders	1	4	0.25
V	Mental disorders	12	15	0.80
VI	Diseases of the nervous system and sense organs (Note 5)	10	9	1.11
VII	Diseases of the circulatory system	75	102	0.73
VIII	Diseases of the respiratory system	10	6	1.66
IX	Diseases of the digestive system	14	18	0.77
IV, X–XVI	All other disease-related causes (Note 6)	2	11	0.18
EXVII	**External causes of injury and poisoning**	**338**	**290**	**1.16**
	Railway accidents	4	1	3.98
	Motor vehicle accidents	118	97	1.21
	Water transport accidents	5	1	4.97
	Air and space accidents	25	19	1.31
	Other vehicle accidents	0	1	0.00
	Accidental poisoning	12	14	0.85
	Accidental falls	8	7	1.14
	Accidents due to fire/flames	0	2	0.00
	Accidents due to natural environmental factors	2	2	1.00
	Accidents to submersion/suffocation/foreign bodies	17	7	2.42
	Other accidents	31	29	1.06
	Late effect of accident/injury	0	2	0.00
	Suicide and injury undetermined whether accidental	107	100	1.07

Table 1

Deaths to UK gulf veterans (Note: 1) 1 April 1991–31 December 2002
Causes (coded to ICD-9) (Note: 2)

ICD Chapter	*Cause of death*	*Gulf*	*Era*[3]	*Mortality Rate Ratio*[4]
	Homicide	6	4	1.49
	Injury resulting from the operations of war	3	4	0.75
	Other deaths for which coded cause data are not yet available	**5**	**4**	
	Overseas deaths for which cause data are not available	**3**	**4**	

Notes:
1. Service and Ex-Service personnel only.
2. World Health Organisation's International Classification of Diseases 9th revision 1977.
3. The Era group comprises 53,143 personnel, randomly sampled from all UK Armed Forces personnel in service on 1 January 1991 and who did not deploy to the Gulf. This group is matched to the 53,409 Gulf veterans to reflect the socio-demographic and military composition of the Gulf cohort in terms of age, gender, Service (Army, Royal Navy, Royal Air Force), officer/other rank status, regular/reservist status, and a proxy measure for fitness.
4. Mortality rate ratios differ marginally from the crude deaths ratio owing to some small differences between the Gulf and Era cohorts.
5. These figures include 4 deaths from Motor Neurone Disease amongst the Gulf corhort and 3 in the Era group.
6. Includes cases with insufficient information on the death certificate to provide a known cause of death.

Table 2

Deaths due to neoplasms among UK Gulf veterans: 1 April 1991–31 December 2002
(Major anatomical sites (coded to ICD-9)[1]

IDC 9	*Site*	*Gulf*	*Era*
140–239	**All neoplasms**	**97**	**109**
140–149	Malignant neoplasm of lip, oral cavity Pharynx	3	4
150–159	Malignant neoplasm of digestive organs and peritoneum	21	25
160–165	Malignant neoplasm of respiratory and intrathoracic organs	15	24
170–175	Malignant nepolasm of bone,		
170–176	connective tissue, skin and breast	14	10
179–189	Malignant neoplasm of genitourinary organs	2	6
190–199	Malignant neoplasm of other and unspecified site	20	27
200–208	Malignant nepolasm of lymphatic and haematopoietic tissue	19	11
239	Unspecified nature	3	2

[1] World Health Organisation's International Classification of Diseases 9th revision, Geneva, 1977.

LORD CHANCELLOR

Magistrates Courts

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Yvette Cooper): The Government have received the independent report by PA Consulting on the extended court sitting hours pilots that took place last year in magistrates courts in London and Manchester between May and September. Ministers are very grateful for the hard and positive work put in by all the staff involved in the pilots from across the CIS agencies, as well as the judiciary—both magistrates and District Judges.

Lord Justice Auld recommended in his review of the criminal courts that there be a "thorough examination of the need for and the costs/benefits of extending court working hours . . . .". The sitting hours conventionally used in magistrates courts have remained essentially unchanged and set on a traditional basis for many years. The Government, therefore, decided to pilot alternative working hours in magistrates courts in order to test possible improvements on the courts' efficiency and effectiveness in the interests of the whole criminal justice system.

Three distinct pilots were established with the local criminal justice agencies to test out variations of extended court sitting hours. The three aspects of extended hours that were tested specifically were:

In *London Bow Street magistrates court*: the extended hours courts ran on Friday and Saturday night from 6pm to midnight to deal with first appearances of defendants charged in Westminster earlier in the day.

In *Manchester City magistrates court* two schemes ran:

> an *early morning remand court* starting at 9am rather than the normal 10am, in three courts daily from Monday to Friday. These courts heard first appearances of adult defendants arrested and held in police custody the previous night; and
>
> *an evening trial court* ran from 4pm to 8pm on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. This court heard adult trial cases for offences where there was no likelihood of custody

The five main offence types heard in London were theft, failure to surrender, begging, drunk and disorderly and possession of drugs. While in Manchester in the early remand courts the five main offence types were theft, breach of the peace, driving without insurance, failure to surrender, and breach of bail. In the Manchester evening court, the large majority of cases were motoring offences.

During the pilots, 368 defendants appeared in Bow Street magistrates court London, 534 in Manchester magistrates court in the early morning courts and 88 in the evening trial court. It is worth noting that all defendants appearing before the courts had to be "fit to be charged" and not under the "influence" or otherwise incapable.

PA Consulting has produced a full evaluation report. The report's conclusion has been that whilst there has been some reduction in delays and some qualitative improvements for victims and witnesses, the extended court sitting hours piloted in magistrates courts proved to be disproportionately expensive and were not cost effective especially given the fact that there are only limited capacity pressures facing the magistrates courts during normal sitting hours

The findings indicated that the early morning sittings did assist the handling of cases and the earlier hearings of overnight remand cases had a beneficial effect on those cases already listed for hearing that day. In contrast there was less demand for the late night trials option, where the relatively low volume of cases led to disproportionate additional costs.

PA Consulting concluded that there were insufficient benefits in terms of increased throughput, reduced delay, improved attrition or overall quality of justice to justify the higher costs of extending court hours under current capacity conditions. However, they noted that useful lessons could be learnt from the pilots in dealing with increased pressures on court capacity due to increased workloads which might arise in the future, from such initiatives as street crime, increased numbers of police officers.

The cost of the pilots reflected the fact that most agencies in the criminal justice system currently have staff terms and conditions and working arrangements based on a 'normal' working day, except the police and prisons. Extending court business into the evening or weekends is more expensive due to the need to recompense staff for working unsociable hours and the additional costs of providing more staff to cover evening courts. The high fixed costs of secure transport and custody of prisoners also contributed significantly to the costs of the pilots.

Preliminary costings for the three pilots were in the order of £5.4m. In fact, partly as a result of reducing the length of the pilots to four months without prejudicing their evaluation, the final total cost was £2.04m, including national project costs. The additional direct cost of handling each defendant was: £3,257 in London; £589 for Manchester morning courts and £1,322 for Manchester evening trials. In particular, the relatively low number of cases in London affected that particular pilot's value for money, especially as this cost does not include the use of prisons for remanded defendants but the temporary, and certainly not long-term alternative, of police cells. The Manchester morning courts were the least costly due to the higher volumes involved, but the pilots identified important lessons about the actual mechanics of how such courts should be run.

The inter-agency pilots have greatly assisted the working relationships in two of the country's largest metropolitan areas and a significant number of cases have been dealt with, despite the unpredictable nature of the number of cases that would actually occur during the pilots. Early operational problems, such as prisoner delivery were largely resolved quickly.

This exercise has meant that the Government have learned valuable lessons that can be shared with all the local criminal justice agencies throughout the country and improvements made to existing arrangements, as well as establishing the ground-work for any future changes. The consultants were also charged to consider other alternatives and these have been taken into account in the Report and its recommendations. The report's findings will be circulated to criminal justice boards, magistrates courts committees and Crown courts so that where capacity problems arise any new arrangements being considered can take into account the lessons learned from this pilot exercise. Manchester magistrates courts committee has decided on the basis of the experience of the pilot to extend the use of early morning sessions at Trafford magistrates court to include early morning fines courts.

The report's recommendations have been agreed, which are being implemented, are set out below:

> the London and Manchester protocols have been put into "good practice" templates (which have been included in the Appendices to the Report);
>
> the Report is being issued out to all the agencies involved (so that should specific pressure require extended magistrates' court hours in any particular location or in order to respond to initiatives, advantage can be taken of the work done so far);
>
> the lessons learnt are being shared with the Crown Court where there is greater immediate pressure in relation to caseload; and
>
> the most practical elements of the pilots, the early morning sittings (probably focusing on a 9:30 start) and the use of "specialist courts" in the late afternoon, will be actively considered by all Magistrates' Courts Committees (MCCs)—where the need and practical arrangements will be a matter for each MCC to decided upon in conjunction with their CIS colleagues under the umbrella of the new local Criminal Justice Boards.

The Government will continue to explore ways to improve and update the working practices of the courts.

Written Ministerial Statements

Tuesday 28 January 2003

WORK AND PENSIONS

Benefit Fraud Inspection (Telford and Wrekin Council)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Malcolm Wicks): On behalf of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) inspection report on Telford and Wrekin Council was published today and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The BFI undertook its first inspection of Telford and Wrekin Council's housing benefits administration and counter-fraud activity during October and December 1998. BFI reported that the authority needed to develop a more secure and accurate benefits administration system and improve the overall quality of its benefits service.

This follow-up inspection considered the progress made by the authority since the first inspection and in particular its implementation of recommendations. BFI commends the progress made by the council in undertaking a major restructuring exercise to bring together the management of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. This had resulted in clear focus on customer service and processing, replacing IT systems and introducing a system for document image processing.

Recovery of overpayments was identified in the first inspection as the council's weakest area. This follow-up report finds that improvement in identification, classification and recording of overpayments are still needed.

In the first inspection, BFI found problems in the way claimants' residency and identity was verified. This follow-up report finds that the council has made significant improvements in verification, and considers that the council is well placed to implement the Verification Framework.

This report finds that positive steps have been taken to address previous concerns in the areas of IT, post opening and cheque dispatch. In particular, a quality control team has been created to ensure that accuracy checks are made.

This report also finds that counter-fraud efforts have increased significantly since the first inspection with more proactive investigation work. More staff have been deployed and staff training has improved. In addition, the council has introduced a case management system.

In 2000–01, Telford and Wrekin Council administered approximately £38.7 million in housing benefits. This is approximately 21 per cent. of its total gross revenue expenditure.

The report makes recommendations to help the council address the remaining weaknesses and to further improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as counter-fraud activities.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Benefit Fraud Inspection (Fife Council)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Malcolm Wicks): On behalf of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) inspection report on Fife Council was published today and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

This report finds that the council has responded to the challenges of re-organisation. However, there is considerable scope for further improvement particularly in verifying claims. BFI found significant weaknesses in verifying identity and residence as well as income and capital.

Following BFI inspection, the council reported working towards implementing two modules of the Verification Framework by April 2003. To do this effectively, the council needs to draw up a detailed implementation plan, showing key milestone dates and clear roles and responsibilities for those involved.

The report finds that the council's claim form is broadly effective in gathering the right information and is reasonably straightforward to understand and complete. However, there is room for further improvement.

The council plans to make more use of prosecution and administrative penalties against fraudsters, and to support this crucial change the council is creating a dedicated prosecution team.

The report finds that the council needs to improve the recovery of overpayments, including those incurred through fraud, from rent rebate claimants.

In 2000–01, Fife Council administered approximately £81 million in housing benefits.

The report makes recommendations to help the council address the remaining weaknesses and to further improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as counter-fraud activities.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

CABINET OFFICE

Delegations/Authorisations made in 2002 under the Civil Service (Management Functions) Act 1992

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Douglas Alexander): No such delegations or authorisations were made during 2002.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

English Fisheries Package

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): At the meeting of the Council of Agriculture and Fisheries Ministers in December a number of important decisions were taken on fisheries measures to help restore depleted stocks. Necessarily they include real new constraints on fishing and the Government recognises that they may impact on some coastal fisheries communities. We have already promised to respond with financial assistance which will address the needs, and promote sustainability, both in the fishing industry and local communities, and I am now able to set this out in more detail.

We propose to provide grants to help vessel owners who wish to do so, to leave the industry by decommissioning their boats. An SI will be laid before Parliament for approval. The intention is to remove 15–20 per cent. of the English fleet's fishing effort on cod in the North Sea and West of Scotland, in order to bring the fleet capacity better into line with fishing opportunities. Similar schemes are proposed by the Scottish Executive and in Northern Ireland. Decommissioning of this scale in the UK fleet will secure the 15 day per month allowance for fishing in the new interim EU scheme for limiting time at sea. Detailed rules for targeting the scheme and for assessing applications for grant will be developed in discussion with the English catching industry shortly. A tendering process is expected to apply and the cost in England is likely to reach £5 million.

The EU decided in December that to improve control of fisheries the requirement to install satellite tracking equipment on vessels should be extended to 15–24 metre boats. To help fishermen Defra will provide £400,000 over two years to allow 40 per cent. grant to be paid towards the cost of the terminals and their installation.

There will also be help for fishing-dependent communities. Regional Development Agencies, which have responsibility for economic development and regeneration in England, are already engaged in strong local partnerships, targeted on the economic development of coastal communities.

It is important that fishermen have access to the help that is provided by local Business Links, Learning and Skills Councils and JobCentre Plus. I have therefore asked the RDAs, working with and coordinating the activity of these partnerships, to urgently ensure that arrangements are in place to ensure the effective delivery of assistance and guidance for local fishing communities particularly affected, taking full account of the recent decisions and their impact on those communities.

RDAs and other agencies have substantial resources to address their economic and social responsibilities. However, where necessary, Defra will provide additional resources for facilitation to ensure that the services which are most needed are identified in those fishing communities which are dependent on the fish stocks of the North Sea and West of Scotland.

The National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations has emphasised the importance of strengthening the involvement of the fishing industry in the assessment of stocks, in close partnership with our scientists. We warmly welcome their approach, which will help to ensure a fuller appreciation of the state of and prospects for fish stocks. We will provide additional funds for this purpose and will consult them on how this initiative might best be taken forward.

An additional £1million will be provided to finance both the facilitation arrangements described above and industry involvement with the scientists, as well as providing the potential for other priority initiatives in recognition of the English industry's transitional problems.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Local Government Elections Review

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): We are looking at all sorts of ways to encourage more people to use their vote, including using modern technology such as mobile phones and the internet. I believe the electorate of the 21st Century expect a cycle of local elections that is clear and readily understood, so we have asked the Electoral Commission to look at options for simplifying the current arrangements.

This follows the commitment in the Local Government White Paper—"Strong Local Leadership, Quality Public Services"—to invite the Electoral Commission to propose options to simplify the current cycle of local elections. I have today asked the Electoral Commission to undertake a review under Section 6(2) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000.

The Electoral Commission will consult widely during the review and will identify options for change in a report to be submitted to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister by the end of January next year. The options may include proposals for changes in councillors' terms of office and local authorities' electoral arrangements. The Commission's report will include an assessment of the desirability and practicality of the options identified. It will also recommend how the proposed options might be implemented.

As part of the review the Electoral Commission will consider the relationship between local government elections and other elections such as elections to this House and to the European Parliament. The Commission will also look at cases where elections currently fall in close proximity of time to each other, and the combination (or otherwise) of local government elections with other elections. The views of the Electoral Commission have been sought separately on the proposal to combine the European and local government elections in 2004.

The Terms of Reference ask that the Electoral Commission have regard to the extent to which an option for change:

> would improve councils' democratic legitimacy and local accountability;
>
> would enable the electorate and public generally to easily understand when elections are to be held and their purpose;

would be likely to improve participation of the local electorate in the electoral process, including participation of specific groups—such as young people and ethnic minorities—where participation in the process is particularly low;

would be likely to facilitate the effective management of local authorities and particularly performance improvements in the case of local authorities categorised as "poor performers" in the Comprehensive Performance Assessments; and

might be facilitated by possible new ways of polling, including increased postal voting, electronic counting and multi channel e-voting.

DEFENCE

Defence Sixth Form College

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): Our intention to develop a Defence Sixth Form College was initially announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence in answer to a question by my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) on 27 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 547–48W, on the outcome of the Defence Training Review. On 24 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 994W, my right hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Armed Forces gave the House an update on the project, at which time no decisions had been taken on where the College would be built, or how it would be procured.

I am now able to inform the House that we have concluded that a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) offers best value for money for provision of the facilities and services required by the College. We have selected the Minerva consortium, which comprises Interserve plc, HSBC and TQ Education and Training Ltd, as the Preferred Bidder, and are now engaged in negotiations to conclude a contract.

This being the site selected by the Preferred Bidder, the Defence Sixth Form College will be built on the site of the disused barracks outside Woodhouse, near Loughborough. It will open in September 2005, at which time the present Army Sixth Form College at Welbeck Abbey will close.

HEALTH

Fertilisation and Embryology (Donor Information)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Hazel Blears): Following a consultation exercise carried out between December 2001 and July 2002, we propose to lay regulations before Parliament, so that people conceived as a result of sperm, egg or embryo donation will be able to obtain more information about their donors in the future. The information will not identify the donors. We hope that donor-conceived people are all part of loving families but we also understand that at some point in their lives they may decide they want to know more about their genetic origins and we think it is right that they should be able to ask for non-identifying information.

We propose that the regulations enable the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) to provide non-identifying information about donors to donor-conceived people aged 18 or over who request that information and who were born after the HFEA's register came into effect in 1991. In practice the information would be available from 2010 (eighteen years after the register came into operation).

To enable standardised information to be available in the future, we will seek approval for the regulations to require the HFEA to collect standardised non-identifying information with immediate effect.

We will also explore the possibility of setting up a pilot scheme for a voluntary contact register for donor-conceived people aged 18 and over.

The summary of responses to the consultation exercise is on the Department of Health's website at www.gov.uk/consultations.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Water

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): The UN has designated 2003 as the International Year of Freshwater, acknowledging that global water issues need to be placed high on the international agenda. They will be discussed at the Global Water Conference in Kyoto in March and we expect that there will also be discussion at the G8 Summit in Evian in June. This statement sets out briefly the Government's view of the key issues and our approach to addressing them.

The provision, use and management of water are central to both sustainable development and poverty reduction. Nearly two thirds of the world's population will be living in countries of significant water stress by the year 2025. 1.2 billion people lack access to safe drinking water and 2.4 billion people lack access to basic sanitation. Environmental needs for water are vital. Some 1.3 billion people continue to earn less than US$1/day and 800 million of them regularly go hungry. Hunger and poverty are closely linked. Agricultural water management can and does play a significant role in reducing hunger and poverty in the developing world.

Meeting the water supply and sanitation targets within the Millennium Development Goals is estimated to require an additional US$9 billion to US$30 billion per year. Meeting funding needs for water resources and integrated water resources management would increases this amount to around $180 billion per year. The largest share of investment will need to be met from public and private resources in each country. Development assistance has a role to play through direct or indirect support of Government and civil society programmes, through helping to build the capacity of national institutions, and, in poorer countries, through providing a lever for other forms of finance, thus helping bridge the funding gap.

Our overall strategy, set out in the DFID Target Strategy Paper on Water published in 2001, is to seek to focus international policy making in water resources, irrigation, water supply and sanitation on the reduction of poverty. We have concentrated our efforts in improving the management and allocation of water resources and in increasing access to water and sanitation to achieve improved health and sustainable livelihoods for the poor. The UK played a leading role at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in the agreement of a new target on sanitation as one of the Millennium Development Goals. We are equally committed to supporting implementation of this and the existing MDG on access to safe water, and to the commitments made at WSSD for better management of water resources.

Our emphasis in addressing issues in the water sector has changed over the years. More effective use of development assistance means moving away from funding a proliferation of isolated and uncoordinated donor-led projects to providing support to build sustainable improvements in local capacity in a way that is consistent with poverty reduction strategies drawn up by developing countries themselves. We have moved from bilateral assistance towards providing greater input into global efforts at addressing these issues. In the last three years this process has accelerated.

In March 2000 at the World Water Forum in The Hague I announced that we planned to double our bilateral contribution to the sector over the next three years. At that time we estimated our expenditure in the sector (based on 1998–99 figures, which were the latest available) at £50 million a year. Our expenditure bilaterally on water and related activities is estimated at £82 million in 1999–00, £91 million in 2000–01 and £87 million in 2001–02. Our new commitments to the water sector totalled £86 million in 2001–02. Some of our spending, for example, direct budget support, is not easily attributable to particular sectors but will nevertheless contribute to sectoral goals. A small proportion of our budget support is likely to help finance activities in the water sector.

In our work in the water sector we aim to strengthen governance, build institutional capacity, raise awareness and promote sharing of knowledge.

We are therefore supporting global programmes and processes that reach down to the poorest through international agencies, through new forms of partnerships between the public sector, civil society and the private sector, such as the EU Water Initiative and Partners for Water & Sanitation. We continue to be open to good opportunities to invest in the water sector, consistent with our broader approach of supporting country-owned poverty reduction strategies through which developing countries establish their own priorities. Multilateral institutions which we support, such as the World Bank, the Regional Development Banks, UNICEF and the European Community, also make very significant investments in water-related projects and programmes.

We are seeking more effective ways of mobilising financing at a global level that are linked to the development of effective water sector strategies and policies. We work with other donors to develop new financing facilities, to address the complex of market and government failures that deter private financing in water infrastructure.

We are supporting global resource centres for water resource management and for environmental health, which, for the first time, bring together a network of developed and developing country based technical and social institutions. These resource centres seek to develop best practice and to share international expertise so as to ensure that the best knowledge finds its way down to national and local levels.

Written Ministerial Statements

Wednesday 29 January 2003

WORK AND PENSIONS

Local Authorities (Benefit Administration)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Malcolm Wicks): We are publishing today the quarterly performance statistics for local authority administration of housing benefit and council tax benefit (HB and CTB). These statistics are for the first two quarters performance of 2002–03; in the future they will be updated every three months. A copy of the quarterly statistics for all local authorities in Great Britain has been placed in the Library and has been published on the Department for Work and Pensions website at http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/other_stats.html.

This will make councils more accountable to the public as we publish, for the first time, figures for how quickly they process housing benefit and council tax benefit.

Publishing these statistics is part of our strategy for reforming housing benefit. It is right and proper that the public see how well or how badly their council is doing. Housing benefit is a vital weapon in our attack on poverty and our Welfare to Work programme. Good housing benefit performance can have a significant impact in tackling poverty and providing opportunity, whereas poor performance restricts opportunity and leaves people facing financial problems. We are using these statistics to challenge poor performance.

It is unacceptable that the worst performing councils take up to five times longer to process claims than the best performers. Council leaders and chief executives need to take responsibility where there are serious performance failures and act to improve delivery. We are working with councils to improve efficiency.

These figures, based on a selection of performance indicators, show that nationally the time taken to process new claims has improved by around 4 days to an average of 8 weeks. But they also highlight widespread variations across individual councils.
For example, in the second quarter of 2002–03:

> Over 100 councils were processing new claims for housing benefit within 34 calendar days on average, while the worst performing councils were taking up to 162 days.
>
> Changes of circumstances were being handled in around 3 days in some councils, but in excess of 100 days in others.
>
> The target of 14-days for issuing decisions on claims in which all the necessary information has been supplied, was being met in 100 per cent of cases in some councils but in only 20 per cent of cases in others.

The statistics cover the following areas of performance:

> average time for processing new claims
>
> average time for processing changes of circumstances
>
> percentage of renewal claims processed on time
>
> percentage of cases calculated correctly
>
> percentage of new claims decided within 14 days of receipt of the local authority receiving all necessary information
>
> percentage of new Rent Allowance claims where the first payment is made on time.

The statistics are unaudited and are provided quarterly by local authorities to the Department.

The latest annual audited Best Value performance information for English local authorities is for 2001–02 and was published by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on 12 December 2002 on the Best Value Performance Indicators website at http://www.bvpi.gov.uk/home.asp. A copy is available in the Library.

The most recent corresponding data for local authorities in Wales are for 2000–01. This is published on the Audit Commission website at http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/pis/pi_data_01shtml. A copy of the relevant extract from this site is available in the Library. The Local Government Data Unit for Wales intends to publish audited performance information for 2001–02 by the end of this financial year.

The most recent corresponding data for local authorities in Scotland are for 2001–02 and are in the Accounts Commission publication "Performance Indicators 2001/2002: Benefits, Finance and Corporate Issues", a copy of which is available in the Library.

Angus Council (Benefit Fraud)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Malcolm Wicks): On behalf of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) inspection report on Angus Council was published today and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

This follow-up report finds that Angus Council has responded positively to the BFI's first inspection in May 2000 and has made many improvements in the way that it administers and counters fraud in housing benefit and council tax benefit. For example, the council has introduced the Verification Framework and a new claim form to make the benefits gateway more secure.

The council has also improved the quality of its fraud investigations and this has enabled it to make good use of sanctions as a deterrent. Importantly the council has significantly increased the number of staff employed in benefits and counter-fraud work.

This report notes that the council has acknowledged that it still needs to improve in some areas. In particular, it needs to improve its speed of benefits claims processing and to do this it must finally eradicate its small backlog of work that had built up since the middle of 2001–02.

Senior officers and elected Members have a close interest in benefits and counter-fraud activity and were closely monitoring efforts to clear the backlog.

In the first inspection, the BFI reported that the council needed to make better use of a wider range of methods to recover overpaid benefits. This follow-up report finds that the council has put in place effective processes and is performing well against targets. However, to prevent the total debt outstanding rising year on year, the council will need to increase the rates at which it makes recoveries.

In 2001–02, Angus Council administered approximately £20.5 million in housing benefits. This is approximately 9 per cent. of its total gross revenue expenditure.

The report makes recommendations to help the council address the remaining weaknesses and to further improve the administration of housing benefit and council tax benefit, as well as counter-fraud activities.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Iraq

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Jack Straw): I have today placed in the Library copies of the statement made to the United Nations Security Council on 27 January by Dr Blix of the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) and Dr El Baradei of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Written Ministerial Statements

Thursday 30 January 2003

TRANSPORT

Rural Bus Challenge

The Minister for Transport (Mr. John Spellar): I am pleased to announce today approval of the 46 projects listed below which were submitted as bids by local authorities in this competition. This follows careful consideration of the 105 bids totalling almost 3 times the funding available submitted by authorities

Authority	*Project*	*Total Award* £
Bath and NE Somerset	Chew Valley Explorer	396,000
Bedfordshire	North East Beds Dart	751,261
Buckinghamshire	On Call	350,000
Cheshire	Taxi Rider	300,000
	TRACS	320,000
Cornwall	Penwith Corlink Transport Services	455,000
Cumbria	X35 Furness Express Enhancement	805,573
Derbyshire	Derbyshire Integrated Rural Transport	954,000
	Buxton & District Accessible Transport	320,960
Devon	The Jurassic Coast Line	665,000
Durham	County Durham—A Healthy Response	743,000
East Riding	My Bus	358,000
Essex	Viking Community Transport HEART scheme	193,600
	Epping Forest Community Transport Brokerage	99,900
Gloucestershire	Gloucestershire Village Link	631,750
Greater Manchester	Hattersly	329,500
	Uppermill and Mossley	234,000
	Partington and Cadishead	44,000
Hampshire	Hampshire Cango Further	735,732
Herefordshire	Completing the Jigsaw	794,000
Hertfordshire	Health and Accessible Rural Transport	265,900
Isle of Wight	The East Wight Villager	426,530
Kent	Swale Unified Network Phase 2	215,000
Lancashire	Garstang Super 8	476,873
Lincolnshire	Interconnect Building a Flexible Future	870,400
Medway	Tackling Social Exclusion & Isolation	336,435
Merseyside	Billinge Whiston Hospital Service	24,000
Norfolk	Broadshopper	473,580
	Fenland Connections	393,570
North East Lincolnshire	Demand Responsive Community Transport	344,512
North Yorkshire	Hawes-Garsdale Stationlink	261,000
	Increase Rural Dial-a-ride	280,500
	Information Centre for Community Transport	90,000
Nottinghamshire	Demand Responsive Transport between Newark and Bingham	479,000
Shropshire	Wem Minibus Links	355,694
South Yorkshire	Southern Communities	768,000
Somerset	Somerset Inclusion Bus Buddy	94,500
Stockton-on-Tees	The Village Bus	360,000
Staffordshire	Staffordshire Border Car	178,500
	Weaver Ward Access Bus	60,000
Suffolk	Grass Routes	190,720
Tyne & Wear	Western Links Stage 2	721,216
West Sussex	South Downs Route	833,000
West Yorkshire	Pennine Taxibus	872,020
Wiltshire	Wiltshire Taxi Link	169,440
Worcestershire	Malvern Matters	992,000

SRA Strategic Plan

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. Alistair Darling): The Strategic Rail Authority has today published its second Strategic Plan. I have placed copies in the Libraries of the House and it is also available on the SRA website.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Benefit Fraud (Dover)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Malcolm Wicks): On behalf of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) inspection report on Dover District Council was published today and copies of the report have been placed in the Library. This report finds that Dover District Council has some commendable performance while some areas are very poor.

The report identifies the positive aspects as a benefits claim form that complies with the BFI model claim form, achievement of good results from a customer survey, and Verification Framework compliance in most areas. Dover needs to: run benefit take-up campaigns; verify residency more vigorously and income in renewal claims; carry out visits to Verification Framework requirements; apply benefit periods in accordance with risk and apply the fit and proper person test before making payments to landlords.

Speed of processing is a distinct weakness, with only 25 per cent of claims sampled being processed within targets. Breaks in payments were found in 23 per cent of renewals sampled.

There were significant problems with all aspects of the overpayments regime. The council is undertaking a fundamental review of the overpayments service, which is to be completed and implemented by March 2003.

The report finds that the counter-fraud area gave the greatest concern. The council's investigators were poorly trained, and were overloaded with referrals, many of which were of spurious value. Sanctions were inadequate. The report also finds evidence of failure to comply with the laws governing investigation techniques.

In 2000–01, Dover District Council administered approximately £27 million in housing benefits. This is approximately 40 per cent. of its total gross revenue expenditure.

The report makes recommendations to help the council address the remaining weaknesses and to further improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as counter-fraud activities.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Export Control Act 2002

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tessa Jowell): I have today placed in the Libraries of both Houses a Consultation Paper on a draft Order relating to the export of objects of cultural interest to be made under the Export Control Act 2002. The text is also available on the DCMS Departmental website at http://www.culture.gov.uk/heritage/export_controls.html.

LORD CHANCELLOR

Legal Services Ombudsman

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Ms Rosie Winterton): My right hon. and noble Friend, The Lord Chancellor has appointed Dr. Zahida Manzoor as Legal Services Ombudsman.

The appointment is for a 3 year fixed term in the first instance and Dr. Manzoor is expected to take up post on 3 March 2003.

Dr. Manzoor is co-founder and marketing director of her own company. She was formerly a member of the NHS Policy Board, Regional Chair of the NHS Executive, Northern and Yorkshire Regions, Commissioner and Deputy Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality and Chair of the Bradford Health Authority.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Farm Incomes

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): Revised estimates of farm income, output and productivity of agriculture during 2002 were published on 30 January. These confirm the increase in farm incomes forecast last November, and indicate a rise of 15 per cent. (14 in real terms) compared to 2001.

Details have been placed in the Library of the House.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Complaints Authority (Shootings)

The Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety (Mr. John Denham): I am pleased to be able to place in the Library a copy of the Police Complaints Authority's (PCA) Review of Shootings by Police in England and Wales between 1998 and 2001.

On behalf of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, I commissioned this Review under Section 79(1) of the Police Act 1996 which allows the Home Secretary to call for a report from the PCA on issues of concern. I announced the terms of reference to Parliament on 20 November 2001. They were:

> "The review will consider what lessons can be learnt from the investigations into police shootings, which have resulted in death or injury since January 1998.
>
> In particular the review will look at:
>
> The planning, control and conduct of operations;
>
> The way in which the concerns of the bereaved families were addressed, and how they were kept informed of the progress of the investigation; and
>
> The training and skill needs of the police officers involved in such operations, particularly at command level."

I am very grateful to the PCA, and, in particular, Mr. Alan Bailey, Dr. David Best and the two Deputy Chairs for the hard work and expertise they have brought to this report.

I welcome the report and its positive findings. It covers a very difficult and demanding area of police work where great professionalism is needed. Rightly, it gives credit to police forces for the small number of shots discharged by police officers in armed responses and praises much policing practice. The overall picture is very positive and it gives clear guidance on how best to manage firearms operations to minimise threat to life.

I commissioned the report in order to make sure that the lessons from each individual incident could be learned and shared by all forces. While there is always understandable public concern when someone who is shot turns out to be unarmed, we must recognise that armed police face enormously difficult decisions. Sometimes these decisions have tragic consequences, and it is nonetheless essential to ensure that operational procedures, training and support to officers minimises the number of avoidable deaths and injuries.

Our police officers are not routinely armed. The use of firearms is a rare last resort, considered only where there is a serious risk to public or police safety. When it is necessary for police officers to deploy firearms, it is vital that they are properly equipped and expertly trained, to respond effectively to the serious situations they have to face. Police use of firearms is subject to stringent guidelines from the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), which govern training, control and the conduct of operations. This is reflected in their excellent record against international standards.

The PCA report makes a number of recommendations to further improve the management of firearms incidents. Many of these are already underway, and I have published an action plan today, which I will also place in the Library, which sets out how we will work with the police service and other agencies to build on existing good work, and take forward the recommendations in the report. We are determined to build on the good practice already in place by working closely with the police and others—including mental health professionals.

It is essential that our police have effective less lethal alternatives available to them. The search for suitable less lethal options is complex and requires in-depth consideration of a range of issues. After rigorous medical and operational trials, and at ACPO's request, we have agreed that pilots on taser use will go ahead. If any less lethal options are ultimately recommended to police these must provide real tactical solutions to disorder and violence.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Electricity (Trading and Transmission) Bill

The Minister for Energy and Construction (Mr. Brian Wilson): The draft Electricity (Trading and Transmission) Bill, which will bring forward the British Electricity Transmission and Trading Arrangements (BETTA), is being published today. The Trade and Industry Committee will now undertake pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill and will issue a report by Easter.

Copies of the draft Bill and draft Explanatory Notes are available in the House Library. A Regulatory Impact Assessment has been published on DTI and Ofgem's websites.

Export Control Act 2002

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Nigel Griffiths): I have today published a consultation document on the secondary legislation to be introduced under the Export Control Act 2002. This makes provision for new controls on the transfer abroad of military technology by electronic means; the transfer of technology by any means or provision of technical assistance overseas which may be used in connection with weapons of mass destruction programmes; and trade in military equipment between overseas countries. The consultation document contains the drafts of the orders, explains how the new controls are expected to operate in practice and invites views on their practical implementation. The partial Regulatory Impact Assessment provides an initial assessment of the impact of the new controls and invites views on the estimated compliance costs. The consultation period will last for 3 months, closing on 30 April 2003. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

DEFENCE

Iraq (Reservists)

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): In my statement on 7 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 23–25. I informed the House that I had made an Order under Section 54(1) of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 to enable the call out of reservists for possible operations against Iraq. I explained that the overall scale of mobilisation would depend upon the continuing evolution of our contingency planning, that we envisaged initially sending out sufficient call-out notices to secure around 1,500 reservists, and that we would issue further notices as appropriate.

That process of calling out and mobilising reservists is underway. By 24 January 2003, the Services had issued 2,063 notices. As I explained in my statement on 7 January, the number of notices issued has to be significantly larger than the number of reservists required, to allow for the proportion who are likely to be genuinely unavailable.

Further contingency planning has now clarified the likely size and shape of our additional requirements, in particular in the light of the decision we reached recently on the size and composition of land forces that we plan to deploy, which I described in my statement on 20 January, *Official Report*, columns 34–35. Our latest assessment is that our overall requirement for reservists is likely to be up to 6,000, including those currently in the process of mobilisation. We will now issue further call-out notices over the coming weeks to enable us to meet this requirement. The size of the requirement will remain under review as our planning continues.

Written Ministerial Statements

Friday 31 January 2003

CABINET OFFICE

Public Bodies

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Douglas Alexander): I have today placed in the Libraries of the House, the latest edition of the annual Cabinet Office publication, *Public Bodies.*

Public Bodies 2002 is the latest in a series of publications providing information on public bodies sponsored by government.

In addition to giving details about the remit and expenditure of public bodies, the publication also gives information about the number of women, people from minority ethnic backgrounds and people with disabilities, who sit on the boards of public bodies. I am pleased to announce that the proportion of those from minority ethnic backgrounds and those with disabilities holding public appointments have increased from 4.8 per cent. to 6.2 per cent. and from 1.5 per cent. to 3.3 per cent. respectively, although it is disappointing that the percentage of women holding such appointments, 34 per cent., has remained static. Departments will continue to work hard to encourage increased participation of women on the boards of public bodies.

Additionally, this year's publication includes information about the Government's task forces, ad hoc advisory groups and reviews. Previously these were reported on separately, and to a different timetable. Including this data in one publication gives a more complete picture of the extended bodies and groups working to deliver government objectives.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agricultural Merchants and Saddlers' Fees

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Elliot Morley): With the consent of the Treasury, the schedule of fees for registration, retention and restoration of agricultural merchants and saddlers with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain has been determined. This is given in the table:

FEES

Application in respect of each premises	*Previous fee £*	*New fee £*
Agricultural Merchants		
For registration under Article 5	232	232
For retention of registration under Article 5	140	153
For restoration of registration under Article 5	197	197
Saddlers		
For registration under Article 5	127	127
For retention of registration under Article 5	76	83
For restoration of registration under Article 5	107	107

HEALTH

Community Health Councils

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. David Lammy): I have announced today that Community Health Councils (CHCs) will be abolished on 1 September 2003. Abolition was announced in the NHS Plan and relevant legislation is in the NHS Reform and Health Care Professions Act 2002.

CHC staff have been sent details of the support arrangements for them in the run up to abolition and includes help and advice for them in finding alternative employment. These arrangements have been agreed with the trade unions. I have personally written to all staff and members of CHC acknowledging the service they have provided over the years.

We are modernising the way patients and public are involved in the delivery and design of NHS services. Between now and September the functions that CHCs currently carry out will move across to one of the bodies that will replace them. The new arrangements have a number of key components that radically transform patient and public involvement. Already the Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health has been established and we are working with it to establish patients' forums for every NHS trust and primary care trust in England. Since the 1 January Overview and Scrutiny Committees across England have had the power to scrutinise health and there has been a new duty on the NHS to involve and consult the public. Patient advice and liaison services are supporting patients, their families and carers in most trusts in England.

The Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health will make available more information about when and how patients' forums will be established later today.

Copies of the information that has been sent to CHC staff and members is available at www.doh.gov.uk/involvingpatients.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 20 January 2003

CABINET OFFICE

Government Car Service

Mr. Gray: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) how many cars in the Government Car Service pool will pay the full London congestion charge; and how many will be eligible for a reduction; [91098]

(2) how many and what proportion of the Government Car Service drivers are *(a)* women and *(b)* from a racial minority; and what were the equivalent figures in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 2000; [91096]

(3) if he will list the cars in the Government Car Service pool broken down by *(a)* make, *(b)* model, *(c)* registration number and *(d)* where they are registered. [91097]

Mr. Alexander: The responsibility for the provision of ministerial cars and drivers has been delegated under the terms of the framework document to the Government Car Despatch Agency. I have asked its chief executive Mr. Nick Matheson to write to the hon. Member. Copies of his letter will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the impact of the congestion charge on *(a)* the Government Car Service and *(b)* Ministers on official business. [91100]

Mr. Alexander: The responsibility for the provision of ministerial cars and drivers has been delegated under the terms of the framework document to the Government Car Despatch Agency. I have asked its chief executive Mr. Nick Matheson to write to the hon. Member. Copies of his letter will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

However, there is no special exemption from the congestion charge for Government vehicles. GCDA will meet the cost of the congestion charge for its fleet of vehicles and will cover the cost from its customers.

Any congestion charge incurred by Ministers while on official business would be met by Departments.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Fuel Poverty

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many people fell out of fuel poverty because of reduced energy prices during the financial year which ended on 31st March 2002. [90807]

Mr. Wilson: It is estimated that in England the number of households in fuel poverty fell by around 1½ million between 1996 and 2000. This fall is largely a consequence of increased incomes and reduced fuel prices in roughly equal degrees. The impacts of energy efficiency schemes since 1998 are not included in this estimate. Information is not available specifically for the year ending 31 March 2002.

Further analyses of fuel poverty and explanations of the methods used to produce these, are given at *www.dti.gov.uk/energy/consumers/fuel_poverty/*.

Aerospace Industry

Tony Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps she is taking to support the Pechiney Aviatube Company at Lillyhall, Workington against the downturn in the aerospace industry. [91214]

Alan Johnson: Pechiney Aviatube have received an offer of a £240,000 Regional Selective Assistance grant support towards the £2 million first stage of a project intended to upgrade facilities at the plant. The North West Development Agency is also working with the company to identify other forms of support that may be available to them.

Annual Report

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much producing her Department's latest Annual Report cost; how many copies were printed; how many copies of it were sold at its cover price; to whom copies of the report have been provided free of charge; and how many copies were provided free of charge. [90890]

Ms Hewitt: The cost incurred by the Department for design and artwork of the latest Expenditure Plans report (June 2002) was £32,161. This figure includes the costs incurred in placing an electronic version of the report on the departmental website. Other costs of printing and publication were met directly by the publisher, The Stationery Office Ltd. (TSO), and did not fall to the Government. TSO recoups these costs through sales and uses its commercial judgment as to the number of copies printed. Some 420 copies of the latest Expenditure Plans report were sold at the cover price (£25) by TSO or through its accredited agents and other booksellers.

In addition, the Department circulated some 540 complimentary copies to Ministers, Opposition Front Bench spokesmen, Select Committee Members and staff, other Peers and MPs, the Parliamentary Libraries, DTI officials and external Board Members (including in agencies and NDPBs), officials in other Government Departments and journalists.

Appointments

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry who have been members of the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders' Industry Forum since its inception; what *(a)* expenses and *(b)* salary each received; and if she will make a statement. [91659]

Alan Johnson: The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders' Industry Forum is not a membership organisation. There is however a non salaried board which oversees its activities. The members of the board have included:

Michael Baunton Varity Perkins Group Ltd
Alan Jones Toyota Motor Mfg (UK) Ltd
Sir Ian Gibson ex Nissan Motor Mfg (UK) Ltd
John Neill CBE Unipart Group of Companies Ltd
Trevor Bonner CBE ex GKN
Mike Beasley CBE Jaguar Cars Limited
John Cushnaghan Nissan Motor Mfg (UK) Ltd
J Gilchrist Leyland Trucks
Allan Cooke Cobham plc
Christopher Macgowan SMMT
Bob Lawrie SMMT
Graham Broome SMMT IF
Arthur David SMMT IF
Geoff Dale SMMT IF
Kevin Dimmelow SMMT IF

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry who have been members of the Cleaner Vehicles Task Force since its inception; what expenses or salary each received; and if she will make a statement. [91661]

Alan Johnson: The Cleaner Vehicles Task Force had 13 members, excluding Ministers, who were: Ian McAllister (ex Ford), Tony Rose (Rover), Keith Taylor (Esso UK), Neil Johnson (RAC), David Lea (TUC), Nigel Haigh (IEEP), Michael Gwilt (Arriva), David Green (FTA), Michael Parker (Nexus), Michael Baunton (Perkins), Stuart Holland (ALTER), Sir Trevor Chinn (Lex). Membership was on a voluntary basis and no salaries or expenses were paid. The Task Force had its final meeting in June 2000 and disbanded afterwards.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry who have been members of the Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership since its inception; what *(a)* expenses and *(b)* salary each received; and if she will make a statement. [91663]

Ms Hewitt: The members on the Council of Excellence in Management and Leadership since its inception are:

Council Members

Sir Anthony Cleaver
Ms Sarah Anderson
Dr. Neville Bain
Sir Michael Bichard (only 2000–01 year)
Dr. Tony Hayward
Mr. Chris Humphries
Professor Amin Rajan
Sir Martin Sorrell
Professor Stephen Watson

Organisations Working Group

Mr. David Butcher
Mr. Robert Currie
Mr. Patrick Lewis
Ms Rosalind McCool
Mr. Terry Morgan
Mr. Neil Rodgers
Mr. Paul Rodgers
Ms Hilary Rowland
Mr. Mark Woodhouse

Professions Working Group

Mr. Geoffrey Armstrong
Mr. E. S. Awty
Sir Michael Bichard
Ms Mary Chapman
Mr. Jonathan Harris
Dr. Robert Hawley
Mr. Michael Napier
Dr. Jenny Simpson

SME Working Group

Mr. Simon Barley
Mr. Anthony Cann
Ms Vikki Cooke
Mr. Ram Gidoomal
Mr. William Kendall
Mr. Paul Kiss
Mr. Keith Moxham
Professor Ken O'Neill
Mr. Andy Powell
Mr. A. Robinson
Mr. C. Steel

SME Taskforce

Mr. David Battersby
Mr. Cameron Beard
Mr. Alan Bretherton
Mr. Anthony Carey
Mr. Mike Davis
Mr. Brian Dunsby
Mr. John Evans
Ms Samantha Gemmell
Ms Teresa Graham
Mr. Martin Henry
Mr. Michael Horner
Professor Robin Jarvis
Mr. Alan Jones
Mr. Ian Kinder
Professor Andrew Lock
Ms Fiona Mellett
Mr. Stephen Nightingale
Mr. Stephen Pegge
Mr. Chris Pierce
Dr. Ken Poulter
Mr. Peter Russian
Dr. Michael Sanderson
Mr. Don Scriven
Mr. David Sears
Mrs. Toni Shawley
Mr. Mark Smith

HE Advisory Group

Mr. Peter Campbell
Mr. Ray Campsie
Professor Chris Greensted
Professor David Kirby
Dr. Clare Morris
Ms Sally Muggeridge
Professor Leo Murray
Mr. Michael Osbaldiston
Dr. B. A. W. Redfern
Ms Margaret Saner
Professor Ken Starkey

Non HE Advisory Group

Mr. Amarjit Basi
Ms Tricia Bradley
Ms Sue Cheshire
Mr. David Clark
Mr. Chris Hughes
Ms Denise McCormack
Mr. Will McKee
Ms Oonagh McPhillips
Dr. Sally Messenger
Mrs. Lindsay Millington
Mr. David Pardey
Mr. John Quinan
Ms Hilary Tucker

Measurement Network

Professor Derek Bosworth
Ms Lisa Cramp
Mr. Jim Hillage
Dr. Christopher Mabey
Professor Andy Neely
Mr. Peter Russian
Ms Penny Tamkin
Professor Andrew Thomson
Professor Stephen Wood

CEML Support

Mrs. Liz Amos
Professor John Burgoyne
Dr. Lew Perren
Mrs. Dorothy Robb
Dr. Wendy Hirsh
Dr. Kim James
Dr. Neill Schofield

No salaries were paid to members. Members were entitled to reimbursement of travelling expenses so to attend meetings upon production of receipts etc. However, most did not in fact claim any expenses.

Assisted Areas (Scotland)

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans she has to revise the withdrawal of assisted area status from Arbroath by the implementation of the Assisted Area Order 2000. [91769]

Alan Johnson: The European Commission's approval of the Assisted Areas map in Great Britain lasts until the end of 2006. It is not possible to increase the coverage in one area without reducing it in another. This would be likely to require an overall review of the map and new negotiations with the Commission, with no assurance that any particular area could be covered. The Government are therefore not planning to review the Assisted Areas map until it is necessary to develop proposals for the subsequent period.

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans she has to revise the Assisted Areas map for Scotland through the Assisted Area Order 2000, prior to the expiry of that Act. [91770]

Alan Johnson: The Government have no plans to revise the Assisted Areas map before it is necessary to develop proposals for the period following the expiry of the European Commission's approval of the current map at the end of 2006.

BAE Systems (Financial Dynamics)

Syd Rapson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry whether she *(a)* directed and *(b)* approved UBS Warburg's engagement of Financial Dynamics to advise on matters connected with BAE Systems. [88854]

Ms Hewitt: The Government retained the services of UBS Warburg to provide specialist financial advice. Financial Dynamics was retained for a short period as part of this arrangement.

Business Links

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many Business Link partnerships there are; how many have closed in each year since 1999; and if she will make a statement. [91649]

Nigel Griffiths: There are 43 Business Link Operator partnerships covering 45 areas across England.

In April 2001, the network of Business Link Operators partnerships was rationalised from 80 to 43 in order to improve customer focus and divert more resources to front line services for SMEs.

Contractual arrangements remain in place with all Business Link Operators awarded contracts in April 2001.

Broadband (Sittingbourne and Sheppey)

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry pursuant to her answer of 8 January 2003 (ref 88014), how many of the grants for broadband satellite were placed in Sittingbourne and Sheppey; and if she will make a statement on the timing of the publication of information about SEEDA's broadband strategy. [90246]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 13 January 2003]:* One grant application has been approved by Wired Sussex acting on behalf of SEEDA in each of Sittingbourne and Sheppey. Two further applications await processing in Sheppey.

Maximising access to, and take up of, broadband facilities forms Priority 14 of the Regional Economic Strategy which SEEDA are launching on 23 January 2003.

Associated Action Plans, currently under formulation, set out how SEEDA and Regional Partners will deliver specific programmes both with respect to broadband generally and as it applies on a sub regional basis.

Capita Group

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the contracts that have been awarded to the Capita Group by her Department. [89973]

Ms Hewitt: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 4 March 2002, *Official Report*, column 1W.

Cement Kilns

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the total energy requirement of the United Kingdom's cement kilns *(a)* is and *(b)* is expected to be over the next 20 years; and if she will forecast the maximum quantity and types of waste these cement kilns can digest over this time period. [88568]

Mr. Wilson: The Government do not have information on the total current and future energy requirement of cement kilns. However, estimates from the British Cement Association suggest that in the short term (3–5 years) the potential use of waste in cement kilns, by a range of products, could be around 1–1½ million tonnes per year.

Correspondence

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when she intends to reply to the letter of 29 July 2002 from the hon. Member for Manchester, Central, regarding Mr. D.G., reference number 97657. [91111]

Ms Hewitt: A response to this letter was sent on 15 January 2003.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many full-time equivalent staff are employed in *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of the agencies it sponsors; and what the figures were for 1997. [90666]

Ms Hewitt: I refer to the answer given by the Minister of State at the Cabinet Office on 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 697W.

Electricity Industry (Scotland)

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the Transmission Issues Working Group will publish its report on the modernisation of Scotland's grid infrastructure. [91925]

Mr. Wilson: The report is being finalised at the moment and my intention is to publish it as soon as possible.

Energy White Paper

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list *(a)* the target publication dates that Ministers have employed for the Energy White Paper and *(b)* when each target was first used. [91137]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* The Energy Review published in February 2002 by the Performance and Innovation Unit indicated that the Government would set out its detailed response in an Energy White Paper later in the year. The Consultation document for the White Paper issued in May 2002 said the Government intended to issue a White Paper around the turn of the year. In a reply to a Parliamentary Question in October 2002 Ministers said that they planned to publish the White Paper in the new Year.

We plan to publish the White Paper shortly.

Export Credit Guarantees

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimates she has made of the number of UK jobs within the defence industry that depend on export credit guarantees; and if she will make a statement. [90337]

Ms Hewitt: The number of jobs in the defence sector that are created, secured or sustained as a result of export credit guarantees is difficult to estimate as the amount of ECGD support for particular industry sectors can vary widely from year to year. In UK Defence Statistics 2002 the Defence Analytical Services Agency estimates that total UK defence exports, only some of which have ECGD support—have on average supported around 100,000 jobs in the defence industry over the last five years.

External Consultants

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the total cost to her Department was of the use of external consultants in 2002. [90503]

Ms Hewitt: Central records indicate that contracts for consultancy for a total of £43 million were awarded in calendar year 2002.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations she has received from the Chairman of the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce on the effect of a war in Iraq on UK trade with the Arab world. [91154]

Ms Hewitt: No such representations have been received.

Job Creation Grants

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many grants for job creation her Department awarded in *(a)* Blyth Valley and *(b)* south-east Northumberland in 2002; and what the value was in each case. [91570]

Alan Johnson: The table sets out the numbers, value and job links for grants offered in 2002 under the Regional Selective Assistance (RSA) and Enterprise

Grants schemes for Blyth Valley and south east Northumberland (the local authority districts of Blyth Valley, north Tyneside and Wansbeck). From 1 April 2002 responsibility for RSA was transferred to ONE NorthEast, the regional development agency.

Details of individual RSA grants of over £75,000 are published in "Labour Market Trends" after the first payment of grant has been made.

Regional Selective Assistance and Enterprise Grant 2002

	Blyth Valley	*South east Northumberland*
Number of offers	5	20
Grant value	£344,671	£5,327,460
Associated jobs	82	842

Logica

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the contracts awarded by her Department to Logica since 1 August 2002; and in each case what the *(a)* title, *(b)* total cost, *(c)* time scale and *(d)* terms of reference were. [90227]

Ms Hewitt: Central records indicate that only one contract has been awarded to Logica since 1 August 2002, for development work on the Immarsat Voice Roaming (IVR) project. The contract runs from October 2002 to April 2003 and the total cost is £160,000.

New Employees

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment she has made of the needs of employers with regard to new employees. [87457]

Ms Hewitt: I assume the question concerns the needs of employers employing staff for the first time.

I firmly believe that new employers need clear, accessible advice and guidance on good employment practice and regulatory requirements. This is made available by ACAS and the Small Business Service, working with my Department and other key Departments and agencies.

In addition, I plan to take forward the helpful recommendations of the Better Regulation Task Force in this area: to run pilots to identify ways in which businesses, particularly small businesses, can participate in shared human resources schemes; to provide advice visits to employers, free seminars to businesses with less than five employees and easier access to mediation and arbitration services.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations she has received from businesses about their requirements with regard to new employees. [87458]

Ms Hewitt: Ministers regularly meet businesses and their representatives to discuss a range of issues, including employment matters.

Nuclear Industry

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate she has made of the costs to British Energy of *(a)* storage of all AGR nuclear fuel and *(b)* continuation with current reprocessing contracts in each year of the projected life of each of British Energy's advanced gas-cooled reactors. [91920]

Mr. Wilson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on 8 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 242W.

Nuclear Security

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will ask the Director of her Department's Office for Civil Nuclear Security to review the security of British nuclear power plants and other nuclear installations with special reference to the invasion of Greenpeace protestors at the Sizewell B nuclear plant on 13 January. [91966]

Mr. Wilson: The Director of Civil Nuclear Security is reviewing security at Sizewell B following the incident on 13 January. The Director and the Government take security very seriously and are concerned that any lessons to be learned should be applied to all civil nuclear power stations. Security at civil nuclear sites will continue to be kept under regular review.

Oil Reserves

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent assessment she has made of the *(a)* extent and *(b)* accessibility of oil under Iraqi sovereignty; and what recent *(a)* representations she has received from and *(b)* discussions she has had with BP on this matter. [90790]

Mr. Wilson: Iraq's proven oil reserves are estimate to be 112.5 billion barrels which amounts to over 10 per cent. of the world's total reserves. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is in regular contact with all the major UK oil companies, but "Under Exemption 13, third party commercials confidences of Part 2 of the Code of Practice on access to government information", I am not able to comment on specific commercial issues.

Personal Business Advisers

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many Business Link Personal Business Advisers there were in each year since 1999; and if she will make a statement. [91650]

Nigel Griffiths: This information is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Post Boxes

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations she has received concerning changes in the number of red post boxes in rural areas; and if she will make a statement. [91325]

Mr. Timms: These are matters that fall within the day to day responsibility of Royal Mail and I have therefore asked the Chairman to reply direct to the hon. Member.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions she has had with the Post Office on the continued provision of red post boxes in rural areas. [91326]

Mr. Timms: These are matters which fall within the day to day responsibility of Royal Mail and I have therefore asked the Chairman to reply direct to the hon. Member.

Post Office (Losses)

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list *(a)* the losses, broken down by operational activity, for (i) Royal Mail, (ii) Parcelforce and (iii) Post Office Counters, and *(b)* non-operational charges, broken down by (A) write-offs and (B) pension costs at (1) Royal Mail, (2) Parcelforce and (3) Post Office Counters. [91938]

Mr. Timms: Losses for Royal Mail, Parcel Force and Post Office Counters in 2001–02 are set out in the table:

Losses from:	*Losses from operations*	*Exceptional costs*	*Losses after exceptional items before tax*
UK Mails	74	74	148
UK Parcels	94	397	491
Post Office Ltd.	163	78	241

It is not possible to provide more detailed figures as these are commercially confidential.

The Department's officials are working with Royal Mail to provide the information requested on write-offs and pension costs. I will write to the hon. Member as soon as this is available, and place a copy of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

Post Office (Benefits)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much the Post Office will receive for each benefit and tax credit transaction paid via the *(a)* universal bank and *(b)* Post Office Card Account. [91297]

Mr. Timms: Remuneration for benefit and tax credit transactions is a commercial matter between the Post Office and its clients.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much the Post Office receives for each benefit transaction that is processed. [91298]

Mr. Timms: Remuneration for benefit transactions is a commercial matter between the Post Office and its client.

Postcomm

Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the members of Postcomm. [92002]

Mr. Timms: The Commissioners appointed to Postcomm are:

Graham Corbett, CBE
Robin Aaornson
Tony Cooper
Julia Kaufmann
Ken Olisa
Janet Lewis-Jones
Martin Stanley

PV Solar Panels

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many grants have been awarded for PV solar power panels in each of the last three years; and what the total value of such grants is. [91563]

Mr. Wilson: Year 2000—Domestic PV Systems Field Trial, First Round: £1.4 million to support nine projects totalling 166 homes.

Year 2001—Domestic PV Systems Field Trial, Second Round: £4 million to support 23 projects totalling 380 homes.

Year 2002—Large Scale BIPV Field Trial for Public Buildings: £4.2 million to support 18 projects on schools, universities, council offices, leisure centres etc.

Major PV Demonstration Programme, First Phase—Stream 1 (small-scale up to 5kWp)—118 grants awarded, worth £880,000; Stream 2 (medium and large-scale up to 100kWp)—27 grants awarded, worth £3.52 million.

Total value of grants for last three years is £14 million.

Renewable Energy

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of Britain's current energy requirements she estimates could be met from renewable sources by 2020 if the sector were to benefit from the level of financial support currently made available to the nuclear industry. [91582]

Mr. Wilson: Scope for the expansion of renewable energy and the question of future renewable energy targets will be discussed in the Energy White Paper, which will be published shortly. The White Paper will also address the issue of the future of nuclear power.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many working days were lost due to illness in her Department in *(a)* 2002 and *(b)* each of the preceding five years. [90744]

Ms Hewitt: The average number of staff days lost per staff year in the DTI Group have been:

	Number
1997	8.2
1998	8.0
1999	7.8
2000	7.5
2001	7.8

The DTI Group, in addition to DTI HQ, consists of ACAS, Companies House, Patent Office, Insolvency Service, National Weights & Measures Laboratory, Employment Tribunals Service and the Radiocommunications Agency.

The figures are taken from the annual reports on public sector sick absence commissioned by the Cabinet Office each year and which enable interdepartmental comparison.

Central figures for 2002 will not be available for some months but will be announced by Ministerial statement and copies placed in the Libraries of the House.

Small Business Service/Business Links

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry at what conferences and seminars in each year since 2000 *(a)* the Small Business Service and *(b)* Business Links were represented; what costs were incurred in each case; and if she will make a statement. [91657]

Nigel Griffiths: The conferences at which SBS and Business Link were represented as exhibitors during the period and costs incurred are listed below. There is no central record of conferences where SBS and Business Link were only represented by delegates or speakers.

		£
Women Unlimited	13/2/01	4,000
Chief Executives Conference	8 to 9/3/01	400
BCC National Conference	27 to 28/3/01	15,426
Cardiff European Forum	11 to 12/10/01	12,500
CBI Conference	4 to 6/11/01	36,075
OST Framework Conference	22/1/02	Free
NDC Jobs Convention	28 to 29/1/02	681
Trade Association Forum	12/3/02	500
BCC Conference	22 to 23/4/02	8,010
IOD Annual Convention	24/4/02	6,500
Women Moving On	22/5/02	550
LGA Conference	2 to 5/7/02	3,422
Trading Standards Conference	9 to 11/7/02	1,860
CBI Conference 2002	24 to 26/11/02	15,000

Steel Industry

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures she is taking *(a)* to support and promote the UK steel industry and *(b)* to help the UK steel industry fulfil its production capacity. [92032]

Alan Johnson: The information is as follows:

(a) The Department works closely with steel industry representatives to help the sector to improve its competitive position. We are providing support towards a number of initiatives designed to help steel companies to improve productivity and innovation.

> The Metal Industry Competitiveness Enterprise (MICE) is a five year process improvement and supply chain improvement project launched in February 2000 with £1.5 million contribution from DTI.
>
> The National Metals Technology Centre (NAMTECH) is a collaborative venture which will draw together sources of metals related expertise in order to provide a unique service to UK companies seeking help and advice on metals technology and R&D issues. DTI, in partnership with Yorkshire Forward, are providing £2.7 million in pump priming support.

(b) I refer my right hon. Friend to the reply to his questions tabled on 10 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 404W, and 12 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 403W.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Afghanistan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of pledged assistance for the reconstruction of Afghanistan has been received by the Afghan Government; and how much of the financial assistance so far received by the interim Government of Afghanistan has been spent on projects other than humanitarian aid. [90907]

Clare Short: At the conference in Tokyo in 2001 the international community pledged over US$4 billion to the reconstruction of Afghanistan over periods of 1–5 years. In the current financial year close to the $1.8 billion pledged at Tokyo for the current financial year has been disbursed to Afghanistan. This has been through a number of avenues, including the UN system, NGOs and the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF). The money directed through the ARTF is available for the Afghan Transitional Administration to utilise as it chooses. To date the ARTF has received over US$200 million from donors.

The international community is committed to the reconstruction of Afghanistan but at the same time it is important to continue to address the needs of the returning and returned refugees, the internally displaced people and those who continue to struggle to survive, particularly during the winter months. To this end many donors continue to provide both humanitarian and reconstruction assistance. The distinction between humanitarian and reconstruction projects is often undefined, with many humanitarian activities having longer-term reconstruction outcomes. In the current financial year DFID has provided £55 million to Afghanistan, £24 million of which has been for reconstruction purposes. The international community as a whole provided $1.067 billion of support to the UN Immediate and Transitional Assistance Programme.

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's activities in relation to Afghanistan planned for the coming year. [90737]

Clare Short: In 2003 DFID will be continuing to work towards the Government's strategic aim of helping to create a stable, secure and prosperous Afghanistan that is once again able to become part of the community of nations, and that enjoys mature relations with its neighbours. The development challenge is considerable, and will require a sustained effort by the international community

The balance of DFID's programme for Afghanistan will continue to move from short-term humanitarian support to a medium-term, more strategic approach in 2003. DFID is committed to working with the Afghan Transitional Authority and its international partners and is developing a strategy that will map DFID's engagement in Afghanistan over the next two years.

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the humanitarian situation in the Zabul province of Afghanistan; and what action is being taken to ensure the security of those distributing aid in the province. [91159]

Clare Short: Zabul province is one of the poorest of Afghanistan's 32 provinces and is suffering from a prolonged drought. Several NGOs are delivering humanitarian relief in the province and have been doing so for some time. An extensive relief programme for the current winter is being provided in vulnerable parts of Afghanistan including Zabul. The UN reports that this is going well and is meeting humanitarian needs.

Following a reported hijacking of one of their aid vehicles last week Oxfam has temporarily suspended its activities in Zabul until the security situation is reviewed.

Security is a serious concern in all parts of Afghanistan. Addressing this remains a priority for the international community and the Transitional Authority.

All NGOs in the province are determined to continue their activities in Zabul, however, and Oxfam have indicated that their project will continue after the security review.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her Department's latest assessment is of the number of refugees that have returned to Afghanistan. [91450]

Clare Short: In 2002 nearly 1.8 million Afghan refugees returned home under the UNHCR assistance programme. In addition more than 250,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) went home with assistance and another 200,000 Afghans returned on their own. The return rate has declined during the winter months, with weekly returns of about 2,000 during December. This compares to a peak of over 100,000 a week in May.

A further 1.2 million refugees and 300,000 IDPs are expected to return home in 2003. Despite the massive number of returns, some four million Afghans remain outside the country, including an estimated two million in Iran and 1.5 million in Pakistan.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what *(a)* progress is being made in and *(b)* aid is being given to educating women in Afghanistan. [90909]

Clare Short: DfID helped in the rehabilitation of several schools, and during the past year, three million children, both boys and girls, have returned to school throughout Afghanistan. Since September 2001, we have also provided UNIFEM with £1 million of support to work with the Ministry of Women's Affairs on a national gender strategy for Afghanistan.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what aid is being given to *(a)* democracy building, *(b)* women's advocacy organisations and *(c)* the Revolutionary Association for Women, in Afghanistan. [90910]

Clare Short: DfID has provided £0.5 million to support the emergency Loya Jirga, which elected the current Afghanistan Transitional Administration in July 2002. DfID has also offered to provide a further £1 million to the Constitutional Drafting Committee, in conjunction with other international donors. A number of donors have offered to support preparations for the election in 2004, although these plans are still at an early stage.

DfID does not at present fund any specific women's groups in Afghanistan, although in 2001–02, DfID contributed £1 million to UNIFEM to develop a gender strategy with the Ministry of Women's Affairs. The joint Global Conflict Prevention Pool has also contributed £1 million to the Human Rights Commission. Addressing women's rights is an integral part of DfID's strategy in Afghanistan. For example, the needs of widows and households headed by women are accorded urgent priority by the World Food Programme, who DfID part fund.

No funding has been directly allocated to the Revolutionary Association for Women.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what proportion of the pledged assistance for the reconstruction of Afghanistan has been received by the Afghan government; [91118]

(2) how much of the money received by the interim government of Afghanistan has been spent on projects other than humanitarian aid. [91120]

Clare Short: I refer the hon. Member to the Answer I gave her to question 90907, earlier today.

Water Shortages

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action was taken by the UK in 2002 to contribute to the prevention of water shortages for the world's population by 2025. [90460]

Clare Short: DFID recognises the key role that water plays in the reduction of poverty and is committed to assisting those in the developing world to assess and manage their water resources in a sustainable manner. Nearly two-thirds of the world's population will be living in countries of significant water stress by the year 2025. 1.2 billion people lack access to safe drinking water and 2.4 billion people lack access to basic sanitation. Strong commitments were made at the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development for Better Management of Water Resources and Improved Access to Drinking Water and Sanitation, and these must now be implemented.

In 2002, my Department has continued to support a substantial number of on-going activities, which seek to contribute to the prevention of water shortages. Such shortages may be caused because insufficient water is available or because of a lack of infrastructure, poverty or pollution which mean that people cannot access the resource.

The sustainability of the quality and quantity of water resources depends on the balance of agricultural, industrial and domestic uses and environmental needs against the prevailing hydrological conditions. DFID, with most other bilateral and multilateral organisations, is promoting integrated water resource management, which is the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources.

My Department is supporting a number of global initiatives, including the Global Water Partnership; the International Hydrological Programme; the Dams for Development Unit of the World Commission on Dams; Water for Food and Nature Dialogue and the International Programme for Technology and Research in Irrigation and Drainage. My Department also supports initiatives for assessment and monitoring of the status of the world's water through the UNESCO-led World Water Assessment Programme and the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme. Our Knowledge and Research Programme also supports a number of projects that aim to improve meteorological and hydrological assessment, collection, analysis and modelling for improved water resource assessments, as well as projects that investigate improvements in the efficiency of irrigation water use.

There is an increasing possibility of conflicts over water becoming more common in regions of water stress. Equitable sharing of water between users at national and at local level has a significant contribution to make towards reducing conflict and promoting peace and security. The Nile Basin Initiative is a current example of an initiative being supported by the World bank, my Department and other donors, to manage competition for water equitably.

Africa Action Plan

Hugh Bayley: To ask the Secretary of Secretary of State for International Development, what progress the UK has made with implementing the G8 Africa Action Plan. [91796]

Clare Short: The UK is implementing all six areas of the G8 Africa Action Plan. UK implementation priorities are peace and security, trade, health, education, aid effectiveness and transparency in the extractive industry. A recent success was the agreement by the UK Working Group of a report setting out a framework to give Africa's poor access the medicines.

Aid (Points of Entry)

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the principal points of entry are for international aid to *(a)* Zambia, *(b)* Malawi and *(c)* Zimbabwe. [91258]

Clare Short: WFP's logistical arrangements have been modified and adjusted as appropriate during the first six months of this emergency operation. The graph shows that the actual corridor use and the estimated use of corridors in the period July-December 2002. The shift, which can be attributed to the GMO and milling issues, has in particular affected the Beira corridor which was expected to supply Zambia and Zimbabwe in much higher quantities. The GMO issue demanded that an increased tonnage of non-GM cereals was purchased in Tanzania and the Republic of South Africa (RSA) whereas as a result of the need for milling of GM cereals, more cargo was routed through the RSA for milling prior to dispatch to Zimbabwe.

WFP: Corridor use: planned, actual, expected

	Percentage of total traffic		
	Planned July-December 2002	*Actual July-December 2002*	*Planned January-June 2003*
Dar-es-Salaam	11	8	14
Nacala	4	2	6
Beira	40	19	27
Maputo	19	3	10
Durban	25	24	27
Regional purchase	—	48	18

It is not realistic simply to extrapolate the actual use of the various corridors during the past six months in order to determine the logistics plan for the next six months. Due to the fact that the availability of non-GM cereals in the region is now limited, WFP will need to make future purchases on the international market and therefore cargo is expected to arrive through the originally planned points of entry. It should be noted that this shift to international purchases will negatively impact on the lead time for arrivals of cereals at the points of entry.

As a result of the increased tonnages of non-GM cereals being purchased on a FCA basis in the RSA, the logistical set-up in Johannesburg had to be revamped when WFP became a major exporter of food commodities rather than an importer.

Angola

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what evidence has been collated by her Department on abuse of civilians by army personnel in the Cabinda enclave of Angola; and if she will make a statement. [91156]

Clare Short: Access to Cabinda is difficult and the UK government has been unable to assess the situation on the ground. However as part of its emergency response mandate in Angola, the UN is planning an inter-agency mission to the region at the end of this month. This is likely to include UNICEF, the World Food Programme and one of the UN protection agencies, as well as the Government of Angola. We expect that the mission will address the issue of human rights.

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress has been made in the distribution of food aid to inaccessible areas of Angola. [91165]

Clare Short: The UN has been able to provide food aid to an additional 1 million vulnerable Angolans since the ceasefire agreement last April. However, humanitarian agencies are still unable to reach many parts of the country because of mine infestation and poor road infrastructure. The World Food Programme (WFP) is to conduct airdrops of food aid to Angolans in inaccessible areas.

Serious mine accidents have closed a number of roads. Re-opening them is a UN priority and the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs has contributed US $460,000 from the Emergency Response Fund (ERF) to clear the mines from some of the main transport arteries used to deliver emergency supplies. My Department has allocated £500,000 to the ERF and a further £300,000 to UNDP for a project aimed at improving the effectiveness of mine action through strengthened co-ordination at the provincial level. The United Kingdom also contributed 19.7 per cent. of the 6 million euros which the EC has made available for mine action in Angola. This included 5 million euros to a variety of mine clearance agencies.

A $6.9 million WFP Angola Special Operation (SO 10149.1) was recently approved to improve access to vulnerable populations and to reduce the cost of delivering humanitarian assistance. In addition to the £2 million my Department has contributed to WFP food aid in Angola, a further £750,000 has been provide for this special operation to enable WFP to lease all terrain trucks to deliver food aid. The first trucks have arrived in Mavinga where they are being used to deliver food to 70,000 Angolans in the two gathering areas outside the town.

Annual Report

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much producing her Department's latest Annual Report cost; how many copies were printed; how many copies of it were sold at its cover price; to whom copies of the report have been provided free of charge; and how many copies were provided free of charge. [90900]

Clare Short: The cost to my Department of producing our 2002 Annual Report was £61,236. The number of copies printed for DFID was 3,500. This excludes copies ordered by The Stationery Office Ltd. for sale to their customers (these costs are not charged to government). The number of copies sold by The Stationery Office at cover price was 421.

DFID does not charge for copies of its Annual Report. By the end of 2002, 1,733 copies of the report had been provided free of charge to people within the following groups: Parliament; British Embassies and High Commissions; Churches and Faiths; International Development Organisations; DFID headquarters, overseas offices and delegations; Other Government Departments; Non Governmental Organisations; Libraries; University Research Institutes and other Development Academics; and individuals who requested them via the DFID website or public inquiry point.

My Department also produced a summary version of the report at a total cost of £11,673. 15,000 copies of this summary were produced, of which 12,694 have been provided free of charge to people within the groups listed above.

Bangladesh

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the projects the UK is developing with the Bangladeshi Government in that country. [89769]

Clare Short: DFID is preparing its new Country Assistance Plan for Bangladesh which will be published in April 2003 and will give a detailed description of our future intentions.

DFID is presently developing the following projects:

Project	*Amount (£ million)*	*Description*
Chars development programme	50	Major livelihood programme for vulnerable communities living on the unstable sand islands in the Jamuna river
Developing Business Services Market	9	To develop services to support private sector growth
Financial Management Reform Programme	25	Programme co-funded with the Dutch to improve public expenditure management accounting and planning
Health and Nutrition Sector Programme	75	Second phase of the health sector programme aimed at delivering essential health package to all poor people
Support to National Arsenic Programme	5	To help the Government devise a comprehensive programme to mitigate the effects of arsenic in drinking water
Disaster Management	7	A project co-funded with UNDP to improve Government systems for responding to disasters
Support to State Owned Enterprise (SoE) closure	6	To meet redundancy costs of closing down loss making jute mills
Primary Education Development Programme II	70	Introduction of a sectoral approach to improve the quality and access to primary education
Rural Electrification Board	50	To increase electrification in rural areas
Public Access to Justice Project	4	To introduce concept of community policing with Bangladesh Police Force
Roads and Highways Institutional Development	12	To continue support reforms in the planning and implementation of road sector
Trade Capacity building	To be determined	To support short and long term capacity for the Ministry of Commerce in international trade negotiations. Co-funded with EC

Brazil

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of her Department's contributions to poverty reduction in Brazil in the years *(a)* 2000, *(b)* 2001, and *(c)* 2002 was spent on water and sanitation projects; what assessment she has made of the privatisation of water and sewage treatment in Brazil; and if she will make a statement. [90414]

Clare Short: Around 4 per cent. of DFID's budget for Brazil was spent on water and sanitation projects in the financial years 1999–2000 and 2000–01. There was no expenditure in the financial year 2001–02 and none is planned for 2002–03. The EC programme in Brazil, to which DFID contributes 19 per cent. of the total, is not active in the sector.

DFID has made no assessment of the privatisation of water and sewage treatment in Brazil, as this is not a priority area for DFID support.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her Department's aid budget to Brazil is this year; and how much of that will go to water and sanitation projects. [90415]

Clare Short: DFID's budget for bilateral development co-operation with Brazil for the financial year 2002–03 is £8.7 million. None of that budget will be spent on water and sanitation projects. The EC programme in Brazil, to which DFID contributes 19 per cent. of the total, has no plans in the sector.

The World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, of which DFID is a shareholder, currently have lending in the sector of over US$1 billion and US$2 billion respectively.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of water and sanitation provision in Brazil to *(a)* the rural population and *(b)* the urban population; and if she will make a statement. [90416]

Clare Short: None. In line with DFID's aim to focus our development effort in Brazil, we have agreed with the Government that the water and sewerage sector is not a priority area for DFID support.

Debt Relief

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to ensure that its additional debt relief beyond HIPC provides effective assistance in tackling poverty in indebted countries. [91679]

Clare Short: Before a country can qualify for debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, it must produce an interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) at Decision Point, setting out what action it will take to develop a full PRSP. To reach Completion Point, the full PRSP must be in place, and under implementation for at least one year. The PRSP sets out the policy action governments are taking to reduce poverty and provide a budgetary framework not only for spending the savings from debt relief but also for allocating all other aid and government revenues that they have the greatest impact on poverty reduction. We believe strongly in the value of the PRSP process, which is leading to improved economic management and social reform. The additional bilateral debt relief provided by the UK goes towards these poverty reduction programmes. The UK is also aligning its development assistance programmes with the PRSPs.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the UN report on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth of the Democratic Republic of Congo; what assessment she has made of the British companies named in the report; and if she will make a statement. [90413]

Clare Short: The latest UN Panel Report has provided a valuable further assessment of the illegal exploitation of resources in the DRC, but we and other members of the Security Council have asked for additional information on the specific claims made in the report. In particular we have asked for sight of the information corroborating the allegations made against British companies and nationals. Once this has been received we will take a view on what further action to pursue in relation to the allegations.

Departmental Expenditure (Newsprint)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the total expenditure of her Department was on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in 2002. [90523]

Clare Short: The Department no longer purchases newspapers, magazines and periodicals from a central budget, but full details of decentralised expenditure could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The central expenditure is shown in the table for the year 2002.

	£
Magazines and periodicals	99,041.12
Newspapers	3,385.13
Total cost	102,426.25

Running Costs

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the running costs of *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of its sponsored agencies were in (i) 1997 and (ii) the most recent year for which figures are available. [90709]

Clare Short: Detailed information on administration costs for the Department for International Development, going back to 1998–99 and with projections to 2003–04, is set out in Table 6 of the 2002 departmental report (CM 5414). Data for years before 1998–99 are not available on the same basis. Final outturn figures for 2001–02 were published in DFID's Resource Accounts for 2001–02 (HC 48). Updated information, with plans to 2005–06, will be published in the 2003 departmental report in the spring.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the distribution of her Department's whole time equivalent staff was, including the staff in agencies and other bodies reporting to her, in each Government office region and nation of the UK *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the most recent available period. [90475]

Clare Short: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office on 15 January (*Official Report*, column 609W).

Famine

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her estimate is of how many people are suffering from famine in *(a)* Zambia, *(b)* Malawi, *(c)* Zimbabwe and *(d)* other countries south of the Zambezi; and how much humanitarian aid was delivered to each country in 2002. [91257]

Clare Short: My estimate of how many people are suffering from famine is guided the by the Emergency Food Security Assessment Report prepared by the Southern Africa Development Community:

> Lesotho: 650,000 people (30 per cent. of the population) will require an estimated 36,000 tonnes of emergency cereal food assistance through to March 2003.
>
> Malawi: 3,300,000 people (29 per cent. of the population) will require an estimated 237,000 tonnes of emergency cereal food assistance through to March 2003.
>
> Mozambique: 590,000 people (3 per cent. of the population) will require an estimated 48,000 tonnes of emergency cereal food assistance through to March 2003.
>
> Swaziland: 270,000 people (24 per cent. of the population) will require an estimated 20,000 tonnes of emergency cereal food assistance through to March 2003.
>
> Zambia: 2,900,000 people (26 per cent. of the population) will require an estimated 224,000 tonnes of emergency cereal food assistance through to March 2003.
>
> Zimbabwe: 6,700,000 people (49 per cent. of the population) will require an estimated 486,000 tonnes of emergency cereal food assistance through to March 2003.

Humanitarian aid is delivered through a co-ordinated approach and is best expressed by the following table:

Donor contributions in response to the humanitarian crisis (Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe, regional)

£ million

Donor	*Contribution*
USA1	175.2
EU-EC-ECHO[2]	112.7
United Kingdom	87.2
Sweden[2]	19.1
Germany[2]	13.3
Netherlands[2]	12.4
Italy[2]	8.8
Norway	8.4
Japan	7.9
Finland[2]	7.8
Canada	5.5
Denmark[2]	5.3
Australia	4.9
Ireland[2]	4.2
Switzerland	3.1
France[2]	1.9
Belgium[2]	1.5
Spain[2]	0.5
Austria[2]	0.2
Luxemburg[2]	0.2

[1] USAID Southern Africa Complex Food Security Crisis Situation Report 5 (FY 2003)

[2] As reported through ECHO 14 point fax system 1 January–19 December 2002 (Euro/GBP exchange rate Financial Times 11 December 2002: 0.64008)

Source:

Data from Reliefweb/USAID/EC

Famine (Zimbabwe)

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her estimate is of how many people are suffering from famine in each province of Zimbabwe; what steps she is taking to ensure British aid supplies reach all areas of Zimbabwe; and if she will make a statement on the amount of British or British-supported food aid delivered to each province of that country in each month of 2002. [91255]

Clare Short: The SADC vulnerability assessment in September 2002 estimated that 6.7 million people are in need of food aid in Zimbabwe. By province and major urban areas, the numbers in need are as follows:

	Number
Bulawayo	167,077
Harare	395,566
Manicaland	976,455
Mashonaland Central	704,392
Mashonaland East	779,671
Mashonaland West	739,359
Masvingo	977,783
Matabeleland North	515,872
Matabeleland South	418,251
Midlands	975,155

The number in need was revised up by 500,000 in December, with the increase in Mashonaland, largely of former commercial farmworkers.

DFID-funded assistance is provided through a number of partners focusing on the most vulnerable districts in Zimbabwe. However, to produce this data by province by month would involve a disproportionate effort. DFID's Zimbabwe staff are based in country and their efforts are focused on implementation and monitoring of our assistance.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to ensure that humanitarian organisations can deliver aid in Zimbabwe without interference by the Government of that country; and of what interference she received reports in 2002. [91256]

Clare Short: It is a fundamental principle of the international community working in Zimbabwe and elsewhere that food aid is delivered on the basis of need alone, and is not politically determined.

The EU has established guidelines to ensure food distribution in Zimbabwe is apolitical and transparent. Our bilateral feeding programmes through NGOs use the same criteria. The WFP also works through NGOs under an agreement with the Government of Zimbabwe that enshrines this principle.

The UN and donors closely monitor events on the ground to ensure that principles and agreements are honoured. If obstruction does occur, we work closely in support of the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator and WFP in engaging with the GoZ to ensure the obstruction is dealt with and food distribution resumed as quickly as possible.

Two major incidents of interference were reported during 2002; the obstruction of operations by Save the Children UK in Binga, and the seizure of WFP food in Insiza prior to a parliamentary by-election. Both issues were successfully resolved and feeding has now resumed.

Some commentators have failed to distinguish between political bias in the distribution of food by the Government of Zimbabwe, which is widespread and the principles of distribution according to need which are being adhered to by the international community.

Food Aid

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions her Department has had with the USA on food aid containing GM products and the provision of GM-free food aid; and if she will make a statement. [90417]

Clare Short: DFID officials have been in communication with USAID on these topics in the context of the humanitarian crisis in Southern Africa.

Genetically modified varieties of maize and soya which are consumed by the US public, have also been provided as food aid by the USA for some time—one report suggests since 1995.

The GM varieties concerned have been tested and approved for human consumption in the US and Europe. The FAO, WHO and WFP have all assured Southern African countries that the consumption of GM maize poses no risk to human health.

HIPC Initiative

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which countries her Department estimates will have unsustainable debt burdens after their completing the HIPC Initiative. [91451]

Clare Short: The main aim of the heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) initiative is to ensure that countries exit the HIPC process with sustainable levels of debt. The current framework of the initiative has the flexibility to provide, when appropriate, additional debt relief at completion point, so called "topping up", to countries whose debt sustainability outlook has changed due to exogenous factors since reaching their decision point. The UK is pressing the World bank and the IMF to widen their approach to topping up, so that any HIPC country facing unsustainable debts, that has demonstrated its commitment to poverty reduction and economic reform, should qualify for this additional relief. Debt relief alone, however, cannot guarantee future sustainability. This requires sound macroeconomic policies, strong growth and export bases, including access to markets of developed countries, access to adequate financing on highly concessional loan and grant terms, and prudent policies on new borrowing. The UK is co-financing a debt strategy project aimed at helping HIPC Governments to strengthen their debt management capacity.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which countries taking part in the heavily indebted poor countries initiative have reached completion point within the time scale established at their decision point. [91452]

Clare Short: Six countries have reached their completion point under the heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) initiative. Of these, five countries—Bolivia, Mauritania, Mozambique, Tanzania and Uganda—reached their floating completion point either within the timescale assumed at decision point or between one and five months after the assumed date. Burkina Faso reached its completion point in April 2002—one year late. The reason for this was the delay in completing its PRSP, and the decision by the World bank and IMF to defer consideration of the completion point until spring 2002, in order to reassess the country's external debt position and to update the debt sustainability analysis. As a result of this delay, Burkina Faso became the first country to receive additional relief, so called, "topping up" at completion point, to enable it to exit the HIPC process with sustainable levels of debt.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent proposals her Department has made to *(a)* the World bank and *(b)* the IMF to reform the HIPC initiative. [91453]

Clare Short: The UK continues to play a leading role in the implementation of the heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) initiative, to ensure that as many countries as possible benefit from the enhanced framework. Following UK pressure, it was agreed that the World bank and the IMF would provide additional relief to countries that risk exiting the HIPC process with debts above the 150 per cent. debt/exports ratio. This was reconfirmed at the spring meetings in 2002, when Burkina Faso became the first country to benefit from "topping up". Although we welcome this change, it does not go far enough. The UK has proposed that, in calculating topping up, additional bilateral relief should be excluded from the calculations. We also want to see a more flexible interpretation of the rules, so that any HIPC country facing unsustainable debts, that has demonstrated its commitment to poverty reduction and economic reform, should qualify for this additional relief. The UK has also asked the bank and fund to come forward with proposals to promote the full participation of all creditors in the initiative, including technical assistance to HIPC countries facing legal challenges from non-participating creditors.

India

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions her Department has had with the Indian Government on food aid containing GM products; and if she will make a statement. [90418]

Clare Short: None. My Department has had no discussions with the Government of India regarding the provision of food aid containing GM products. Neither the UK Government nor the EC are currently providing food aid to India. The World Food Programme (WFP) does provide non-GM food aid to India, which it sources in-country.

Iraq

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much her Department will provide towards the UN appeal for basic readiness funding, in light of the possible war and subsequent humanitarian situation in Iraq. [90411]

Clare Short: My Department is not making funding available at this stage.

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if the UN has published a strategy for preparing for the humanitarian effects of hostilities against Iraq; and if she will make a statement. [91347]

Clare Short: The United Nations is undertaking inter-agency humanitarian preparedness and response planning for a variety of humanitarian contingencies in Iraq and neighbouring countries.

Job Sharing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the extent of job sharing in her Department. [90872]

Clare Short: Our most recent figures show that 113 members of staff are working reduced hours. 18 of these are employed on official job-share contracts.

Job-sharing is one of a number of alternative and flexible working patterns that are available to staff. A flexi-time system is also available to all staff. DFID is strongly committed to providing a working environment which values and nurtures a diverse workforce and has identified diversity and the need for work/life balance as one of its five core values.

In support of this, we issued a booklet to all of our staff in 2002 which set out the various work patterns available within DFID, advice on how staff can access them and-for women-specific information about how they can plan their return to work after maternity leave.

The flexibility of the pattern is decided in conjunction with line managers to suit individual needs and the needs of the Department.

Anyone applying for a vacancy, either internally or externally, may do so on the basis of working in the job on a flexible working pattern although, in some instances, this is not possible owing to the nature of the work.

Kenya

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the Government's plans to assist the incoming Kenyan Government to tackle poverty and encourage economic regeneration. [90144]

Clare Short: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Belfast, North (Mr. Dodds) earlier today.

Mr. Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what the Government's policy is towards assistance to Kenya as a result of the recent Kenyan elections; [90165]

(2) what the total UK public funding to Kenya was in each year since 1997; [90164]

(3) what plans there are for talks between the new government of Kenya and the UK Government; and if she will make a statement. [90166]

Clare Short: The UK is providing substantial bilateral assistance to Kenya, as illustrated in the table. In addition we provide support through our contributions to multilateral agencies including the European Commission. Following successful elections on 27 December, my officials based in Nairobi have already had discussions with the new Government on its plans to tackle corruption, revive the economy and reduce poverty, and on how the international community, including the UK, can best help. I expect to visit Kenya very soon to have face to face discussions with President Kibaki and his team.

UK Bilateral assistance to Kenya	*£million*
1997/8	30
1998/9	42
1999/00	33
2000/01	62.7
2001/02	35.8

Malawi Flooding

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what estimate she has made of the *(a)* numbers affected and *(b)* volume of crops destroyed by recent flooding in Malawi; what impact flooding has had on the distribution of food aid in Malawi; and what steps she is taking to assist those affected by the flooding. [91164]

Clare Short: In Malawi the Humanitarian Working Group of the National Food Security Task Force is now assessing the overall extent and impact of the recent floods. My Department is working with partners in this working group to develop an appropriate response. Although the floods caused some temporary disruption to humanitarian distribution work, where necessary the WFP NGO consortium has successfully developed alternative transportation routes.

Natural Resources Institute

Jonathan Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when her Department's solicitors will respond to the University of Greenwich regarding arrangements for a new underlease for the Natural Resources Institute buildings in Chatham Dockyard as set out in the university's letter of 24 April 2002; and if she will make a statement. [90429]

Clare Short: Neither my Department nor our solicitors have any record of receiving any such letter. The general issue of the lease on the premises at Chatham Dockyard has been the subject of long-term discussions. Our solicitors will be contacting those of the University of Greenwich shortly to arrange a meeting.

Official Travel

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what the total budget of *(a)* her Department and *(b)* its agencies is for official travel in 2002–03; [84932]

(2) what the total expenditure of *(a)* her Department and *(b)* its agencies was on official travel in 2001–02. [84799]

Clare Short *[holding answer 3 December 2002]:* My Department does not hold a central budget for official travelling.

Since 1999, the Government have published an annual list of all visits overseas undertaken by Cabinet Ministers costing £500 or more during each financial year. The Government have also published on an annual basis the cost of all Ministers' visits overseas. Details of travel undertaken during the period 1 April

2001 to 31 March 2002 was published on 24 July 2002, *Official Report*, columns 1374–75W. The cost of Ministers' visits overseas for 2002–03 will be published as soon as possible after the end of the current financial year. Copies of the lists are available in the Libraries of the House.

All travel is undertaken fully in accordance with the rules set out in the Ministerial Code and Travel by Ministers, copies of which are available in the Libraries of the House.

Peru

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what schemes her Department supports in Peru. [90571]

Clare Short: DfID's new draft Country Assistance Plan for Peru is currently being finalised after extensive consultation (the consultation draft is available on the DfID website). The overall objective of the Plan is to contribute to reducing poverty in Peru by 50 per cent. by 2015. We aim to do this by promoting the development of an inclusive society, which is responsive to the rights of the poor and excluded. The Plan focuses on three outcomes: promoting social inclusion, Government working for the poor and economic opportunities for the poor. To achieve these outcomes, we work closely with Peruvian organisations—both the Government and broader society—and the major multilateral development agencies, to improve the effectiveness of national policies, programmes and international assistance.

DfID has a £3.7 million programme in Peru for 2002–03. The UK also funds about 19 per cent. of the EC development programme, and is a 5 per cent. shareholder in the World bank and 1 per cent. shareholder in the IDB.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the objectives of the 'Improving Health of the Poor: A Rights Based Approach' programme in Peru. [90572]

Clare Short: The proposed 'Improving Health of the Poor: A Rights Based Approach' programme in Peru has been designed to promote poor and excluded peoples rights to access health care, strengthen the relationships between health service providers and Peruvian citizens and to facilitate greater responsiveness to the needs of the poor within the health sector. The project would support the work of the Ministry of Health, the Ombudsman's office and civil society and has a number of components. The objectives are to: (i) improve public health service policies and institutions to protect and promote the right to health of poor and excluded communities in Peru; (ii) facilitate, with citizens and health care providers, the implementation of participatory mechanisms for the planning, provision and evaluation of health services and (iii) promote the uptake of lessons learned in the programme by the multilateral development organisations working in Peru.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much aid is provided *(a)* to encourage and *(b)* to finance abortions in Peru; and if she will make a statement. [90573]

Clare Short: None. My Department considers support for activities to improve the quality, safety and accessibility of abortion services where this is legal in the country concerned, and where it is available as a matter of individual choice. In all situations, as we have done in Peru between 1997 and 2002, DfID will consider support for measures to improve access to effective and high quality post-abortion care to deal with the complication of spontaneous or induced abortion.

Rwanda

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what estimate her Department has made of the revenues of the Congo Desk of the Rwandan Patriotic Army and Rwanda's national budget; and what impact this has had on development aid to the Rwandan Government. [90412]

Clare Short: We have made no such assessment. The Rwandan national budget is regularly assessed by the IMF which has reported positively on improvements in the effectiveness and transparency of budget management by the Rwandan Government, and has confirmed it has found no evidence of significant off-budget receipts or expenditure. There is no evidence in the national budget of receipts from the Congo Desk of the RPA. Development aid remains vital to support efforts to eradicate poverty and establish long-term stability in Rwanda following the 1994 genocide. We will continue to support the Government in implementing their poverty reduction strategy within a framework of good governance and respect for human rights.

Sexual Reproductive Health

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the organisations her Department works with which specialise in sexual reproductive health; and if she will make a statement. [91181]

Clare Short: My Department works with a large number of sexual and reproductive health organisations in developing and developed countries. Information is not held centrally on all of these organisations, and to collate the information would incur disproportionate cost. However, a key element of DfID assistance for sexual and reproductive health programmes is that it is provided in support of the principles of free and informed choice set out at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994.

Statutory Instruments

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many Statutory Instruments subject to negative procedure made by her Department *(a)* came into force and *(b)* were considered by a delegated legislation committee in each of the last three Sessions. [88029]

Clare Short: Over the last three Sessions the Department for International Development has made one Statutory Instrument which was subject to negative procedure. It was not considered by a delegated legislation committee.

2002/1408: International Development Act 2002 (Commencement) Order 2002.

Trade Liberalisation

Mr. Challen: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department has taken to assist developing countries to carry out impact assessments on the effects of trade liberalisation agreements, broken down by country. [91354]

Clare Short: DFID supports a variety of trade related technical cooperation programmes which are designed to help developing countries participate more effectively in trade negotiations and to take advantage of trade opportunities. A number of these programmes include consultancy or study funds which can be used to undertake impact assessments or to secure advice on trade liberalisation issues. Particular examples include:

a study of the economic effects of EU bilateral trade agreements with developing countries, which includes case studies on South Africa, Egypt, Mexico, Chile, Turkey and the MERCOSUR Common Market;

a study on the possible effects of changes in the EU Sugar Regime on African, Caribbean and Pacific sugar exporting countries;

the Integrated Framework Trust Fund for least developed countries (LDC), which is also supported by multilateral and other bilateral donors, has helped LDCs to mainstream trade issues into national poverty reduction strategies. Support has so far been provided to Cambodia, Madagascar and Mauritania;

Malawi Trade and Poverty Programme, which helps to build capacity in Malawian institutions to formulate, negotiate and implement trade reform strategies that are inclusive and pro-poor; and

Trade Policy Development Project (with the World bank). This has included a broad range of trade related policy and impact studies, such as on the cashmere sector in Mongolia, trade and foreign exchange policies in Iran, the impact of WTO accession on the Russian telecommunications sector, trade facilitation and standards reform in the Asia Pacific region, and the linkages between regional trade policies and economic integration in south Asia and south eastern Europe.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her latest estimate is of the productivity of the agricultural sector in Zimbabwe. [91259]

Clare Short: Official figures for agricultural production are not issued in Zimbabwe until late February following the national assessment. Preliminary figures indicate that the area planted to maize, the staple crop this year is larger than last. However widespread shortages of tillage, seed and fertilisers will suppress yields. Early planted crops in some areas wilted and had to be replanted. The condition of the maize in the main growing areas is reported to be average. Providing the rains continue then Zimbabwe is expected to produce between 850 000 to 1.0 million tonnes, an improvement over 2002 but only 60 per cent. of its annual maize requirement.

No figures have been released for the late 2002 wheat harvest but a figure of 160,000t is being used which was 50 per cent. less than the previous year. This year's wheat crop will be planted in July as usual.

The harvesting of flue-cured Virginia tobacco, the main foreign exchange earner for Zimbabwe, is just starting. The main producer group is forecasting a total crop of 80 million kilogrammes, considerably lower than the 165 million kg in 2002 and the 202 million kg produced in 2001.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Prisoner Conveyances

14. **Dr. Pugh:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what recent assessment he has made of the efficiency and value for money of private firms who deliver prisoners to court. [91437]

Hilary Benn: The contracting out of prisoner escort arrangements has offered better value for money, a reduction in escapes and has freed up prison officers to concentrate on their main duties. A recent Prison Service review confirmed that escorts should continue to be contracted out, and the existing contracts, which are planned to be re-let in 2004, will be replaced with more flexible ones to allow the Prison Service to respond more effectively to business needs and population.

Drugs

17. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what plans he has to support communities in the fight against drugs. [91440]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The new communities target was simplified to focus it on what matters most—reducing drug related crime. The target is to reduce drug related crime, as measured by the proportion of offenders testing positive at arrest.

Additionally we have invested through the Community Against Drugs fund to empower local people to take action on local problems.

Police Resource Allocation

18. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions his Department has had with representatives of local constabularies about the allocation of police resources used in the investigation of crime. [91441]

Mr. Denham: Home Office Ministers and officials have regular discussions on a wide range of police resourcing issues with representatives of the police service.

Police (Gwent)

19. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on police numbers in Gwent. [91442]

Hilary Benn: On 31 March 2002 Gwent police had 1,333 officers, a record number. Gwent was allocated 81 recruits from the Crime Fighting Fund for the three years to March 2003.

The provisional grant settlement for 2003–04 provides Gwent with an additional £40,000 from the Crime Fighting Fund for further additional officers. We estimate that this will allow a strength increase of up to seven officers by the end of 2003–04.

Gun Crime

20. **Mr. Prisk**: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress his Department is making in tackling gun crime. [91443]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: While the overall proportion of crime involving firearms is low the increase in gun crime in the year 2001–02 is unacceptable and is being tackled vigorously. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has announced:

a mandatory minimum sentence of five years for illegal possession of a firearm;

a new offence of carrying replica firearms or air weapons in a public place without reasonable excuse; and

an amnesty to get many guns off our streets which may otherwise be used in crime.

EU Drugs Policy

21. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans there are to implement a common drugs policy throughout the European Union. [91444]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: European Union member states, including the UK, develop national drug strategies, identifying national priorities and developing national solutions. The fight against drugs is complemented and co-ordinated by a range of EU-wide action. The EU Drugs Strategy 2000–04 guides this action and is practically implemented by means of the EU Action Plan on Drugs. These common measures aim to co-ordinate, complement and add value to action by member states.

Youth Crime

22. **Ann Keen:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what international evidence he has taken into consideration in developing policies to tackle youth crime. [91445]

Mr. Denham: To help inform our approach to youth crime, we hosted an international youth crime seminar involving leading academics, practitioners and policy makers, in October 2002. A clear message from the seminar was that early prevention programmes, such as Sure Start, and tailored services for children and young people, are more likely to have a substantial impact in preventing the onset of offending behaviour and other adverse outcomes.

Child Murderers

23. **Tim Loughton:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with the Lord Chancellor's Department regarding prosecutions for child murderers involving joint enterprise. [91446]

Hilary Benn: There is regular contact with the Lord Chancellor's Department about a range of issues. This includes the difficult and important question of what we might do to improve the chances of successful prosecutions for the death or serious injury of children where it is clear that the injuries inflicted were caused by one or other parent, but there is no evidence as to which was responsible. Although some measures already contained in the current Criminal Justice Bill, such as those about admissibility of hearsay and evidence of previous misconduct, will help in this respect. We are considering a number of other possibilities with a view to legislation at the earliest possible opportunity.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the consultation period is for the siting of reception centres for refugees and asylum seekers. [91438]

Beverley Hughes: At the point where The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) expresses an interest in a particular property or location, and where there is no change of use, local authorities are given two weeks to provide NASS with any concerns they have regarding the potential use of the accommodation as some form of housing for asylum seekers. Where a change in use is required, as in the case of accommodation centres, local authorities have been given eight weeks to respond. However, it is clear that, in those instances when NASS intends to proceed with a contract, consultation and dialogue should continue beyond these minimum periods, and I have ensured that in future this will be the case.

TRANSPORT

Counter-pollution Practices

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when the United Kingdom's coastal waters counter-pollution practices were last reviewed. [91602]

Mr. Jamieson: In January 2000, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) published the "National Contingency Plan for Marine Pollution from Shipping and Offshore Installations" (NCP), which set out revised command and control procedures for the response to shipping incidents in the UK counter pollution zone following the experiences gained during SEA EMPRESS incident and from the recommendations in Lord Donaldson's review of salvage and intervention and their command and control. The MCA uses regular exercises to test the NCP.

Oil and Chemical Spills

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) how many permanently equipped vessels are available in the United Kingdom to tackle *(a)* oil, *(b)* chemical and *(c)* diesel spillages at sea; and where they are stationed; [91597]

(2) how many anti-pollution vessels there are to deal with *(a)* chemical and *(b)* oil spills within five hours sailing time of Lyme Bay; [91601]

(3) what emergency plans are in place to deal with chemical spillages that may occur off the United Kingdom coast; and what defences are in place to prevent such incidents; [91603]

(4) how many incidents of *(a)* chemical, *(b)* oil and *(c)* diesel spillage have occurred in United Kingdom waters since 1997. [91604]

Mr. Jamieson: Counter pollution operations at sea are best dealt with through the aerial spraying of dispersants. However, ships with a counter pollution capability to support the recovery of spillages can be resourced from commercial shipping companies, oil spill response organisations and ports. The numbers and locations will vary depending on the primary role of these ships. In Lyme Bay, for instance, craft with a counter pollution capability may be available in the ports of Plymouth, Poole, Weymouth or Portland, but there are no ships solely dedicated for that purpose. The Government has substantial counter pollution stockpiles with mechanical recovery resources to assist in the collection of marine pollution from the sea.

Companies and shippers involved in the carriage of hazardous chemicals have plans and equipment for dealing with emergencies whilst the substances are in transit. If an incident escalates expertise and facilities from relevant industries and the MCA are available. The MCA's main response would utilise the specialist chemical equipment in the UK's 'at sea' stockpile and its contracted chemical strike team, who provide both manpower and advice. The UK's National Contingency Plan and the Secretary of States Representative's (SOSREP) powers extend to chemical incidents.

The MCA annually commissions a report on the different types of marine pollution in the waters around the British Isles from the Advisory Committee on Protection of the Sea (ACOPS). In the ACOPS Report the type of pollutant has been classified since 2000 into mineral oils, chemicals, garbage, vegetable/animal oils and other substances. Oil and diesel are categorised into the same group. Before 2000 the ACOPS report did not include this level of detail.

The figures from the ACOPS report since 1997 for spillages in UK waters are as follows:

Year	*Nos. of pollution incidents*	*Incidents where source could be identified (percentage)*	*Incidents from offshore oil and gas installations*	*Mineral Oils (percentage)*	*Chemicals (percentage)*	*Garbage (percentage)*	*Vegetable/ animal oils (percentage)*	*Other substances (percentage)*
2001	678	87	419	95.5	1.3	0.4	0.3	2.4
2000	743	88	456	95	0.7	0.5	0.4	3

Year	*Nos. of pollution incidents*	*Incidents where source could be identified*	*Incidents from offshore oil and gas installations*	*Incidents where an estimate of the quantity of oil was reported*	*Incidents where 100 gallons or more were spilled*
2001	678	614	419	544	67
2000	743	627	456	543	77
1999	747	748	382	541	69
1998	801	609	359	613	87
1997	723	578	351	553	100

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what specific funding is available to coastal local authorities for counter-pollution measures and clean-up operations for *(a)* oil, *(b)* diesel and *(c)* other spillages at sea; [91599]

(2) what steps he has taken to train *(a)* local authority staff and *(b)* staff of other interested organisations, in the management, containment and clearance of (i) oil, (ii) chemical and (iii) diesel spillages at sea. [91598]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department does not make any specific funding available to coastal local authorities for counter-pollution measures. However, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) provides accredited training courses for the maritime local authorities to prepare them for such operations. These courses are primarily based on a response to oil pollution, but the response issues covered are also pertinent to chemical spills. The MCA runs two specific areas of training for local authorities:

Oil Pollution, Contingency Planning and Response

A residential training course (five days) for local authority management staff involved in contingency planning and oil spill response. This is run four times a year at locations around the UK, including the MCA's Training Centre in Dorset.

Oil Pollution Response

A two day hands-on training course in counter pollution response for local authority staff, who would expect to be involved in supervising beach clean-up operations and protective booming operations. These are run eight times a year at locations hosted by maritime local authorities.

In the last 24 months the MCA have trained over 150 people on the oil pollution, contingency planning and response courses. The MCA have also run two day hands- on training courses for councils in the following areas since the summer of 2000: Suffolk, Lincolnshire, Merseyside, Hampshire, West Sussex, Cumbria, Somerset, Argyll and Bute, Fife, Kent, Pembrokeshire, Cornwall, Essex, Teeside, Highland and South Wales. Before April 2002 courses will also be run in Inverclyde, North East Scotland, North Devon, Humberside, the Isle of Wight and Dorset.

Additionally, the MCA runs a series of decision making in oil spill response courses for the statutory nature conservation bodies, the environmental regulators, the Government Fisheries Departments and the public health authorities in the UK. These are designed to brief, train and prepare the staff of these agencies for their role in the multi-agency response to a pollution incident from shipping. The MCA have run nine of these courses since the beginning of 2000. The MCA also offer 24 hour incident response advice and support to local authorities and maintain a large stockpile of shoreline clean-up equipment at Southampton and Inverness that can be mobilised to an incident if required. The MCA has published a large range of scientific, technical and operational notices to provide guidance for local authorities on a wide range of response issues.

Taxis (Disabled Access)

Mr Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what decisions he has taken regarding the making of regulations to provide for access to taxis by disabled people. [91546]

Mr. Jamieson: We are still considering the options for implementing the Taxi Accessibility Regulations. We need to ensure that the costs of requiring accessibility do not have a major detrimental impact on the viability of the taxi trade in some parts of the country. We have been in discussion with the trade, with manufacturers and with our statutory disability advisers, the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC). I will make a statement once we have arrived at what we believe to be a workable way forward.

Air Transport (Scotland)

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many of the Future Development of Air Transport-Scotland consultation documents were *(a)* sent out and *(b)* downloaded from the Department of Transport website by 10 January 2003; and how many responses have been received. [91175]

Mr. Jamieson: Estimates of Scottish consultation documents dispatched and downloaded from the web site as of the 10 January 2003 are shown in the following table:

	Dispatched	*Downloaded from the Web Site*
Main and Summary Documents	13,149	30,738
Questionnaires	6,704	640

As of the 10 January 2003, we have received approximately 350 letters and e-mails and 882 questionnaires for the Scottish region.

Air Travel Organisers Licensing Regulations

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what representations he has received on changes to the law affecting Air Travel Organisers' Licensing (ATOL); and if he will make a statement. [91320]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department has received one letter on behalf of a travel agent. However, the CAA in response to its consultation paper ("Consultation on Proposed Amendments to the ATOL Regulations") received over 90 replies.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to amend ATOL Regulations to cover firms who sell package holidays by air under separate contracts; and if he will make a statement. [91321]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government are planning to introduce an early amendment to the ATOL Regulations to cover firms who sell package holidays by air under separate contracts.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what representations he has received concerning the protection of individual airline passengers against schedule airline failure from whom they have bought accommodation from a listed supplier; and if he will make a statement. [91323]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department has received no representations concerning the protection of individual airline passengers. However we have received representations from a number of travel organisers who assert that scheduled airlines that offer accommodation via linked websites ought to be obliged to comply with the ATOL Regulations.

Air Travel Trust Fund

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he will introduce legislation to increase the Air Travel Trust Fund; and if he will make a statement. [91322]

Mr. Jamieson: A draft Bill to secure the necessary powers to impose a levy will be introduced as soon as a suitable legislative opportunity arises.

Annual Report

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much producing his Department's latest Annual Report cost; how many copies were printed; how many copies of it were sold at its cover price; to whom copies of the report have been provided free of charge; and how many copies were provided free of charge. [90891]

Mr. Jamieson: The latest annual report for the Department for Transport was the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) Annual Report 2002.

The DTLR Annual Report was published in June 2002 at a cost of £37,761.14. This figure represents the cost to the Department for the design, production and printing of 600 copies. Other costs of printing and publication were met by the publisher, The Stationery Office Limited (TSO). These 600 copies were distributed free of charge to members of the Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee, various stakeholder groups and internally to officials within the Department. Copies were also laid before Parliament.

The Stationery Office Limited (TSO) can provide definitive numbers of the total number of copies printed and sold at the cover price.

British Transport Police

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many British Transport Police there were in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [91670]

Mr. Jamieson: The British Transport Police have provided me with the following information:

	Police officers	*Support staff*
2002	2,123	644
2001	2,109	565
2000	2,091	523
1999	2,113	524
1998	2,095	492
1997	2,132	461
1996	2,165	468
1995	2,147	410
1994	2,155	406
1993	2,114	373

Coach Accidents

Mr. Michael Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many passenger *(a)* injuries and *(b)* fatalities were recorded for accidents involving coaches in each year since 1991. [91763]

Mr. Jamieson: Figures for coaches alone are not available, the table shows the number of bus or coach passenger casualties from accidents involving a bus/coach in each year since 1991:

Bus/coach passenger casualties in accidents involving at least one bus/coach: GB 1991–2001

		Casualties	
	Killed	*Injured*	*All*
1991	25	8,197	8,222
1992	16	8,413	8,429
1993	32	8,637	8,669
1994	20	9,331	9,351
1995	34	8,510	8,544
1996	10	8,528	8,538
1997	12	8,594	8,606
1998	17	8,915	8,932
1999	11	9,333	9,344
2000	14	9,050	9,064
2001	10	8,882	8,892

Congestion Charging

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many letters were received by his Department on the proposed policy of the Mayor of London to introduce congestion charges in London; and what percentage of the letters *(a)* supported the proposal and *(b)* opposed it. [90978]

Mr. Jamieson: Between May 2000 and 15 January 2003 we had received 154 letters. Approximately 5 per cent. supported the proposal and 95 per cent. opposed it.

Running Costs

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the running costs of *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of its sponsored agencies were in (i) 1997 and (ii) the most recent year for which figures are available. [90704]

Mr. Jamieson: Detailed information on administration costs for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and its transport related agencies, going back to 1998–99 and with projections to 2003–04, is set out in Table A5 of the 2002 departmental report Cm 5405. Data for years before 1998–99 are not available on the same basis. Provisional outturn for gross and net administration costs limits were published in Public Expenditure 2001–02 Provisional Outturn (Cm 5574), Tables 4 and 5. Updated information, with plans to 2005–06, will be published in the 2003 departmental report in the spring.

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many documents were sent to DVLA as proof of identity in the last year for which information is available; and how many are known not to have been returned to their owners or holders. [90992]

Mr. Jamieson: In the financial year 2001–02 DVLA returned 3.9 million identity documents to customers. In the same year the Agency met 2,704 compensation claims from customers whose documents were not delivered (0.07 per cent. of cases where identity documents were sent to DVLA). 5.9 million photocard driving licences were issued in the same period.

Driving Licences (Vision Tests)

Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many driving licences were withdrawn between July 2001 and December 2002, due to people failing a field of vision test. [92005]

Mr. Jamieson: Around 2,000 drivers have had their licences withdrawn or applications refused in this period, due to a failure to satisfy the visual field standard for driving.

Foreign Commercial Vehicles

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement about the effectiveness of measures to ensure that foreign commercial vehicles driving on British roads are properly insured. [91539]

Mr. Jamieson: Both UK and European law require any vehicle, including commercial vehicles, to be covered by compulsory insurance when they are used on our roads. Foreign vehicles are subject to the same random checks as UK vehicles and if one were found to be uninsured, its user would be subject to the same fines as any UK motorist.

Liquid Petroleum Gas

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many road vehicles which run on liquid petroleum gas fuel were in use in each year since 1999. [91157]

Mr. Jamieson: DVLA statistics do not provide a breakdown by fuel type, only vehicles that are dedicated gas or petrol/gas combinations. The following table shows the number of vehicles that are dedicated gas or petrol/gas combination. DVLA statistics also do not distinguish between Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) and Natural Gas vehicles.

	Number of gas or bi-fuel vehicles
1999	17,010
2000	23,968
2001	29,968

But this understates the number of vehicles because not all conversions to alternative fuelling are notified to DVLA.

The Energy Saving Trust estimate that there is around 75,000 LPG vehicles currently in the UK. Motorists are converting to LPG at an increasing rate, with the number expected to increase by about 25,000 per year over the next two years, prompted by the Government grants available, and the fact that low-cost LPG fuel is now available in all areas of the country.

London Underground

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on how figures for attributable delays on the London Underground are to be used as *(a)* a performance measure for the PPP and *(b)* a basis for payments to the consortium; and who will evaluate the figures. [91068]

Mr. Jamieson: Under the PPP, the payments received by the Infrastructure Companies vary according to their performance. One of the key factors in determining performance is "Lost Customer Hours"—the time wasted by delays and the basic measure of Underground reliability.

The methodology for assessing and attributing delays, and calculating payments to the Infrastructure Companies has been working since September 1999. It is explained in detail in the PPP contracts, which will be published once financial close has been achieved on all three deals.

M25

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to his answer of 17 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 684W, on the M25, if he will place in the Library a copy of the full report on the initial assessment by the Transport Research Laboratory of the Controlled Motorway Project on the M25 between junctions 10 and 15. [91883]

Mr. Jamieson: A report of the initial assessment of the M25 Controlled Motorways Project will be placed in the Libraries of the House in due course.

Marinair

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what guarantees he has received from the promoters of Marinair that they *(a)* have secured and *(b)* are likely to secure the funding necessary to complete the proposed Marinair airport. [91863]

Mr. Jamieson: The Thames Estuary Airport Company Limited (TEACO) response to "The Future Development of Air Transport in the United Kingdom (South East)" included a statement about the availability of funding, but this was conditional, not guaranteed.

We will make publicly available in due course all responses to the consultation, except those marked confidential. In the mean time publication is a matter for the authors.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department to whom the Metropolitan Police must apply to close a road for *(a)* a period of seven days and *(b)* a period of more than seven days; and for how many consecutive periods of seven days the Metropolitan Police may close a road. [90556]

Mr. Spellar: I have been asked to reply.

It is open to the Metropolitan Police to apply to the local traffic authority for a temporary road closure order under Section 14 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 (as amended by the Road Traffic (Temporary Restrictions) Act 1991). The traffic authority may grant an order for a period up to 18 months. The duration of an order may be extended with the agreement of the Secretary of State for a period of up to six months.

New Communities (Thames Gateway)

Jon Cruddas: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the extra resources required to support the growth and development of new communities in the Thames Gateway area; what discussions he has had with other Government Departments in relation to supporting the growth and development of new communities in the Thames Gateway; and what resources he has allocated to support the growth and development of new communities in the Thames Gateway. [90428]

Mr. Jamieson: My right hon. Friend and noble, the Minister for Housing and Planning (Lord Rooker) chairs the Thames Gateway Strategic Partnership, whose membership comprises Ministers from five Government Departments (ODPM, DfT, DFES, DTI and DoH) three Regional Development Agencies, three Regional Assemblies and three sub-regional partnerships (East London, North Kent and South Essex).

The Partnership is now looking at new means of accelerating the regeneration and development of the Gateway.

Thames Gateway development and regeneration is being supported by investment from various Government funding streams and through regional public agencies (for example the RDAs).

Night Flights

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he will publish a consultation paper on night flights serving London's airports. [90734]

Mr. Jamieson: We are currently considering an orderly timetable for this and other environmental consultations, in the light of the decision announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport to extend the consultation on "The Future Development of Air Transport in the United Kingdom: South East" *Official Report,* 28 November 2002, columns 474–75. We intend to publish shortly a consultation paper on night restrictions at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted airports.

Rail Subsidies

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much subsidy has been paid to *(a)* rail freight operations and *(b)* passenger train operating companies in each year since 1997. [91532]

Mr. Jamieson: The table provides the amounts paid in freight Track Access Grants. Details of the subsidy paid to each train operating company, in each year, are set out in the Strategic Rail Authority's annual report, copies of which have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

	£ million
1997–98	21.3
1998–99	19.3
1999–2000	17.2
2000–01	13.9
2001–02	19.9

Road Traffic Accidents

Mr. Michael Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many road traffic accidents involved buses and coaches in each year since 1991. [91764]

Mr. Jamieson: The table shows the number of accidents resulting in a fatality or injury involving a bus or coach in each year since 1991.

Accidents involving bus/coach, by severity: GB 1991–2001

	All
1991	11,235
1992	11,064
1993	10,747
1994	11,186
1995	10,822
1996	10,988
1997	11,051
1998	11,585
1999	11,735
2000	11,524
2001	11,334

Roskill Committee

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport whether he has carried out a comparison of forecasts made by the Roskill Committee of *(a)* air travel, *(b)* plane movements and *(c)* runway use with actual outcomes since that time. [80710]

Mr. Spellar: The 1971 Roskill report (page 191) projected 123 million passengers at Heathrow, Gatwick, and a third London airport in 1991 and 260 million passengers in 2006. Over the period 1969 to 2006, traffic was projected in Roskill to grow over 15 fold. (Forecasts were presented in terms of passengers, rather than air traffic movements and runway utilisation.) Actual passengers through all London airports in 1991, the year before the Gulf war, was 62.8 million passengers (69.5 million passengers in 1992). In 2000, the corresponding actual figure was 117 million passengers. Our consultation documents report an unconstrained forecast of 301 million passengers in 2030, ie a 2.6 fold increase over 2000.

The Roskill report forecasts are one of a number of projections of air traffic growth. Since the early 1970s traffic growth has fallen as the industry has matured. More recent forecasts produced by the Department in the 1990s have tended to under-estimate future traffic growth.

Teleworking

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate he has made of the effects of teleworking on *(a)* current and *(b)* future transport needs. [91542]

Mr. Jamieson: The information is as follows:

(a) The National Travel Survey suggests that around 7 per cent. of all workers currently work from home at least once in a typical week. But about half of these are people whose paid job is only carried out at their home, and it is not clear how much of a role is played by communications technology.

Taking the 3 per cent. of workers who travel to work sometimes and work at home sometimes as being representative of teleworkers, it appears that they make roughly half the number of commuting journeys of non-teleworkers. But that they make around 5 per cent. more trips overall.

The Department will continue to monitor travel behaviour, and will analyse the data in more detail once a larger sample of responses has been accumulated.

(b) A number of the multi-modal studies being carried out have considered "soft" policies such as encouragement of teleworking as potential methods of reducing travel demand. The Secretary of State is aware of a number of research studies which have estimated the likely future impact of increased teleworking, but there is no clear overall picture which emerges. One research study, currently subject to peer review, suggests that teleworking might reduce car commuting by of the order of 5 per cent. by 2015, but there is considerable uncertainty involved in any such estimate.

Thameslink 2000

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the future of the Thameslink 2000 project. [91178]

Mr. Jamieson: Planning and associated applications are currently before the Deputy Prime Minister.

Transport Research Laboratory

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what arrangements he is making to ensure that the Transport Research Laboratory continues to provide crash testing facilities for wheelchairs. [91826]

Mr. Jamieson: We understand that TRL are to cease the routine product testing of wheelchairs and associated equipment to concentrate resources on their core research businesses. The Department is aware of the importance of this dynamic testing service, and TRL has recently completed an extensive programme of research for my Department on the safety of wheelchair users who travel as passengers in vehicles. Equipment manufacturers also use such test facilities for product development and to provide evidence in support of applications for CE marking.

TRL was privatised in 1996 and now forms part of the Transport Research Foundation group of companies providing impartial transport research and advice. Although it is disappointing that TRL has chosen to withdraw from this market, we are unable to influence the work that they choose to do or the services that they offer. Other test houses in the UK have dynamic test equipment and are able to offer this service.

Young Persons Discount Card

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what discussions he has held with *(a)* train operating companies and *(b)* London Transport on the introduction of a combined young persons discount card; and if he will make a statement. [91675]

Mr. Jamieson: The Strategic Rail Authority has recently completed a consultation exercise on railway fares policy following publication of their consultation document "Future Fares Policy-Seeking Your Views". Fares integration with other modes of transport in the London area is addressed in the consultation document. The SRA is now considering the comments received from the consultation exercise and will shortly be advising Ministers on the outcome.

TREASURY

Retirement

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the research was, referred to in the green paper Simplicity, security and choice: Working and saving for retirement, that found that the 401k schemes in the USA have been successful in raising pension saving amongst the low paid. [90820]

Ruth Kelly: There is an ongoing body of research on 401k pension schemes in the US. Studies that have looked at the effect of 401 kschemes on the low paid, for example, Engen, E and Gale, W (2000J, The Effects of 401 *(k)* Plans on Household Wealth: Differences Across Earnings Groups, NBER Working Paper 8032, (http://papers.nber.org/papers/w8032.pdf) suggest that 401 ks have been successful in raising pension saving among lower earners.

Annual Report

Norman Lamb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many copies of his Department's latest annual report were printed; to whom copies of the report were provided free of charge; and how many copies were provided free of charge. [90894]

Ruth Kelly: Publication of HM Treasury's Autumn Performance Report (Cm 5665, published 6 December 2002) was handled by The Stationary Office Limited (TSO). 190 copies were produced for HM Treasury's own internal purposes and 310 copies have been sold by TSO to date.

Departmental Minutes

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many departmental minutes issued by his Department were outstanding on 30th November that referred to public private partnerships as included in Table B14 of the Consolidated Fund and National Loans Fund Accounts; and what their value was. [89426]

Mr. Boateng: *[holding answer 13 January 2003]:* No departmental minutes related to public private partnerships are outstanding in respect of liabilities charged to the Treasury's resource estimate shown in table B14 of the latest published Consolidated Fund and National Loans Fund Accounts.

Equitable Life

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what information relating to the transfer out of Equitable Life by the PIA's pension scheme in 1998 was available to the Treasury at the time the transfer took place. [91188]

Ruth Kelly: None.

Financial Advice Centres

Lynne Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will make it his policy to set up a national network of free or affordable financial advice centres; [91086]

(2) what plans he has to increase consumer awareness about sources of unbiased financial advice. [91085]

Ruth Kelly: It is important that everyone should have access to appropriate financial education, information and generic advice to understand his or her options, as well as having access to regulated product specific advice where appropriate.

We have noted the proposals for a new network to provide financial education, information and generic advice, with interest. Many organisations are already involved in the provision of those forms of help, such as adviser and product provider firms, trade associations and Government and regulators. A wide range of charitable and voluntary sector organisations are also active in providing individuals with help on their finances, including Citizens Advice, Citizens Advice Scotland, National Debtline, and other money advice, information and advice organisations.

The Financial Services Authority (the FSA) has a statutory objective to promote public understanding of the financial system.

I welcome the work the FSA is undertaking to look at the feasibility of a new tool to help deliver consistent, high quality, interactive generic help for those who need it. We also welcome the work the FSA will be doing to develop a more general strategy for consumer education, information and advice. We understand they plan to consult on this in the summer of 2003.

The FSA already offer a great deal of help, for example through publishing a guide to financial advice which gives contact details for commercial advisers, trade associations, government, and charitable and voluntary organisations, as well as already providing specific help with many financial products and services, such as pensions, annuities, bank accounts and ISAs.

Financial Services Authority (Pension Scheme)

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) who the trustees are of the pension scheme of the Financial Services Authority; who the trustees were in 1998; who the trustees were of the pension scheme of the Personal Investment Authority in 1998; and what the role of the trustees is in relation to the *(a)* FSA and *(b)* other Government and regulatory bodies; [91191]

(2) how many members of the pension scheme of the Personal Investment Authority paid additional voluntary contributions to Equitable Life in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000; [91189]

(3) if the trustees of the Personal Investment Authority pension scheme in 1998 had access to internal assessments undertaken by *(a)* the Government Actuaries' Department and *(b)* other regulatory and Government bodies, in relation to the viability of Equitable Life; [91193]

(4) what the aggregate amount was of additional voluntary contributions paid to Equitable Life by members of the pension scheme of the Personal Investment Authority in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000; [91186]

(5) if he will place in the Library copies of the *(a)* Personal Investment Authority and *(b)* Financial Services Authority pension scheme trustees' annual reports for 1998–99; [91192]

(6) what investments of the Personal Investment Authority pension scheme were held in Equitable Life at its scheme year end in 1998; what payments relating to the pension scheme were made to Equitable Life during the year 1997–98; what changes were made to the arrangement for investments with Equitable Life during the years *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000; what the reasons were for those changes; and what costs were incurred by (i) the Personal Investment Authority and (ii) the Trustees. [91190]

Ruth Kelly: The matters raised are the responsibility of the Financial Services Authority whose chairman will be writing to the hon. Member.

Fines (Financial Service Companies)

Lynne Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much has been collected in fines from financial service companies for wrongdoing in each of the last three years; and to what use this money has been put. [91087]

Ruth Kelly: The FSA tell me that the fines that they or their predecessor regulators imposed were as follows:

Period	*Fines in £ million*
1/4/2000 to 31/3/2001	4.6
1/4/2001 to 31/3/2002	8.0
1/4/2002 to 15/1/2003	7.5

Fines received by the FSA are allocated to the relevant regulatory sector and used to reduce fees charged by them to firms in that sector.

Government Actuary

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many full time staff he estimates *(a)* were employed in the Government Actuary's Department in 1998–99 and *(b)* will be employed in 2003–04; and if he will make a statement. [91712]

Ruth Kelly: It is estimated that there were 93 full time equivalent staff employed in the Government Actuary's Department in 1998–99. It is estimated that 103 full time equivalent staff will be employed in 2003–04.

Investment Products

Mr. Flight: To ask Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had with the European Commission on *(a)* the sale of investment products or services and *(b)* the liability of advisors and providers in relation to their customers, following the recommendations of the Sandler Report; and if he will make a statement [89468]

Ruth Kelly: Treasury officials have regular discussions with the European Commission about financial services, including investment services, particularly in the context of the Commission's proposal for an updated directive on investment services and regulated markets, published on 19 November 2002. The Government is seeking to ensure that this proposed directive is consistent with the proposals in Mr. Ron. Sandler's review of the medium to long term retail savings market.

Job Sharing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the extent of job sharing in his Department. [90866]

Ruth Kelly: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 13 March 2002. The Treasury policy on job sharing remains unchanged. There are now 13 job sharers covering seven posts as at 31 December 2002. These individuals are employed on part-time contracts.

Lisbon Strategy

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what research his Department has undertaken into the progress of member states of the European Union towards achieving the goals set in the Lisbon Strategy in March 2000. [91199]

Ruth Kelly: HM Treasury has produced a series of documents on the progress of the EU towards the goals set in the Lisbon strategy.

1. 'European Economic Reform; meeting the challenge' (March 2001);

2. The Government White Paper, 'Realising Europe's Potential; economic reform in Europe' (February 2002);

3. 'Structural Indicators of European economic reform; measuring Europe's progress' (February 2002);

4. 'Productivity in the EU, 1979–99', commissioned from Mary O'Mahoney at the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (February 2002); and

5. 'Towards Full Employment in the European Union' (July 2002).

All of these documents can be found on the HM Treasury website (www.hm-treasury.gov.uk).

The Treasury will report on developments in European economic reform since the 2002 White Paper in a progress report, to be published shortly.

Mortgages

Andrew George: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the average mortgage rate was in England in each year since 1978. [90835]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Andrew George, dated January 2003:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question concerning the average mortgage rate in England in each year since 1978. I am replying in his absence. (90835)

The rates shown in the attached table are currently compiled by the Financial Services Authority (and previously Building Societies Commission). They are average rates for mortgages with Building Societies. Comparable figures prior to 1984 are not available..These figures relate to the UK Separate figures for England are not available.

Average Mortgage Rate—Building Societies[1]

Year	*Average Rate*[2]	*Basic Rate*[3]
1984	12.19	11.88
1985	13.01	12.75
1986	12.32	12.30
1987	10.34	10.30
1988	12.75	12.77
1989	14.44	14.42
1990	14.34	14.48
1991	11.39	11.52
1992	8.98	8.98
1993	7.94	7.99
1994	7.84	8.14
1995	7.48	7.98
1996	6.51	7.00
1997	7.58	8.16
1998	7.29	7.75
1999	6.49	6.88
2000	6.65	7.31
2001	5.17	5.34

[1] The average rates are based on information provided by Building Societies. The figures reflect rates at the end of the year.

[2] These data represents the weighted average of individual reporters' own weighted average rates on their overall residential loan book.

[3] These data represents the weighted average of the individual reporters' standard variable (headline) rate applying to the majority of mortgage accounts at the end of reporting period.

Paper Supplies

Sue Doughty: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer who the suppliers are of his Department's paper and paper products. [91902]

Ruth Kelly: The following suppliers provide paper and paper products to HM Treasury:

Banner

Talk Paper

Tompla

Public Service Agreement

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to review staffing in relation to his Department's not meeting key targets set out in the 2000 Public Service Agreement. [91200]

Ruth Kelly: The Treasury Management Board reviews the allocation of resources to the delivery of Public Service Agreement targets during the annual business planning round in-year when necessary.

Sandler Review

Norman Lamb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the impact that proposed revisions to the 1993 European Investment Services Directive would have on the proposals contained in the Sandler review of savings. [91574]

Ruth Kelly: The Government are seeking to ensure that the proposed revision to the 1993 Investment Services Directive is consistent with the proposals in Mr. Ron Sandler's review of the medium to long-term retail savings market.

STEPS Contract

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what date stamp duty was paid by Mapeley on the STEPS Contract with the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise; and if he will make a statement. [89475]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 January 2003]:* The payment of Stamp Duty is a confidential matter between the payer and the Inland Revenue. Ministers are not involved in the process and do not have access to information relating to it. Exemption 15 (Statutory and other restrictions) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information applies.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish the advice given by Mr. Dave Shaw of the Inland Revenue special investigation section to the Deputy Chairman of the Inland Revenue in respect of the Mapeley STEPS contract; and if he will make a statement. [89476]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 January 2003]:* I understand that Mr. Shaw's advice referred to policy advice which it would be inappropriate to disclose.

Exemption 2 (Internal discussion and advice) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information applies.

Teleworkers

Mr. Miller: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* employees and *(b)* self-employed persons are teleworkers. [91600]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Andrew Miller, dated 20 January 2003:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question about teleworkers. I am replying in his absence. (91600)

The attached table gives the information requested, for the three month period ending May 2002. These estimates are from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). The LFS questions on teleworking are asked in spring (March to May) quarters only. The latest available estimates are for spring (March to May) 2002.

Employees and self-employed people who are teleworkers[1,2]
United Kingdom: spring (March to May) 2002
Thousand[3]

	Number
Teleworker homeworkers[4]	
Employees	163
Self-employed	232
Home-based teleworkers[5]	
Employees	375
Self-employed	449
Occasional teleworkers[6]	
Employees	472
Self-employed	89
Total	
Employees	1,010
Self-employed	770

[1] People who do some paid or unpaid work in their own home in their main job and could not do so without using both a telephone and a computer.

[2] Estimates not adjusted for non-response to the teleworking questions.

[3] Not seasonally adjusted

[4] Teleworkers who work mainly in their own home.

[5] Teleworkers who work in various locations using home as a base.

[6] People who do not usually work at home or use home as a base but spent at least one day in the reference week teleworking in these locations.

Note:
These Labour Force Survey (LFS) estimates are Not Seasonally Adjusted (NSA) and have not yet been adjusted to take account of the recent Census 2001 results.

Source:
ONS Labour Force Survey

Widows/Widowers

Mr. Heald: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women were widowed in each month in (i) 2001 and (ii) 2002. [91616]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Oliver Heald, dated 20 January 2003:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your question asking how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women were widowed in each month in (i) 2001 and (ii) 2002. I am replying in his absence. (91616)

The latest available figures for England and Wales are for 2001. The information requested for that year is given in the table below.

Number of new widows and widowers by month, England and Wales, 2001[1]

	Widows	*Widowers*
January	12,835	6,430
February	11,056	5,465
March	12,375	6,018
April	11,249	5,797
May	11,471	5,506
June	10,680	5,162
July	10,893	5,411
August	10,647	5,128
September	10,716	5,212
October	11,076	5,393
November	11,014	5,604
December	12,414	5,917

[1] Data are for deaths occurring in the year

2001 Census

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the total cost of the UK 2001 Census of Population, broken down to show *(a)* gross cost and *(b)* net cost after census-related income; and if he will make a statement. [91704]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Colin Mowl to Mr. David Laws, dated 20 January 2003:

The National Statistician and Registrar General for England and Wales has been asked to reply to your recent question asking what is his estimate of the total cost of the UK Census of Population, broken down to show *(a)* gross cost and *(b)* net cost after census-related income, and if he will make a statement. I am replying in his absence. (91704)

The information that has previously been supplied to the Treasury Sub Committee and the National Audit Office indicates that the overall budget for the Census in England and Wales covering the 13-year period 1993–2006 is £207m. ONS expect to deliver the Census within this figure subject to the settlement of outstanding claims from contractors. No income from the dissemination of census-related output has been budgeted.

The Census is a devolved matter in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but an estimate of £254m for the total UK Census over the same 13-year period was provided to the Treasury Sub Committee and published in the Report of the Treasury Committee, "The 2001 Census in England and Wales", HC 310 on 6 March 2002.

For the 2001 Census, access to all standard statistical output will be through a user-friendly website and, subject to simple licence terms, access will be free at the point of use. This access is in addition to pre-defined printed reports to be laid before Parliament. Sections 2(3) and 4(1) of the Census Act 1920 require the cost of undertaking the production of key outputs to be covered as part of the sunk cost of the Census.

For non-standard statistics, Section 4(2) of the Census Act requires that customers will be charged only the marginal cost of producing and disseminating the information. This is consistent with the Government's wider policy on the 'Knowledge Economy' to make best use of information held by Government by offering an extended range of data free of charge, thereby demonstrating its commitment to ensure that data is widely available and easy to access.

All-employee Share Plan/Enterprise Management Incentives

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of companies that have taken advantage of *(a)* the all-employee share plan and *(b)* the enterprise management incentives as set out in the 2000 Budget. [91025]

Dawn Primarolo: 442 Share Incentive Plans have received Inland Revenue approval up to 15 January 2003 with a further 197 plans in the process of approval. 3,297 companies have granted share options under Enterprise Management Incentives up to 15 January 2003.

More detailed statistics relating to 2000–01 only are contained in tables 6.5 and 6.6 of Inland Revenue Statistics. These are available on the Inland Revenue website at: http://www.inlandrevenue.gov.uk/stats/emp_share_schemes/menu.htm.

Business Inquiries (Inland Revenue)

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* full and *(b)* aspect business inquiries were taken up and settled by the Inland Revenue in each of the last two financial years; and if he will make a statement. [91390]

Dawn Primarolo: Details of the numbers of 'full' and 'aspect' business inquiries taken up each year are set out in the Inland Revenue Annual Reports, copies of which are in the House of Commons Library.

Capital Gains Tax

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost of the exemption from capital gains tax of gains arising on the disposal of the only or main residence as stated in table 7 of the November 2002 "Tax Ready Reckoner and Tax Reliefs" if gains could be rolled over onto the purchase of another residential property; and if he will make a statement. [91744]

Dawn Primarolo: Reliable estimates of the cost of abolishing the exemption of gains arising on the disposal of the only or main residence, and instead allowing gains to be rolled over onto the purchase of another residential property, are available only at disproportionate cost.

Early Retirement

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost of early retirement for the public sector in each of the last five years. [92073]

Mr. Boateng: Early retirements are the responsibility of individual public sector employers. The costs of making the early retirement are charged directly to employers' budgets and information about total costs is not held centrally. However, the costs of ill health pensions are borne by each pension scheme, and such centrally-collected information as there is was included in the report of the "Review of Ill Health Retirement in the Public Sector", published by the Treasury in July 2000.

Euro

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish the background papers associated with the forthcoming recommendation on the five economic tests; and if he will make a statement. [91866]

Ruth Kelly: A number of supporting studies will be published encompassing the preliminary and technical work that will inform the assessment of the five economic tests. When the assessment is complete, the detailed supporting studies will be published alongside, all to be subject to intensive public scrutiny and debate. Further detail on the supporting studies was set out in the "Paper for the Treasury Committee on the Treasury's Approach to the Preliminary and Technical Work" published on 6 September.

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 13 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 414W, on the euro, when his Department last updated its survey of April 1999 on the proportion of small and medium-sized companies prepared for membership of the euro; and if he will make a statement. [92053]

Ruth Kelly: Since April 1999, HM Treasury has published two surveys on the level of preparations among UK businesses for dealing with the euro as a foreign currency. These were published in April 2000 and November 2001. The results of these surveys are available on the Treasury's euro website (www.euro.gov.uk).

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to publish the supporting studies undertaken as part of the preliminary technical work on euro convergence, prior to the formal assessment of the five economic tests for the euro; and if he will make a statement. [92562]

Ruth Kelly: As set out in the Paper for the Treasury Committee on the Treasury's Approach to the Preliminary and Technical Work, published on 6 September 2002, "When the assessment is complete, the detailed supporting studies will be published alongside, all to be subject to intensive public scrutiny and debate".

HIPC Initiative

John Barrett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the external debt is of *(a)* the Gambia, *(b)* Ethiopia, *(c)* Cameroon, *(d)* Chad, *(e)* Zambia, *(f)* Senegal, *(g)* Rwanda, *(h)* Niger, *(i)* Nicaragua, *(j)* Mali, *(k)* Malawi, *(l)* Madagascar, *(m)* Honduras, *(n)* Guyana, *(o)* Guinea-Bissau, *(p)* Guinea *(q)* Ghana, *(r)* Sao Tome and Principe and *(s)* Benin; and what the debt level was when each country reached its Decision Point under the HIPC initiative. [91174]

John Healey: Most of these countries reached Decision Point in the HIPC initiative in 2000, with the exception of Ethiopia and Chad (which reached Decision Point in 2001), and Ghana (which reached

Decision Point in 2002). Under the HIPC initiative a country receives interim debt relief on payments due when it reaches Decision Point, and subsequently the debt is irrevocably cancelled at Completion Point.

To reach Decision Point and demonstrate their commitment to poverty reduction, a country must prepare an Interim-Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), to get to Completion Point they need to develop a full PRSP, and usually make progress in, implementing it for one year.

The UK always goes beyond HIPC terms and offers 100 per cent. debt relief, including 100 per cent. interim debt relief from Decision Point. The HIPC initiative has helped increase social expenditures in countries receiving HIPC debt relief by US$1.7 billion in 2001–02, equivalent to 1.2 per cent. of Gross Domestic Product. On average, health and education spending account for 65 per cent. of the resources freed by HIPC debt relief.

The most recent readily available data for external debt is for 2000 and is set out in the table:

Country	*Date reached DP*	*External debt (US$, millions) 2000*
The Gambia	December 2000	471
Ethiopia	November 2001	5,481
Cameroon	October 2000	9,241
Chad	May 2001	1,116
Zambia	December 2000	5,730
Senegal	January 2000	3,372
Rwanda	December 2000	1,271
Niger	December 2000	1,638
Nicaragua	December 2000	7,019
Mali	September 2000	2,956
Malawi	December 2000	2,716
Madagascar	December 2000	298
Honduras	July 2000	707
Guyana	November 2000	128
Guinea-Bissau	December 2000	61
Guinea	December 2000	177
Ghana	February 2002	483
Sao Tome and Principe	December 2000	30
Benin	July 2000	192

Source:

World Bank, Global Development Finance, 2002

Income Statistics

David Winnick: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what numbers and percentage of people received an annual income from all sources of *(a)* £15,000 to £20,000, *(b)* £20,000 to £30,000, *(c)* £30,000 to £40,000, *(d)* £40,000 to £50,000, *(e)* £50,000 to £60,000, *(f)* £60,000 to £70,000, *(g)* £70,000 to £80,000, *(h)* £80,000 to £90,000, *(i)* £90,000 to £100,000 and *(j)* above £100,000 in the latest period for which figures are available. [91875]

Dawn Primarolo: The information is given in the table.

Annual income from all sources	*Number of taxpayers (thousand)*	*Number of individuals with total income in range as a percentage of all taxpayers*
£15,000 to £20,000	4,910	17
£20,000 to £30,000	5,400	18
£30,000 to £40,000	2,000	7
£40,000 to £50,000	800	3
£50,000 to £60,000	410	1
£60,000 to £70,000	230	1
£70,000 to £80,000	150	1
£80,000 to £90,000	100	1
£90,000 to £100,000	70	
Above £100,000	300	1

These estimates are based on the 2000–01 Survey of Personal Incomes and are consistent with the November 2002 pre-Budget report.

Inland Revenue

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of staff numbers at the Inland Revenue in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 2002–03; what the reasons are for change in staff numbers; in which areas changes in numbers have taken place; and if he will make a statement. [91719]

Dawn Primarolo: Staff usage in the Inland Revenue (including the Valuation Office Agency) for 1997–98 was 55,989 full time equivalent staff. Current plans show an estimated usage for 2002–03 of 72,444. The change is due mainly to:

The transfer of staff from the contributions and benefits agencies in 1999;

Preparation for the introduction of new tax credits on 1 April 2003;

Implementation of the Grabiner review of the informal economy;

Workload growth.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many local tax offices have been *(a)* owned and *(b)* utilised by the Inland Revenue in each year from 1985–86 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [91723]

Dawn Primarolo: Regrettably we are unable to supply an answer to this question on the grounds of disproportionate costs.

Liquid Petroleum Gas

Bob Spink: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will amend medium and longer-term taxation policy to encourage more LPG fuelled vehicles. [92052]

John Healey: In Budget 2001, the Chancellor announced that duty on road fuel gases (including liquid petroleum gases) would be frozen in real terms until at least 2004. Furthermore, fiscal incentives to use LPG are also offered through both the graduated vehicle excise duty and company car tax systems.

Any further announcement on the taxation of these fuels will be made in the context of the Chancellor's Budget judgments.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people entitled to the minimum wage are being paid less than the minimum wage in *(a)* the North West and *(b)* the UK. [91943]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Colin Mowl to Mr. Lindsay Hoyle, dated 20 January 2003:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question about the number of people paid less than Minimum Wage. I am replying in his absence. (91943)

The latest available data, for April 2002, show an estimated 330,000 people in the United Kingdom being paid below the National Minimum Wage. This represents 1.3 per cent of all jobs. The corresponding figures for the North West were 40,000 and 1.6 per cent. These estimates cannot necessarily be used as a measure of non-compliance with the legislation as it is not possible discern from the available data whether an individual is eligible for minimum wage rates.

Office for National Statistics

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many staff were employed by the Office for National Statistics in each year from 1996–97 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [91702]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Colin Mowl to Mr. David Laws, dated 20 January 2003:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question about staffing resources in the Office for National Statistics in each year from 1996–97 to 2002–03. I am replying in his absence. (91702)

The numbers of people employed by ONS are published by the Cabinet Office at http://www.civil-service.gov.uk/statistics. The following table sets out the numbers of permanent and casual staff as at 1 April in each year.

Year	*ONS staff employed (Permanent) as at 1 April each year*	*ONS staff employed (Casual) as at 1 April each year*
1996–97	2894	90
1997–98	2968	179
1998–99	3089	166
1999–00	3050	240
2000–01	3210	330
2001–02	3030	110
2002–03	3386* (as at 17/1/03)	113*(as at 17/1/03)

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many staff work in the Drummond Gate Office of the Office for National Statistics; and if he will make a statement. [91709]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Colin Mowl to Mr. David Laws, dated 20 January 2003–01–20:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question about the number of staff who work in the Drummond Gate Office of the Office for National Statistics (ONS). I am replying in his absence. (91709).

As at 16 January 2003, 968 people work in the Drummond Gate Complex of the Office for National Statistics, comprising two buildings: 1 Drumond Gate and Bessborough House.

PAYE

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many companies have declared two employees or fewer who are taxed through PAYE since 1999. [91019]

Dawn Primarolo: There were approximately 640,000 PAYE schemes at April 2002 with one or two employees. PAYE schemes cover both companies and unincorporated businesses, and each employer can have more than one PAYE scheme.

Royal Mint

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the net cost of the Royal Mint in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [91713]

Ruth Kelly: The Royal Mint is a Trading Fund and Self Financing Public Corporation. As such, it is structured so that it does not have a net cost to the Exchequer provided it is able to maintain a reasonable level of commercial performance.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the market value of the Royal Mint; and if he will make a statement. [91714]

Ruth Kelly: Any Government estimate of the market value of the Mint would be commercially confidential. Exemption 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information applies.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what reasons underlie his policy that the Royal Mint should be in the public sector; and if he will make a statement. [91715]

Ruth Kelly: The last review of the Royal Mint in 1998–99 looked at many different options for the Mint, including privatisation. The review concluded that it would not be appropriate to privatise the Mint at the time because of Mint's large change programme; the Treasury's customer relationship with Mint; and uncertainties in the market place, particularly relating to euro coinage.

The next review of the Mint will be in 2003–04. Every option remains on the table.

Taxation

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the income tax receipts foregone, since 1998, as a result of the Government's policy of levying a lower rate of VAT on the installation of energy-saving materials in homes. [91018]

John Healey: There are no income tax receipts forgone but the cost to the Exchequer of the reduced rate of VAT on energy saving materials introduced in 1998 and extended in 2000 can be found in the relevant Financial Statement and Budget Reports. The cost is estimated at £5 million in 1998–99, £10 million in 1999–2000 and £45 million in subsequent years. The increased cost from 2000–01 results from to the extension of the reduced rates to installations in all homes.

Tobacco Smuggling

Norman Lamb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the level of co-operation between Imperial Tobacco and HM Customs and Excise on the issue of tobacco smuggling; and what recent discussions HM Customs and Excise has had with Imperial Tobacco on strategies to tackle tobacco smuggling. [91576]

John Healey: HM Customs and Excise have regular meetings with each of the major UK tobacco manufacturers.

The Government are giving careful consideration to the recent report on tobacco smuggling from the Committee of Public Accounts and will include in their response to the Committee details of the present level of co-operation between Imperial Tobacco and Customs and Excise.

DEFENCE

Accreditation

Mr. Mark Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his Department is doing to support the Government's policy on accreditation. [88094]

Dr. Moonie: The United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) is recognised by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of Sate for Defence as the sole national body for the accreditation, against international standards, of certification and inspection bodies, testing and calibration laboratories. The Ministry of Defence uses UKAS accreditation services whenever it is appropriate to do so.

Afghanistan

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British troops have been *(a)* killed and *(b)* wounded in Afghanistan in the last 12 months. [91009]

Mr. Ingram: Three British soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan in the last 12 months, though none died as a result of hostile fire. Two British soldiers were wounded during the same period, both in accidental shooting incidents.

Appropriation Accounts

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will publish the Appropriation Accounts for 2001–02. [91460]

Mr. Ingram: In accordance with the Government Resource Accounting Act 2000 the Department's financial performance is reported to Parliament in the Consolidated Departmental Resource Accounts. The 2001–02 Accounts were laid on 21 November 2002 (HC47). Copies are available in the Library of the House. The Appropriation Accounts for 2000–01 were the last in that form.

Army Recruits

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proportion of Army Recruiting Group's budget has been spent for the current financial year; how many army recruits will pass through Army Training Regiments in the period 1 January to 31 March; and when he expects the Army to achieve full manning. [91093]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* In the current Financial Year, as at 30 November 2002, the latest date for which accurate figures are available, 80 per cent. of the Army Training and Recruiting Agency's net resource budget has been spent. The total includes £64.8 million for the Recruiting Group, of which 68 per cent. has similarly been spent. The balances of 20 per cent. and 32 per cent. have, however, largely been committed.

In the period 1 January to 31 March 2003, a total of 4,390 recruits will commence training at Army Training and Recruiting Agency (ATRA) Phase 1 training establishments, including the Army Foundation College and the Army Technical Foundation College. The figure also includes Junior Entry recruits at Army Training Regiment (ATR) Bassingbourn and those commencing combined Phase 1 and 2 Infantry training at the Infantry Training Centre, Catterick. Only those Adult recruits who commenced training on 6 January at the other ATRs will pass out to Phase 2 training before the end of March; the present estimate of this number is 147.

The Army intends to achieve manning balance, in accordance with the Public Service Agreement, by the end of 2005. The Army's overall manpower requirement is dynamic and subject to continuing review in light of evolving doctrine, new technology and equipment and possible changes to the operating environment.

Recent performance has been encouraging, with personnel increasing by over 1,400 during the last 12 months.

Asthma

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many people have been discharged from the Armed Forces on account of their suffering from asthma in the last 12 months. [91039]

Dr. Moonie: Between 1 January 2002 and 31 December 2002 there have been 13 medical discharges in the Armed Forces due to asthma, nine of which were in the Army and four of which were in the Navy.

Further information on medical discharges can be found in the National Statistics publication entitled "Medical Discharges in the Armed Forces 2001" which was published on 27 March 2002. This publication can be found on the World Wide Web at http://www.dasa.mod.uk/medstats/discharge/ns_initframe.htm.

Capita Group

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the contracts that have been awarded to the Capita Group by his Department. [89965]

Mr. Ingram: The Ministry of Defence has the following contracts with the Capita Group.

Division	*Contract number*
Capita Business Services Ltd.	MSC5/07998 ABRO1A/0112 CBC/2B/0139 CP21B/1178
Capita Group plc	CPPF1/102/14
Capita RAS Ltd.	CBC/2B/0003 CP21A/1411 CP21B/1249
Capita Property Services Ltd.	DABMSC/10851
Capita Property Consultancy	WS35/806

Chinooks

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the purchase of the MH-47G Chinooks for special operations purposes. [90169]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 3 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 692W.

Close Range Defence

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which Royal Navy vessels have recently been fitted with *(a)* general purpose machine guns and *(b)* other weapons systems suitable for close range defence. [91237]

Mr. Ingram: The majority of Royal Navy vessels are, and always have been, fitted with general purpose machine guns, and also with larger calibre weapons for the purposes of close range defence. The fitting policy for these weapons, including the number of weapons carried by each platform, is reviewed on a regular basis and is subject to change as a result of changes to the threat or operational tasking of the units concerned. The fitting policy of weapons, the numbers and types carried by each vessel and the outcome of any reviews is classified information and I am, therefore, withholding that information under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice (Defence, security and international relations).

Deployment

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list, according to theatre or country, the units of the *(a)* Royal Navy and *(b)* Royal Marines deployed on duties determined by (i) the UK exclusively, (ii) NATO, (iii) the European Union and (iv) the United Nations. [91238]

Mr. Ingram: As at 20 January 2003, units are deployed as follows:

(i) on UK tasking:

North Atlantic

(a) HMS Ark Royal, HMS Ocean, HMS Edinburgh, HMS York, HMS Liverpool, HMS Marlborough, HMS Iron Duke, HMS Grimsby, HMS Ledbury, RFA Fort Victoria, RFA Argus, RFA Sir Tristram, RFA Sir Galahad, RFA Fort Austin and RFA Fort Rosalie

(b) 40 Cdo Gp RM and elements of 539 Assault Squadron RM

Mediterranean

HMS Chatham, RFA Brambleleaf, RFA Oakleaf

Gulf/Indian Ocean

HMS Cardiff, HMS Cumberland, HMS Bangor, HMS Blyth, HMS Brocklesby, HMS Sandown, RFA Bayleaf, RFA Sir Bedivere, RFA Diligence

Caribbean

RFA Blackrover

South Atlantic

HMS Endurance, HMS Leeds Castle, RFA Grey Rover

(ii) NATO tasking:

North Atlantic

HMS Dumbarton Castle, HMS Walney

Mediterranean

HMS Northumberland, RFA Orangeleaf.

No vessels are currently deployed on duties determined by the EU or UN.

In addition, three Royal Marine Protection Teams are deployed. I am witholding the precise location of their deployments and details of the location of deployed UK submarines under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice.

Deployments

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the principal *(a)* Royal Naval and *(b)* Royal Marines deployments on (i) peacekeeping, (ii) anti-terrorist and (iii) humanitarian operations in each of the past five years. [91239]

Mr. Ingram: The information requested is as follows:

	Principal deployments	
1998		
Peacekeeping	Republic of Congo—contingency deployment for possible non-combatant evacuation	RM
Peacekeeping	Albania—contingency deployment for possible non-combatant evacuation.	RM
Anti-Terrorist	Arabian Gulf—Maritime Interdiction	RN/RM
1999		
Peacekeeping	East Timor	RM
Peacekeeping	Sierra Leone	RN/RM
Humanitarian Ops	Honduras and Nicaragua—Hurricane disaster relief	RN/RM
2000		
Peacekeeping	Sierra Leone	RN/RM
Peacekeeping	Kosovo	RM

	Principal deployments	
2001		
Peacekeeping	Sierra Leone	RN/RM
Peacekeeping	Kosovo	RM
Anti-Terrorist	Arabian Gulf—Maritime Interdiction.	RN/RM
Anti-Terrorist	Afghanistan	RM
Anti-Terrorist	Indian Ocean/Afghanistan	RN
Anti-Terrorist	Gulf/Indian Ocean	RN
2002		
Anti-Terrorist	Afghanistan	RM
Anti-Terrorist	Indian Ocean/Afghanistan	RN
Anti-Terrorist	Gulf/Indian Ocean	RN

In addition, Royal Navy and Royal Marine personnel have been deployed on operations in support of the civil authorities in Northern Ireland in each of the years in question.

Dstl Staff

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will estimate the cost of recruiting and training replacements from Dstl staff in Farnborough who are unwilling or unable to relocate to Portsdown Main. [89813]

Dr. Moonie: Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl) at Farnborough are scheduled to move to Portsdown in late 2006. At this stage it is not possible to predict whether any particular member of staff will leave Dstl rather than move to the new site.

Dstl currently has a low annual turnover of staff and has an effective recruitment and training strategy. Dstl always looks to develop the talents and capabilities of existing staff and would look to existing staff to fill any vacancies at a more senior level, at the same time continuing to recruit and train staff to fill in behind them. Dstl does not therefore envisage a significant increase in such costs attributable to their relocation plans.

Dstl annually recruits in the region of 100 graduates and indicators suggest it is an employer of choice for science graduates.

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the account taken of the views of Dstl staff at the Farnborough site in arriving at the decision to relocate Farnborough staff to Porstdown Main. [89833]

Dr. Moonie: The Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl) has been and remains keen to work with staff and trade unions to reduce the impact on staff of their relocation plans. Discussions with TUs have been open and constructive.

Dstl has completed a formal consultation with TUs together with a series of seminars for staff where the relocation plans were explained and staff feedback requested. These responses were used to inform the series of decisions needed on how best to structure the laboratory in the future. Some suggestions from staff have led to changes to plans, including decisions to move staff to different sites than originally planned.

Throughout, staff have been encouraged to express their views on Dstl relocation plans. Many have contacted the chief executive directly with questions, to which he has responded personally. CE/Dstl has also given a series of presentations to staff, including question and answer sessions, at sites affected by these plans.

FA2 Sea Harrier

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the current capability of the FA2 Sea Harrier for possible combat in the Middle East. [89882]

Mr. Hoon: No decision has been taken to authorise military action against Iraq. As I told the House in the course of my statement on 7 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 37, HMS Ark Royal is deploying in a helicopter carrier role and is therefore not currently carrying any Sea Harriers.

Firefighters' Dispute

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* Royal Naval and *(b)* other service personnel are on duties associated with the national firefighters' dispute; and if a schedule has been set for their return to normal military duties. [91307]

Mr. Ingram: Approximately 19,000 military personnel are available for duties associated with the firefighters' strike. Of these, approximately 3,000 are drawn from the Royal Navy and are employed in both the firefighting and support roles.

The armed forces role during strike periods has been and will continue to be to provide emergency cover, thus seeking to save lives and ensuring that essential services are maintained. Emergency cover will, as far as possible, be maintained for as long as the strike continues and balanced with other demands on military resources.

FIST Project

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made in the development of the FIST project; and what advantages it will offer to infantry soldiers. [84850]

Mr. Ingram: The final stage of a competition to choose a Prime Contractor for the Assessment Phase of the Future Integrated Soldier Technology (FIST) programme is currently underway, involving BAE Systems Ltd. and Thales Optronics Ltd. Selection of a single Prime Contractor is planned for early 2003.

The FIST programme will bring the benefits of enhanced technology to the infantry soldier by providing an integrated suite of equipment. The programme will enhance the mission effectiveness of those soldiers committed to dismounted close combat, particularly in the areas of command and control of information, lethality, mobility, survivability and sustainability.

HMS Albion

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when HMS Albion is expected to become available for operational tasking. [91222]

Mr. Ingram: On current plans, HMS Albion is expected to enter service with the Royal Navy by July 2003. Following operational training, she should be available for tasking in October 2003.

HMS Nottingham

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if changes have been made to the anticipated *(a)* repair costs and *(b)* time out of service for HMS Nottingham since she arrived in the United Kingdom for repairs. [91279]

Mr. Ingram: There have been no changes to the anticipated repair costs and time out of service for HMS Nottingham since she arrived in the United Kingdom for repair.

HMS Sceptre

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the final nuclear safety justification for HMS Sceptre will take place; and when he expects the submarine to be fully operational. [91032]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 15 January, *Official Report*, column 638W. The final nuclear safety justification is planned for February 2003. This should permit HMS Sceptre's reactor to be powered up and tested prior to the submarine going to sea for the usual post refit trials and training before she returns to operations.

HMS Trafalgar

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) when HMS Trafalgar is to return to operational service; [91218]

(2) if he will make a statement about the damage caused to HMS Trafalgar. [91227]

Mr. Ingram: The damage to HMS Trafalgar, following her grounding on 6 November 2002, is centred around her forward sonar.

Surveys to fully scope the damage and assess the necessary repairs are currently being undertaken in Devonport dockyard. These include survey of the forward sonar (the damaged area), a full structural assessment of the forward main ballast tanks, foreplane operating gear, anchor operating gear and associated faired coverings. The surveys are expected to complete by the end of January 2003.

The opportunity is being taken to combine the repairs with a planned routine maintenance period for the submarine. The overall work programme, which will be informed by the surveys, is expected to take until early 2004 to complete. The submarine will then undergo the normal trials and training requirements before returning to the fleet.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the outcome will be known of the boards of inquiry into the accidents involving *(a)* HMS Trafalgar and *(b)* HMS Nottingham. [91219]

Mr. Ingram: Boards of Inquiry (BOI) into the accidents involving HMS Trafalgar and HMS Nottingham are complete.

There are no plans to publish the BOI reports into incidents of this nature.

I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 13 January, *Official Report*, column 403W to the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Mr. Wood).

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what effect on the overall capability of the submarine fleet has been caused by the withdrawal of HMS Trafalgar for repairs. [91228]

Mr. Ingram: HMS Trafalgar was due to enter a period of extended maintenance in April 2003. Her withdrawal from service in November 2002 has therefore not had a significant effect on the overall capability of the submarine fleet.

Low-level Flying (Taunton)

Mr. Flook: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many complaints he has received in each of the last 24 months about *(a)* the RAF and *(b)* the USAF and US Navy low flying jet fighters on training runs flying over the Taunton constituency. [83340]

Dr. Moonie: The current system of recording complaints about low flying does not include the constituency within which the complainant resides. The nationality of aircraft involved in complaints is not routinely recorded, nor is it envisaged that it should be. The hon. Member may wish to be aware that in the last 24 months the number of individual complaints recorded by the Ministry of Defence Low Flying Complaints and Enquiries unit for all low flying military aircraft in the county of Somerset was as follows:

	Number
November 2000	10
December 2000	8
January 2001	11
February 2001	20
March 2001	7
April 2001	19
May 2001	32
June 2001	35
July 2001	43
August 2001	19
September 2001	15
October 2001	14
November 2001	3
December 2001	11
January 2002	9
February 2002	11
March 2002	5
April 2002	12
May 2002	11
June 2002	26
July 2002	45

	Number
August 2002	30
September 2002	30
October 2002	10

Complaints have been recorded by the address given by the complainant. Details of the pattern of military low flying activity by low flying area are included on the Ministry of Defence website under the address www.lowflying.mod.uk.

Mr. Flook: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the ordnance survey co-ordinates for low-level jet fighters training run routes over the Taunton constituency. [83341]

Dr. Moonie: There are no "training run routes" for low level jet fighters across the Taunton constituency; as part of their training, aircrew are instructed and encouraged to constantly vary their routes in order to maintain the training value. In common with the rest of the United Kingdom, the whole of the Taunton constituency is open to low flying training by military aircraft in order to spread the disturbance as thinly as possible. However, a number of areas are excluded, such as restricted airspace around civil aerodromes, glider sites, certain industrial sites and the larger centres of population (generally towns with over 10,000 inhabitants).

Royal Navy

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what vessels are *(a)* stationed on Atlantic Patrol Ship (South) duties and *(b)* assigned to Standing Naval Force Mediterranean duties. [91229]

Mr. Ingram: APT(S) is currently gapped because of the commitment to provide emergency fire cover during industrial action by the firefighters' union. Meanwhile the RN contributes to the significant UK presence in the South Atlantic with the Falkland Islands patrol vessel, HMS Leeds Castle, the APT(S) tanker, RFA Grey Rover and the ice patrol ship, HMS Endurance deployed to the region.

The RN ship allocated to Standing Naval Force Mediterranean (SNFM) is HMS Northumberland having relieved HMS Edinburgh on 19 December 2002. HMS Northumberland was due to join SNFM on 15 January 2003 but will now join the group on 28 January 2003 following an extended period of operational sea training and maintenance.

Naval Task Group 2003

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which foreign navies will be participating in Naval Task Group 2003; and which foreign warships will be involved. [91519]

Mr. Ingram: The French Navy and Italian Navy will participate during part of the Naval TaskGroup 2003 (NTG 03) deployment and have allocated the French Destroyer FS Primauguet and the Italian Frigate ITS Granatiere respectively. Their participation is at the personal invitation of Commander in Chief Fleet and the Assistant Chief of Naval Staff to their respective counterparts. Their integration is considered routine business and follows a similar attachment by the French Frigate FS Aconit throughout the Naval Task Group 2000 deployment.

For completeness, but whilst not strictly part of the NTG 03 deployment, a French Minehunter, FS Cassiopee, will also integrate with the MCM Group deploying to the Gulf region on 20 January 2003.

NBC Suits

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether defects have been found in Mk IV NBC suits supplied to the Armed Forces; and what inspections are routinely made. [91042]

Mr. Ingram: No defect reports have been received regarding the Mk IV NBC suits supplied to the Armed Forces. There is no requirement to carry out routine inspections of the Mk IV NBC Suits, as they are vacuum-packed by the manufacturer for long-term storage. Units are responsible for ensuring the integrity of the packaging before they are issued.

Oilfields and Fishing Grounds

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what Royal Naval units are deployed in the protection of *(a)* UK oilfields and *(b)* UK fishing grounds. [91231]

Mr. Ingram: The Royal Navy does not allocate units specifically for the protection of British oilfields. However, RN ships, including those on fishery protection duties, conduct many routine operations and exercises around the United Kingdom throughout the year and any of these ships could be diverted if required to meet a specific requirement. In addition, the fleet ready escort, a frigate or destroyer continuously available at a high state of readiness, is at short notice to respond to any incident in UK waters.

The RN currently has seven ships allocated to the fishery protection squadron. These ships are deployed in accordance with Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs requirements and conduct fishery patrols throughout British fishery limits, excluding Scottish waters which are covered by the Scottish Fishery Protection Agency. HMS Lindisfarne, Guernsey and Atherstone are currently on patrol.

Operation Fresco

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what elements of the armed forces have been withdrawn from Operation Fresco for other duties; what units will replace them in each case; what areas of the country each will cover in the event of a firefighters' strike; and how long each unit has been training for fire fighting duties. [91029]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 16 January 2003]*: The following units and sub units from 16 Air Assault Brigade are to be withdrawn from Operation Fresco once replacements have been trained:

1st Battalion The Parachute Regiment
3rd Battalion The Parachute Regiment
1st Battalion Royal Irish Regiment
7th Parachute Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery
13th Air Assault Support Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps
D Squadron Household Cavalry Regiment
21 Battery, 47 Regiment Royal Artillery
51 Air Assault Field Squadron, 23 Engineer Regiment.

An equal number of replacements will be drawn from:

1 Highlanders
2 Royal Regiment of Fusiliers
1 Worcester and Sherwood Foresters
9 Supply Regiment Royal Logistics Corps
16 Regiment Royal Artillery
12 Regiment Royal Artillery
32 Regiment Royal Artillery
27 Regiment Royal Logistics Corps
Elements drawn from across the RAF.

Replacement forces began a rolling programme of training on 15 January. They will receive the same training package as those personnel being withdrawn from Operation Fresco duties. All units will have completed their training by 25 January but only those that have completed their training prior to 21 January will be able to assume Operation Fresco duties for a strike that day. Consequently, elements of 16 Air Assault Brigade will remain committed until the full complement of replacements are available to provide emergency cover. This ensures that there will be no diminution of the level of commitment to provide emergency fire and rescue cover nor a reduction in the quality of that cover.

A direct correlation between the locations of those being withdrawn and the replacements cannot be made. This is because adjustments are being made to the deployment locations of a number of units in addition to those listed above and some of the units will only be deployed on Operation Fresco for a strike on 21 January. There will not, however, be any change in capability at any of the temporary fire stations.

Pay Review Body

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to announce the appointment of the new Chairman of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body; and if he will take a statement. [91044]

Mr. Hoon: The present Chairman, the right hon. Baroness Dean of Thornton-le-Fylde, does not leave her appointment until spring 2004. The announcement of her successor will be made at the appropriate time.

RAF Uxbridge

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his plans for RAF Uxbridge. [90342]

Mr. Ingram: As part of the Ministry of Defence Estate London (MODEL) project, it is proposed that the United States Navy (USN) should be offered the opportunity to consolidate its London operations at Uxbridge, in place of the seven sites in the London area it currently occupies. The site would remain the property of Her Majesty's Government. The changes are subject to formal MOD approval procedures, discussions with the USN and the United States approval procedures. Should the USN not participate in the project, the site will be considered for alternative Government use, and if none is found, it is likely that the site will be disposed of.

Part of the Service Family Housing may be retained for use by MOD Service families. The historic RAF Bunker will be retained separately and preserved as a site of historic interest.

Retirement Age

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to review the compulsory retirement age of 60 for some Ministry of Defence employees; and if he will make a statement. [90219]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 15 January 2003]:* The Ministry of Defence, like other Government Departments, has recently completed a thorough review of its retirement policy for civilian staff in light of the Government's policy. Some two-thirds of the work force already have the option to work up to the age of 65. The review concluded that our current policy was consistent with departmental needs and that any change, including extending this option to those who currently have to retire at age 60, should be made through the implementation of the legislation on age discrimination that the Government are committed to introduce by 2006. We shall also have regard for the outcome of the consultation on greater flexibility for individuals to work beyond the present retirement age which the Government have initiated in the recently published Green Paper on Pensions.

Ricin

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library unrestricted information about ricin from the Laboratory of the Government Chemist. [91431]

Dr. Moonie: This question has been transferred to me for response because it was Ministry of Defence scientists from the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down who have been responsible for the identification of ricin in the recent terrorist alert.

The Laboratory of the Government Chemist was privatised in 1996 and no longer has any official status. Therefore, in response to your request for unrestricted information on ricin to be placed in the Library of the House, I will make arrangements to place such information from Dstl in the Library. Information on ricin is already available from the Department of Health website.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many days were lost due to sickness absence in the Department in 2002. [90534]

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many working days have been lost due to illness in his Department in *(a)* 2002 and *(b)* each of the preceding five years. [90966]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence's sick absence rates for civilian non-industrial staff in the last five years for which MOD data are available, measured in working days absence per staff year, are as follows:

	Days
1996	7.9
1997	7.9
1998	8.0
1999	8.8
2000	8.8

Sick absence data for all Government Departments is published in an annual Cabinet Office report, "Analysis of Sick Absence in the Civil Service". Copies of the 1999, 2000 and 2001 reports are available in the Library of the House. However, the 2001 report excludes data for MOD pending the introduction of a new and more accurate statistical reporting system. The 2002 report, which will include MOD data, will be placed in the Library of the House on publication.

A programme of measures is being implemented to help meet the target in MOD's Service Delivery Agreement to reduce sickness absence to seven days by the end of 2003 (target adjusted following the reorganisation of Government Departments in 2000). MOD is committed to improving the health of its staff and managing sick absence more effectively.

Shipping (Terrorists)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures are in place to protect *(a)* merchant and *(b)* naval shipping from terrorist attack. [91235]

Mr. Ingram: The threat from terrorist attack is kept under constant review and the Ministry of Defence works closely with other Government Departments on the protection of merchant shipping. The Royal Navy's worldwide Maritime Trade Operations—known as UK MTO arrangements—enable a number of options to be offered in support of merchant shipping, graduated to the prevailing threat. These range from the provision of routine advice and guidance through to naval supervision. The appropriate level of MTO support required in a given area remains under constant assessment. For example, UK MTO arrangements in the Gulf have been enhanced since October 2001 by the establishment of a UK MTO liaison cell in the region. If necessary, higher level Maritime Trade Operations can be implemented very quickly. Information on specific measures to protect naval shipping were provided in my answer to the hon. Member on 15 January, *Official Report*, column 640W.

Trident

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on *(a)* the operation and *(b)* the cost of the Trident submarine fleet in each year since 1997. [91240]

Mr. Ingram: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Warships

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which warships are in extended readiness; for how long each ship has been in extended readiness; what the levels of extended readiness are for warships; and if he will make a statement. [91030]

Mr. Ingram: There are currently two Royal Navy warships being held in Extended Readiness, a single readiness state which is not further sub-divided:

HMS Montrose, a Type 23 frigate, has been in extended readiness in Rosyth since September 2002, prior to an upkeep package in the dockyard. On current plans she is due to return to Fleet service in March 2004;

HMS Bridport, a Sandown Class Mine Countermeasures Vessel, has been in extended readiness at Faslane since March 2002.

Watchkeeper Programme

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Watchkeeper programme; and what extra costs are being incurred by industry bidders in advance of the down select decision. [90335]

Mr. Ingram: The Watchkeeper programme seeks to acquire an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) capability which will provide United Kingdom commanders with accurate, timely and high quality imagery. It is a key element of the Government's efforts to develop a truly network enabled capability, so critical to enhancing the ability of our forces to bring military effect to bear in a timely manner. Bids were received from the companies competing for the remainder of the Watchkeeper programme assessment phase in mid 2002, and additional points of clarification were sought from each bidder in December 2002. Any additional costs incurred by the bidders in addressing these outstanding issues are matter for the respective bidders. We plan to announce a decision on down-select as soon as possible.

West Africa

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment his Department has made of the implications of recent unrest in the Ivory Coast for British defence interests in West Africa. [91226]

Mr. Ingram: The United Kingdom is deeply concerned at the situation in Cote d'Ivoire. We continue to work with the French and other partners to support regional efforts to reach a peaceful political settlement. A resolution of the Cote d'Ivoire crisis is essential for stability of the West Africa region. However there are not considered to be any serious implications for British defence interests in West Africa at this time.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Driving Ban

Bob Russell: To ask the Solicitor General (1) what guidance is given to magistrates courts on the circumstances in which a driving ban should not be imposed on a motorist who has committed a criminal offence where an automatic disqualification is the normal outcome; in what circumstances a court is given discretion not to impose a ban; and what plans she has to remove the discretionary powers available to the courts. [90366]

(2) what guidance is given to magistrates courts and crown courts on the circumstances in which driving bans should not be imposed on motorists who have accumulated sufficient points for disqualification; in what circumstances a court is given discretion not to impose a ban; what plans she has to remove the discretionary powers available to the courts; and if she will make a statement. [90367]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 15 January 2003]:* In September 2000 the Magistrates' Association implemented its most recent guidance to Magistrates on sentencing. This is a wide ranging document covering various aspects of the Magistrates' sentencing powers. However the guidance it provides in relation to the issues raised in the questions is limited.

Although it states what the law is it does not necessarily specify in detail how it should be exercised in differing circumstances.

The main source of guidance for the Magistrates is the relevant statute and case law.

The current system provides a degree of flexibility to the Courts and allows for sentences to be appropriate to each individual case. There are no plans to remove the discretionary powers available to the courts in this area.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Racism and Xenophobia

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in which EU countries *(a)* racism and *(b)* xenophobia is a criminal offence; and how it is defined in each case. [91131]

Mr. Rammell: Criminal law provisions that explicitly include the prohibition of racist and xenophobic behaviour are in place in all EU Member States.

The joint action of 15 July 1996, adopted by the Council on the basis of Article K.3 of the Treaty on European Union provides a common definition of racist or xenophobic behaviour, referring to public incitement to discrimination, violence or racial hatred in respect of a group of persons or a member of such a group defined by reference to colour, race, religion or national or ethnic origin. However, the interpretation of this definition does vary amongst EU member states. A number of states, including the UK, have also entered significant reservations in regard to this Joint Action in order to protect freedom of speech and to reflect their legal traditions in regard to use of civil law.

In its definition of racist or xenophobic behaviour, the joint action includes public condoning, for a racist or xenophobic purpose, of crimes against humanity and human rights violations; public denial of the crimes defined in Article 6 of the Charter of the International Military Tribunal appended to the London Agreement of 8 April 1945; public dissemination or distribution of tracts, pictures or other material containing expressions of racism and xenophobia; participation in the activities of groups which involve discrimination, violence, or racial, ethnic or religious hatred.

EU member states are in the process of agreeing a framework decision on racism and xenophobia which will supersede the joint action.

Afghanistan

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what evidence has been collated by his Department on Taliban activity in the Zabul province of Afghanistan. [91160]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Following Operation Anaconda in March 2002, we received reports that some residual Taliban elements had moved into Zabul, Paktia and Paktika provinces. Poor security and remoteness continue to hamper aid programmes in Zabul. The Governor of Zabul blames these activities on Taliban remnants.

Annual Report

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much producing his Department's latest Annual Report cost; how many copies were printed; how many copies of it were sold at its cover price; to whom copies of the report have been provided free of charge; and how many copies were provided free of charge. [90882]

Mr. Straw: Production of the 2002 Foreign and Commonwealth Office Departmental Report cost approximately £11,000, which covered design, photography, indexing and proof-reading expenses. Other costs of printing and publication are met by the publishers, The Stationery Office Ltd. (TSO), and do not fall to government. TSO charged the FCO £23,923 for supplying 1,403 copies for distribution to Foreign Office Posts abroad and internal Foreign Office Departments. TSO makes its own commercial decisions on how many further copies to print for sale. To date TSO have sold 351 copies. In London, about 20 copies of the report were provided free of charge to journalists and foreign Embassies. Others accessed the electronic version of the report available on the FCO website. We do not hold information centrally about copies distributed free of charge by Posts.

Cuba Detainees

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations, including requests to meet with clients, he has had from the legal representatives of United Kingdom citizens detained in Cuba by the United States as suspected members of the Al-Qaeda terrorist group; what representations he has made to his United States counterparts in respect of the application of due legal process to these detainees; what information he has collated on the nature of the charges they face; and if he will make a statement on the compatibility of the conditions under which they are being held with human rights commitments entered into by the United States. [90237]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have received representations by the legal representatives and families of the detainees. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has spoken to the US Secretary of State several times about this issue, most recently on 5 January. Ministers and officials have raised it on numerous occasions with the US Government.

We continue to encourage the US to move forward with the process of determining the future of the British detainees. We have made our position clear that if they are charged they must have a fair trial. We understand that none have been charged. The US has given assurances that the detainees are being treated humanely and consistently with the principles of the Geneva Conventions. British officials have visited Guantanamo Bay to check on the welfare of the British nationals. I refer my hon. Friend to my Written Ministerial Statement of 11 December 2002, col. 17WS and the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for the City of Chester (Christine Russell) on 13 June 2002, *Official Report*, column 1402W.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the United States concerning the British prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay. [91117]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has discussed the issue of the British Detainees at Guantanamo Bay with the US authorities, most recently on 5 January, when he spoke to the US Secretary of State, Colin Powell.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the distribution of his Department's wholetime equivalent staff was, including the staff in agencies and other bodies reporting to him, in each Government office region and nation of the UK *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the most recent available period. [90472]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given him by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Alexander) on 15 January *Official Report,* column 609W.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many full-time equivalent staff are employed in *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of the agencies it sponsors; and what the figures were for 1997. [90674]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Alexander) on 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 697W.

Elections (Pakistan)

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether British Government representatives observed the recent Pakistani elections *(a)* as part of the EU observer team and *(b)* independently; and whether his policy is on the EU team's criticism of the Pakistani Government's offering financial aid to those political parties it favours. [89586]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We welcomed the holding of multi-party elections in Pakistan. Although there were no formal UK observers, four qualified UK professionals were part of the EU Elections Observation Mission. In addition, we funded 50 per cent. of the costs of the Commonwealth Election Observation Mission which itself had a qualified UK professional as its security advisor. Our high commission in Islamabad also closely monitored developments. We have studied the report of the EU observers with care. The report underlines the need for a concerted effort by the new Government, all political parties and civil society to ensure the establishment of a sustainable form of democratic, civilian rule in Pakistan. We will remain engaged with the Pakistani authorities on this and other key issues.

Global Partners Agreement

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what monies were pledged by the G8, broken down by country, as part of the Global Partners Agreement, known as ten plus ten plus ten; how much has been spent or advanced by each country; what impediments there are to the expenditure and disposition of the global amount; and if he will make a statement. [90690]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Money pledged so far to the G8 'Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction' is as follows (in currency of pledge).

Canada: Cdn $1 billion
France: €750 million
Germany: €1.5 billion
Italy: $1 billion
Japan: $200 million
Russia: $2 billion
US: $10 billion
UK: up to $750 million

Some countries have begun disbursing money to the Russian Federation and related projects, in particular the US under the Co-operative Threat Reduction initiative. The UK does not have details of expenditure to date by other G8 countries. Many countries are not able to disburse a substantial portion of the funds until there is agreement on a legal framework known as the Multilateral Nuclear Environmental Programme for the Russian Federation (MNEPR).

The UK has only been able to disburse around £20 million to date, and the continuing absence of either a multilateral or a bilateral agreement constitutes a substantial impediment to expenditure in a number of areas. Once we have the agreements in place we will be able to spend project money very quickly. In the interim, the UK continues to provide assistance to former Soviet Union countries in a number of areas, including safe storage of nuclear submarine fuel and site characterisation work in NW Russia, nuclear safety assistance to Kazakhstan, and measures to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons expertise from closed nuclear cities in Russia. In addition, the UK is working with other members of the G8 to establish a multilateral instrument to oversee the disposition of Russian weapons-grade plutonium.

The Government are firmly committed to the Global Partnership and believes the need for co-ordinated non-proliferation work has never been greater.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the details and purpose of the Global Partners Agreement known as ten plus ten plus ten reached between the G8 and the Russia Federation in Canada in 2002. [90691]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: On June 27 2002, leaders at the G8 Summit at Kananaskis, Canada, announced the 'Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction'. The details and purpose of the Partnership were set out as follows:

> "The attacks of September 11 demonstrated that terrorists are prepared to use any means to cause terror and inflict appalling casualties on innocent people. We commit ourselves to prevent terrorists, or those that harbour them, from acquiring or developing nuclear, chemical, radiological and biological weapons; missiles; and related materials, equipment and technology. We call on all countries to join us in adopting the set of non-proliferation principles we have announced today.
>
> "In a major initiative to implement those principles, we have also decided today to launch a new G8 Global Partnership against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction. Under this initiative, we will support specific co-operation projects, initially in Russia, to address non-proliferation, disarmament, counter-terrorism and nuclear safety issues. Among our priority concerns are the destruction of chemical weapons, the dismantlement of decommissioned nuclear submarines, the disposition of fissile materials and the employment of former

weapons scientists. We will commit to raise up to $20 billion to support such projects over the next ten years. We will review progress on this Global Partnership at our next Summit in 2003."

Guyana

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on levels of criminal and political instability in Guyana; and what recent discussions he has had with the government of that country. [91312]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend, the Foreign Secretary, is concerned at the political impasse in Guyana, and the rising levels of crime resulting from the deadlock. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) regularly engages with Guyanese politicians to discuss the political situation there, and register concerns on the escalation in crime.

My right hon. Friend, the Foreign Secretary, last met President Jagdeo and the leader of the opposition, the late Desmond Hoyte, in April 2002 to discuss the political situation. My noble Friend, Baroness Amos met President Jagdeo four times in the last year in April, May and September and most recently during her visit to Guyana in November 2002. We keep in close contact with Guyanese politicians through our High Commissioner in Georgetown. The FCO is following closely the Commonwealth Secretary General's efforts to mediate between the two parties. The FCO and Department for International Development (DFID) have provided help to assist the Commonwealth Secretary General's efforts to facilitate a resumption of talks between the two parties.

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions the Government has had with the government of Guyana on holding their local government elections. [91319]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend, the Foreign Secretary, has had no direct discussions with the Government of Guyana on holding their local government elections. The local elections in Guyana have been deferred for one year due to the political impasse. The deadlock is a continuing cause for concern. An escalation in crime and violence has further heightened the need for constructive political dialogue to take place.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) regularly engages with Guyanese politicians about the political situation in Guyana. We keep in close contact with Guyanese politicians through our High Commissioner in Georgetown.

Indonesia

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Indonesia following the prohibition of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community from practising their religion by local authorities in the Kuningan Regency; and if he will make a statement. [90958]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The British Government condemns the persecution of individuals because of their faith. We regularly impress on the Indonesian authorities the importance of upholding and promoting human rights and religious freedoms throughout the country.

Our Embassy in Jakarta has reported that the local authorities carried out the banning order in Kuningan Regency and it is unclear whether central government in Jakarta is aware. Our Ambassador has written to the Department for Religious Affairs to request further information.

International Law

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on taking action under international law and conventions against Governments who starve their own people. [91265]

Mr. Rammell: States Parties to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognise the right of individuals to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food. They undertake to take steps to the maximum of their resources to achieve progressively the full realisation of this right. They are obliged to report every five years on the implementation of such obligations to a UN Committee monitoring the treaty. That Committee gives a public view about a State Party's record of implementation. The Covenant does not provide for other international action where a State Party might be considered to be in breach of the Covenant. But the international community can address this in appropriate for a such as the UN Commission on Human Rights in order to defend international standards.

Iran

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the terms are of the UK arms embargo on Iran. [91571]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Andy King) by the then Minister of State at the Foreign Office my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr Lloyd) on 28 January 1998, *Official Report*, column 273–74.

Iraq

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what evaluation he has made of the ability of the UN oil for food programme to continue in the event of war in Iraq; and if he will make a statement. [91123]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No decision has been taken to launch military action against Iraq and military action is not inevitable. The future of the oil for food programme in the event of any military action would depend on the circumstances at the time. The UN is preparing for all eventualities.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what representations he has made to his US counterpart regarding the protection of water and sanitation supplies in the event of military intervention in Iraq; [91124]

(2) what representations he has made to his US counterpart regarding the protection of food security in the event of military intervention in Iraq. [91125]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No decision has been taken to launch military action against Iraq and military action is not inevitable. We regularly discuss all aspects of Iraq policy with our US colleagues.

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what parts of the Iraqi document on weapons of mass destruction of 8 December 2002 were released to the non-permanent members of the UN Security Council; and what the response has been of those non-permanent members. [91345]

Mr. Rammell: Under relevant non-proliferation conventions, China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States of America are obliged to prevent the dissemination of information relating to the production of biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons.

The President of the UN Security Council therefore decided that the full Iraqi declaration should be given only to these members of the Security Council, who also have the expertise to assess the risks of proliferation. His decision followed consultations with all members of the Security Council.

The non-permanent members received the main body of the Declaration excluding a number of sensitive passages and words that were omitted by UNMOVIC and the IAEA who, after consulting the Security Council members with expertise to assess the risks of proliferation, judged them to contain information which might be of use to potential WMD proliferators.

Several non-permanent members have expressed a wish to see the complete declaration. There continues to be discussion on whether arrangements should be made to enable non-permanent members to consult a copy of the full Declaration.

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs under what procedures the United States gained first access to Iraq's document of 8 December 2002 on weapons of mass destruction. [91346]

Mr. Rammell: Under relevant non-proliferation conventions, China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States of America are obliged to prevent the dissemination of information relating to the production of biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons.

The President of the UN Security Council therefore decided that the full Iraqi declaration should be given only to these members of the Security Council who also have the expertise to assess the risks of proliferation. His decision followed consultations with all members of the Security Council.

ISAF

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he and the international community have to extend ISAF beyond Kabul. [90908]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There are currently no plans to adjust ISAF's mandate. UNSCR 1444, adopted unanimously on 27 November 2002 following discussions among UN Security Council members, extends the existing ISAF mandate until 20 December 2003. As defined in UNSCR 1386 of 20 December 2001, this authorises ISAF to operate in Kabul and the surrounding area only.

Israel

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on the number of *(a)* British citizens and *(b)* foreign nationals who have been (i) denied entry to Israel and (ii) deported from Israel over the last two years. [91572]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: *(a)* (i) The Foreign and Commonwealth Office does not keep statistics of British citizens denied entry to Israel.

(ii) We do, however keep records on British nationals deported from Israel, which show that 12 British citizens have been deported from Israel in the last two years.

(b) The Foreign and Commonwealth Office does not keep details of other foreign nationals denied entry to, or deported from, Israel.

Jamaica

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many additional staff are being posted to Kingston, Jamaica to deal with applications for visas to visit the UK from Jamaican nationals. [91341]

Mr. Rammell: Five additional staff members have been posted to Kingston.

Job Sharing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the extent of job sharing in his Department. [90861]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Over 20 staff are currently job sharing. All Foreign and Commonwealth Office jobs are, in principle, open to job share unless the nature of the work prevents this. To aid placement a register is held on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Intranet, containing details of staff looking to job share.

Job sharing is only one of a number of alternative and flexible working patterns in use at present. Other arrangements include staggered hours, flexi-time, home working, school working hours, term-time working and time off in lieu. We currently have 142 part timers—an increase of 35 per cent. since last year.

Organised Crime

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps his Department is taking to advance co-operation between the UK and Italy on combating organised crime. [91538]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: In addition to regular and ongoing contacts with Italian partners the UK has appointed law enforcement liaison officers to our Embassy in Rome. These liaison officers work closely with the Italian law enforcement agencies and similar agencies in the region to disrupt and dismantle organised crime gangs involved in the illicit drugs trade, people trafficking and tobacco smuggling into the EU, particularly the UK.

Italy is leading on judicial reform in Afghanistan. The UK, which leads on counter narcotics, is working closely with them on updating Afghanistan's drug laws.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many days were lost due to sickness absence in the Department in 2002. [90546]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The number of days per employee lost due to illness in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 2002 and each of the five preceding years is as follows.

	Number of days per employee
2002	5.7
2001	6.6
2000	6.3
1999	N/A
1998	8.0
1997	8.9

Notes:

1. Figures for 1997 to 1998 have been uplifted to account for different recording practices in different parts of the Department and its overseas posts.
2. Figures for 1999 could be provided only at disproportionate costs, as the method of recording changed part way through 1999.
3. FCO figures are recorded as total days (not working days).

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many working days have been lost due to illness in his Department in *(a)* 2002 and *(b)* each of the preceding five years. [90968]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) today (UIN 90546).

UK Prisoners (Saudi Arabia)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to Saudi Arabia concerning the seven United Kingdom citizens recently imprisoned on alcohol charges. [92055]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, and Ministerial colleagues have raised the cases of the British men detained in Saudi Arabia at the highest levels with the Saudi authorities. We remain deeply concerned about these cases. The men's welfare is our paramount concern. We continue to work tirelessly to resolve these cases. We are in close contact with the Saudi authorities and the men's lawyers. We also continue to make consular visits to the men.

UN Resolutions

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which UN resolutions relating to *(a)* Turkey, and *(b)* Israel remain to be enforced; and what action the Government have taken to ensure their enforcement. [91344]

Mr. Rammell: Several UN Security Council resolutions (for example 365 (1974) and 367 (1975)) have called for Turkey's withdrawal from Cyprus since the invasion in 1974. The Government support the ongoing, UN-led process to resolve the Cyprus problem.

Israel has not complied in full with UN Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002), 1402 (2002) and 1435 (2002). But these resolutions also contain provisions calling on parties other than Israel to take certain action (for example agreeing a cease-fire, recognising Israel's sovereignty). We continue to support all efforts to resume the Middle East Peace Process, including through the work of the Quartet, of which the UN is a member.

UN Security Council

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on how many occasions the UK has exercised its veto in the UN Security Council in each year since 1990; and on what issues. [91605]

Mr. Rammell: The UK has not exercised its veto in any of the years in question.

Women's Rights (Afghanistan)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what recent discussions he has had with the Government of Afghanistan concerning women's rights in that country; [90906]

(2) what discussions he has had with the interim Government of Afghanistan concerning the abuse of women's rights in that country. [91119]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We are in regular contact with the Afghan Transitional Administration about a range of human rights-related issues, including the need to ensure full respect for women's rights. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary highlighted the importance of progress in these areas at the Petersberg Conference in December 2002, which was attended by President Karzai. I raised our concerns with the Afghan Foreign Minister Dr. Abdullah, Minister for Rural Reconstruction Hanif Atmar, and Chair of the Afghan Human Rights Commission Dr. Sima Samar when they visited the UK in October 2002.

The Afghan Minister for Women, Habiba Surabi, will visit the UK in February for talks with Ministers and officials on how to improve the situation for women in Afghanistan.

PRIME MINISTER

EU Reform

Keith Vaz: To ask the Prime Minister what measures he plans to take in relation to his proposals for European Union institutional reform, to strengthen the contacts between national parliaments of the EU. [91003]

The Prime Minister: The Government have made a range of proposals in the Convention on the Future of Europe to strengthen the role of national parliaments in the EU, including on considering EU legislative proposals for compliance with subsidiarity. Such an increased role should help to strengthen contacts between national parliaments of the EU.

Iraq

Harry Cohen: To ask the Prime Minister pursuant to his oral answer of 18 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 835, what rules he is applying in respect of the release of the names of UK companies named in Iraq's declaration to the United Nations as supplying arms or weapon-making technology or material to Iraq; and if he will make a statement. [91330]

The Prime Minister: Information provided to us by UNMOVIC is done so in confidence, for the UK authorities to take appropriate action.

The task of analysing the Iraqi declaration is continuing. It would be wrong to conclude without such further analysis that companies whose names appear may have acted wrongfully. The premature publication of the names of individuals or companies that may appear in the declaration could therefore unjustifiably damage the reputations of such individuals or companies. Any evidence of wrongdoing disclosed by the Iraqi declaration will be vigorously investigated by the relevant authority and, where appropriate, further announcements may be made.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Prime Minister pursuant to his oral Answer of 15 January 2003, Official Report, column 680, to the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), what the evidential basis was for his statement that the decision to seek an injunction is one for the Attorney General rather than the Government. [91864]

The Prime Minister: The Attorney General has the power to apply to the courts for an injunction to prevent threatened criminal offences taking place. Under the common law, only the Attorney General can make such an application, because the courts have recognised that he represents the public interest before them. The power is exercised in his independent judgment in that role rather than as a member of the Government. This is the long-established position in relation to functions the Attorney General exercises in the public interest. In 1951 the then Attorney-General, Sir Hartley Shawcross, said:

> "The responsibility for the eventual decision rests with the Attorney General, and he is not to be put, and is not put, under pressure by his colleagues in the matter. Nor, of course, can the Attorney General shift his responsibility for making the decision on to the shoulders of his colleagues. If political considerations which in the broad sense that I have indicated affect Government in the abstract arise it is the Attorney General, applying his judicial mind, who has to be the sole judge of those considerations". [Hansard, 29 January 1951, volume 483, column 683].

Although that was said in the context of prosecutions for criminal offences, it has been accepted by successive Governments ever since, that the same applies to the power to apply for an injunction.

Palestine Peace Conference

Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the outcome of the Palestine Peace Conference hosted in London on 14 January. [91964]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the Written Ministerial Statement my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made on 15 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 25–26WS.

Public Service Agreements

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Prime Minister which department is responsible for the delivery of its public service agreements. [91166]

The Prime Minister: Each public service agreement includes a statement of who is responsible for delivery of the targets.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Health and Safety Executive

Andrew Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions whether he has made an assessment of trends in the number of inspections carried out by local offices of the Health and Safety Executive since 1997. [84777]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The information asked for is not readily available. However, the number of inspection contacts made by each of the divisions within HSE's Field Operations Directorate (FOD) since 1997 is in the table:

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Wales and West	17,168	16,203	14,071	12,254	13,097
Home Counties	11,643	10,996	10,477	9,697	6,514
London and South East	15,292	12,899	11,359	10,520	9,316
Midlands	11,113	9,160	8,834	8,138	7,494
Yorks and North East	11,926	11,292	10,996	8,421	8,862
North West	12,368	11,171	10,915	10,631	8,952
Scotland	10,970	8,784	8,477	8,204	8,372
Totals	90,480	80,505	75,129	67,865	62,607

The decrease in the numbers of inspections is directly related to the increasing number of investigations (of both incidents and complaints) and the complexity of those investigations. Investigations take much longer than inspections and so it is inevitable that more investigations mean fewer inspections. HSE has also taken action to increase their other preventive work including seminars, conferences and awareness days.

Health and Safety Strategy

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) whether his Department and its agencies have met the commitment arising from Action Point 13 of the June 2000 strategy statement on Revitalising Health and Safety, to summarise health and safety performance and plans in annual reports from the year 2000–01 onwards; [89517]

(2) which senior officials within his Department and its agencies take responsibility for health and safety at board or equivalent level; and where their names are publicised; [89518]

(3) what information he has collated on the application to his Department and its agencies of the checklist, circulated by letter by Sir Richard Mottram, referred to under Action Point 12 of the Revitalising Health and Safety Strategy statement; and if he will make a statement. [89519]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: In accordance with Action Point 14 of the Revitalising Health and Safety Strategy, a High Level Forum (HLF), comprising representatives from all main Government Departments to provide leadership on health and safety management issues within the civil service was established in January 2001. On behalf of this group, Sir Richard Mottram circulated the ministerial checklist referred to in Action Point 12 in July 2001. In August 2002, HLF issued a Good Practice Guide to all Departments and their agencies reminding them of the current legal requirements that they should meet and setting out a number of basic aims which they should look to have in place. These included having in place a Health and Safety Policy Statement, a nominated Board member with responsibility for Health and Safety, a report on health and safety performance in annual reports (Action Point 13) and a properly structured health and safety management system linked to adoption of the ministerial checklist (Action Point 12) and the Health and Safety Executive's guidance Successful Health and Safety Management (HSG 65).

The High Level Forum is currently reviewing progress made by Departments in the adoption of the checklist and guidance.

Within the Department for Work and Pensions a new Health and Safety Policy Statement was signed in October 2001. This is implemented through a structured health and safety management system, and in particular though Statements of Internal Control.

As with all Departments, the Permanent Secretary takes overall responsibility for health and safety. At departmental board level the Director of Human Resources has been given particular responsibility and, in addition, Jobcentre Plus, the Department's largest agency with some 85,000 staff has appointed a full-time Director of Safety. The DWP departmental report published in May 2002 sets out the new arrangements including the resetting of baselines against which rigorous targets for reductions in work-related accidents and ill health can be set. Details of progress against these targets will be published in future reports.

National Insurance Contributions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will place in the Library a copy of each edition of leaflets that his Department has produced addressing the issue of married women's reduced rate national insurance contributions since 1973. [91090]

Dawn Primarolo: I have been asked to reply. I have done so today.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Arts and Culture (Expenditure)

Jim Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what decisions have been taken on the distribution of the £257 million, designated to arts and culture under the 2002 spending review; and what proportion will be allocated to *(a)* heritage buildings and *(b)* the historic environment. [90408]

Dr. Howells: Allocations for the spending review period have been made to all the Department's sponsored bodies and other programmes, and these will be set out in the Department's annual report. 5 per cent. of the Spending Review uplift has been allocated to the architecture and historic environment budget line, building on a baseline of £152 million.

Cricket

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much financial support for cricket has been provided this financial year by agencies and organisations which she funds. [91756]

Mr. Caborn: Sport England makes substantial contributions to the funding of cricket, the majority of which is for grass-roots development. 2002–03 funding for cricket to date has totalled approximately £13,036,030, of which £205,000 was Exchequer funding.

Cricket World Cup

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans she has to hold further discussions with the ECB regarding the Cricket World Cup; and what discussions she has had with other Governments whose cricket teams are participating in the Cricket World Cup. [91941]

Mr. Caborn: With my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, I met representatives of the England and Wales Cricket Board on 9 January. There are no further meetings scheduled. However, as my right hon. Friend made clear to the ECB, the Government will respond fully to requests from cricket for advice on the security and other issues raised by the Cricket World Cup.

DCMS Ministers have had no discussions with the Governments of other nations participating in the World Cup. Such discussions are matters for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the distribution of her Department's wholetime equivalent staff was, including the staff in agencies and other bodies reporting to her, in each Government office region and nation of the UK *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the most recent available period. [90476]

Dr. Howells: I refer my hon Friend to the answer given by my hon Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Alexander) on 15 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 609.

Namely that the numbers of staff in each department (including its agencies) are shown in tables copies of which have been placed in the Libraries of the House. The figures show the data at the 1 April each year, and are based on the full-time equivalent figures for the number of permanent staff in each department, rounded down to the nearest ten. Data are shown by Government office region, with columns giving the total number of staff in England and the UK.

Film Makers

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what funding from her Department and its agencies is available to British independent film-makers. [90996]

Dr. Howells: In April 2000 my Department set up the Film Council which distributes lottery funds to support the British film industry. In the financial year 2001–02 it received just over £33 million of lottery money for this purpose.

In addition to providing support for training and other initiatives, it runs three principle production funds to which British film makers can apply: the Premiere Fund, the New Cinema Fund, and the Development Fund.

Hotel Development (London)

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what targets her Department has set for hotel development in London; and what assessment she has made of performance against them. [91379]

Dr. Howells: Good progress has been made towards the targets set in, and subsequent to, Tomorrow's Tourism for hotel development in London. The Government consider that further capacity, including budget accommodation, is still necessary. However, responsibility for tourism matters in London is now devolved to the Mayor and the London Assembly. The Mayor's recently published strategy document, 'Visit London', addresses accommodation supply and more specific proposals for futuredevelopment will be included in the forthcoming 'Action Plan'.

Hotels and Guesthouses

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what measures her Department has taken to introduce a grading scheme for hotels and guesthouses; and what assessment she has made of them since their introduction. [91380]

Dr. Howells: The harmonized National Quality Assurance Schemes (NQAS) for hotels and guesthouses were successfully launched in September 1999. The English Tourism Council has co-ordinated various forms of ongoing assessment at an operational level, including the reaction of both industry and consumers. The Government considers that more emphasis is also required on improving quality at the bottom end of the scale and will pilot a new fit for purpose initiative to address the problem of unsatisfactory hotels and guesthouses. Total membership has of the harmonized schemes has risen, with benefits in occupancy levels for members, but not as much as had been hoped. Therefore, a two-stage review of NQAS is being planned. The first stage will start very soon and consider harmonizing the schemes across Great Britain. The second will relate to England and look at matters such as the efficiency of inspections and the level of promotion.

Paper Supplies

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport who the suppliers are of her Department's *(a)* paper and *(b)* paper products. [91906]

Dr. Howells: All paper purchased for use in photocopiers, printers and fax machines is recycled paper and is supplied by contracted stationery supplier Corporate Express. Other paper products and print are sourced wherever the specific contract dictates and where best value for money can be obtained.

Rugby

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assistance she will provide *(a)* to the Rugby Football League in helping promote supporters trusts within rugby league and *(b)* to rugby league clubs wishing to establish supporters trusts. [91981]

Mr. Caborn: DCMS established Supporters Direct in 2000 to assist groups of supporters in forming and administering club-based trusts. Supporters Direct's remit covers Association Football only, and it is funded from football sources. In response to requests from supporters and clubs, Supporters Direct has provided informal assistance in the formation of trusts at a number of rugby league clubs over the last year. Officials in the Department are in discussion with Supporters Direct and others with a view to formalising this arrangement, and to providing Supporters Direct with the additional resources it will need to provide a high quality service to rugby league.

Tourism

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if she will list the organisations and individuals attending the Tourism summit in *(a)* 1999, *(b)* 2000, *(c)* 2001 and *(d)* 2002; [91372]

(2) what measures her Department is taking as a result of the Tourism summits in *(a)* 1999, *(b)* 2000, *(c)* 2001 and *(d)* 2002; [91371]

(3) when her Department held Tourism summits in *(a)* 1999, *(b)* 2000, *(c)* 2001 and *(d)* 2002. [91373]

Dr. Howells: The first Tourism summit of pan-Government Ministers and other key players in the tourism industry was held on 1 March 2000. Three subsequent summit meetings have been held on 6 March 2001, 5 March 2002 and 26 November 2002. The final reports of the first three summits held, which include details of the organisations and individuals that attended these meetings, are available on the DCMS website (www.culture.gov.uk/tourism). The reports also record the progress made in implementing the various aspects of the Government's strategy for tourism and the key conclusions and actions arising from the meetings to assist the development of tourism. The report of the fourth summit, held on 26 November 2002, is currently being cleared for publication with attendees. It will also be available shortly on the DCMS website.

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent measures her Department has taken to support regional tourism; and what assessment she has made of those measures. [91374]

Dr. Howells: As announced on 31 October 2002, the Regional Development Agencies will, from 1 April 2003, play a stronger part in the strategic leadership of tourism and the Regional Tourist Boards will be their natural partners. The RDAs will receive at least £3.6million for each of the next three years to distribute to the RTBs for activity in line with regional tourism strategies and within the national policy framework for tourism. Guidance has been issued to RDAs on how tourism should be covered in their Corporate Plans and Regional Economic Strategies; Corporate Plans for 2003–06 are currently being submitted to Government for approval. The RDAs will also be represented on the board of the new national tourism body, whose initial chairman has been announced as Sir Michael Lickiss, who until recently chaired the South-West RDA.

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps her Department has taken to regenerate traditional tourist *(a)* resorts, *(b)* amenities and *(c)* services. [91375]

Dr. Howells: The Government consider not just regeneration of traditional tourism but also the generation of new activity, in line with developing consumer tastes, to be hugely important. Building on Government strategy in Tomorrow's Tourism, the English Tourism Council published 'Sea Changes', which outlines recommendations for successful regeneration of England's traditional resorts. A key point is that tourism may well play an important role in resort regeneration, but will rarely be the sole source of a sustainable local economy. Local government recognises the importance of tourism and its document 'A Change of Scene', which this Department supported, sets out many useful ideas for dealing with tourism-related regeneration. The Government's view is that local government has a key role in improving and supporting the regeneration of resorts, amenities and services, as do the regions, the private sector and its trade associations, and many central government departments. In line with Tomorrow's Tourism, much progress has been made, including, for instance, initiatives on accommodation quality (including the lower end of the market) and programmes to improve bathing water standards and beach amenities (now better than ever before). Local Authorities are well aware that other services they provide, such as visitor information or the provision of litter services, contribute significantly towards the creation of attractive environments and lead to improvements in visitor experience. Our recently announced new emphasis on domestic marketing and the regional dimension to tourism strategy, will help stimulate focus on the importance of maintaining high quality amenities and services for tourism across the country, including our traditional resorts.

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps her Department has taken to develop niche tourism markets, broken down by type, and what assessment she has made of those measures. [91376]

Dr. Howells: Recent BTA campaigns have been themed around Britain's key strengths of great heritage, great countryside, great sport and great cities. The BTA evaluates the impact of its campaigns in the overseas markets in which they run. A new overseas strategy will advance this approach further by introducing market-specific campaign themes and marketing tools.

We anticipate that the England Marketing Advisory Board will consider introducing similarly focused campaigns for the domestic market, in due course.

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps her Department has taken to integrate the promotion of British cultural heritage and countryside attractions. [91377]

Dr. Howells: Britain's cultural heritage and countryside are key attractions for overseas visitors. The BTA uses strengths such as these to develop its campaigns, such as one on Cities for 2003 and another on Outdoor Britain for 2004.

We anticipate that the England Marketing Advisory Board will consider introducing, in due course, campaigns for the domestic market which are similarly focussed on our key strengths.

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many employers in the hospitality and tourism-related sector have been signed up under her Department's towards the Investors in People standard since 1999. [91382]

Dr. Howells: An action point in the 1999 strategy document Tomorrow's Tourism was for a hospitality industry programme to sign up 500 employers to work towards Investor in People standard to help raise the quality of training in the industry. Latest available figures show that the number of hospitality organisations recognised as achieving Investors in People status has increased from 865 in September 1999 to 1,215 in August 2001. In addition, 957 organisations were signed up to working towards the accreditation in August 2001.

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when in the last 12 months her Department held a careers festival and image campaign to raise the profile and promote the image of careers in the hospitality industry; and how much was spent. [91383]

Dr. Howells: My Department works pro-actively with Springboard UK the specialist industry body responsible for promoting career opportunities in the hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism industry. They hold Career Festivals every 12–18 months. The last Festival was held in October 2001 and this Department contributed £15,000 towards two magazines focussing on careers in the sector which were launched at it. No Festival was held in 2002. We are currently working with them on their fourth Careers Festival taking place from 31 March to the 6 April 2003 and my Department is represented on the Festival Executive Committee. The Festival is intended to help build a more positive image of the sector and raise awareness of the range and diversity of career prospects within the industry.

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what steps her Department has taken to develop internet systems to deliver worldwide tourist bookings and provide information on attractions and travel options; [91385]

(2) what steps her Department has taken to encourage the provision of computerised tourist booking and information services. [91384]

Dr. Howells: In 2002, Government awarded £3.6 million to the EnglandNet project to develop a world class on-line tourism network for England. EnglandNet will provide quality-assured tourism information and empower tourism businesses to sell their product through new electronic outlets.

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what financial assessment she has made of her Department's overseas visitors promotion programme in each year since 1997–98. [91386]

Dr. Howells: The British Tourist Authority, which is responsible for promoting Britain overseas, evaluates its activities, and results show that, for every £1 of baseline grant-in-aid awarded to the BTA by the Department, the following amounts in additional expenditure by overseas visitors have been generated:

£

	Spend
1997–98	28
1998–99	27
1999–2000	29
2000–01	30
2001–02	26

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much her Department has spent on developing its overseas visitors promotion programme in each year since 1997–98. [91387]

Dr. Howells: The British Tourist Authority, which is responsible for promoting Britain overseas, has been awarded baseline grant-in-aid by the Department as follows:

Year	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Grant (£million)	35	35	36	37	35.5

In addition, £14.2m was awarded in 2001–02 and a further £19m in 2002–03 from the reserve in order to drive forward a strategy to help tourism recover from the impact of the foot and mouth outbreak and the attacks of 11 September.

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what initiatives her Department has developed to widen access to tourism for people who do not take a long holiday. [91388]

Dr. Howells: DCMS works with both the industry and relevant bodies to encourage ways of making tourism accessible and more inclusive to these groups which tend not to take long holidays. Initiatives developed by the English Tourism Council (ETC) and Regional Tourist Boards include the enhanced National Accessible Scheme, the creation of an accessible website and the Access 21 project which are aimed at helping people with disabilities take holidays. Other examples of relevant initiatives include the recently launched website, Just Me and the Kids, which gives information to help single parent families plan holidays in Lancashire; the launch of a North West Marketing Kit and a destination manager handbook, currently being worked on by ETC, both of which outline the benefits to the industry of creating an inclusive environment.

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps she has taken to publish a blueprint for the sustainable development of tourism. [91389]

Dr. Howells: The English Tourism Council (ETC) published Time for Action, a strategy for sustainable tourism in England, in April 2001. The British Tourist Authority published Sustainable Tourists, a strategy for the sustainable growth of inbound tourism to Britain, in October 2001.

Tourism (England)

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps her Department has taken to establish a strategic national body for the English tourism industry. [91381]

Dr. Howells: Since the announcement in October last year of plans for reform of the Government's support for tourism, the chairs of the English Tourism Council and British Tourist Authority have led a restructuring of the strengths and skills of both organisations into a lead national tourism body to be launched in April 2003. A policy group comprising representatives of all sectors of the tourism industry is overseeing their progress. The new body is designed to provide a more efficient service to promote inbound tourism to Britain and to market tourism in England to the domestic market.

Tourism (London)

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much has been spent by her Department on marketing London tourism in the last 12 months. [91378]

Dr. Howells: In 2002–03 my Department will grant aid the Greater London Authority £1.9 million in respect of its statutory tourism responsibilities, of which £1.5 million is specifically for marketing London as a tourist destination, both in its own right and as a gateway to the UK regions. In addition, London has benefited from the £54.5 million grant-in-aid to the British Tourism Authority in 2002–03 for the promotion of Britain abroad.

World Heritage Status

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on the UK's nominations for world heritage site status in 2003. [91520]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will make an announcement regarding the UK's 2003 nomination for world heritage site status by the end of this month.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Animal By-products

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what discussions she has had with the European Commission about the compatibility with the EU Animal By-Products Regulation of her proposals to allow the composting of catering waste and its spreading on land. [89621]

Margaret Beckett: The UK was involved at all stages of negotiation of the EU Animal By-Products Regulation, and we consider our proposals on the composting of catering waste are in line with the requirements of that legislation, although we have asked the Commission for clarification on one point. We have also notified them or our proposals under the Technical Standards Directive.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she will announce the Government's conclusions following her Department's consultation on changes to the Animal By-Products Order 1999 to allow the composting of catering waste and its spreading on land. [89622]

Margaret Beckett: The consultation period on the composting of catering waste closes on 12 February 2003. Taking into account the comments received in the consultation exercise, the final Statutory Instrument will be amended, made and announced as soon as possible thereafter.

Animal Sales

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what initiatives she intends to take to encourage the use of alternatives to animal markets by direct sales, internet and video links. [90257]

Mr. Morley: The development of marketing channels for farm animals is principally a matter for the livestock and meat industries. Through its support for the Red Meat Industry Forum the Government is helping these industries in finding ways to improve the red meat supply chain.

Capital Assets

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, further to her answer of 17 December 2002 [85010], what the value is of the capital assets held by the Environment Agency that can be classed as *(a)* land and buildings and *(b)* plant and machinery. [88411]

Margaret Beckett: The Environment Agency has supplied the following figures for the value of its capital assets as at 31 March 2002:

	£000
Land and buildings	1,768,025
Plant and machinery	109,355
Other—including assets under construction	84,831
Total	1,962,211

Civil Servants (Leadership Review)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the *(a)* terms of reference, *(b)* purpose and *(c)* timescale are of her Department's leadership review. [91054]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 16 January 2003]*: The leadership review flows from the Joint Strategic Review of Defra, carried out by the Department jointly with the Office of Public Service Reform. The Joint Strategic Review examined how Defra operated, and identified both the strengths it could build on and the areas it needed to improve to become a high-performing Department. This included a study of the kind of leadership Defra would need. The purpose of the leadership review is to: (i) develop and introduce a 'leadership profile' for Defra staff from top down to G7; (ii) implement a programme of Development Centres and supporting coaching based on the leadership profile and which also builds on earlier leadership development; (iii) focus future learning on supporting the change in culture and performance identified by the Joint Strategic Review; (iv) help individuals reduce any gaps between current and desired skills and competencies; and (v) generate a culture of learning within Defra so that staff outside the target group are properly supported in their own learning and development.

A pilot Development Centre is scheduled to run in March 2003, with rollout across Defra from April 2003, and completion planned for July 2004. Following attendance at the centre participants will undertake coaching and other training for a period of at least a year.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what criteria she will use to assess the performance of civil servants subject to her Department's leadership review. [91051]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* Defra has developed a leadership profile, which will be used to assess individuals participating in its leadership development programme. It describes the skills and behaviour required to be an effective leader.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs who will carry out the assessments of civil servants under her Department's leadership review. [91052]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* The leadership development programme is being managed by the Department's Human Resources function. A consultancy has been selected to design and deliver the programme.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many officials, at which grades, will be subject to her Department's leadership review. [91053]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 16 January 2003]*: All 150 members of the senior civil service in Defra will participate in its leadership development programme, as will other managers in Grades 6 and 7 who occupy leadership roles in the Department, some two dozen and 380 respectively. Others in specialist and technical roles who aspire to senior management positions may also choose to participate. The number of officials participating is therefore approximately 560.

Coastal Defence

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what budget has been allocated to *(a)* create and *(b)* maintain the National Flood and Coastal Defence Database; how much has been spent and is planned to be spent in each financial year; and if she will make a statement. [89636]

Margaret Beckett: Defra is meeting the full external costs of developing the database by way of contributions to the Environment Agency. Up to and including the current financial year, this has amounted to some £2.2 million.

Management and on-going maintenance will be funded from normal operating budgets of the Agency. The Business Case anticipates that there will be a significant net gain from the expected savings in improved efficiency of data management and operational activities.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs which organisations have access to the National Flood and Coastal Defence Database; what plans she has to allow further access; and if she will make a statement. [89743]

Margaret Beckett: The Environment Agency advise that the National Flood and Coastal Defence Database (NFCDD) is now available to staff within the EA and will subsequently be made available to all other operating authorities with responsibilities for Flood and Coastal Defence as well as to Defra and the National Assembly for Wales.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the *(a)* terms and *(b)* objectives are of her Departments' contract with Scisys for the provison of the National Flood and Coastal Defence Database. [89682]

Margaret Beckett: The Department has no contract with Science Systems Ltd. SciSys is one of the Environment Agency's Framework Partners for provision of IT Systems Development and Support. The objectives of the contract for the National Flood and Coastal Defence Database (NFCDD) are for the development and subsequent support of Phase One and Two of the system.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what reports she has received from *(a)* the Environment Agency, *(b)* Coastal Defence Groups, and *(c)* Coastal Protection Authorities about the implementation of High Level Targets 6a and 6b; and what action has been taken to inspect coast protection assets in pursuance of High Level Target 6A. [89761]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 13 January 2003]:* A number of coastal groups, on behalf of coast protection authorities, have submitted reports on inspection programmes and assessments of coastal erosion risk as required by High Level Target 6; no such reports are required from the Environment Agency. However it has been recognised that it would be useful to develop a methodology for a more consistent approach to the assessment of coastal erosion risk. To that end Defra will be forming a working group with representatives from the coastal groups to consider what research is needed, and the outcome will inform future reports for this High Level Target.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for what proportion of *(a)* England and Wales by area, *(b)* coastline in England and Wales and *(c)* properties at risk of flooding information is now available on the national flood and coastal defence database. [89635]

Margaret Beckett: Information on flood defences for the coastline of England and Wales and all main rivers is available in the national flood and coastal defence database (NFCDD) to staff within the Environment Agency. General flood plain information on properties at risk is available by inclusion in NFCDD of the indicative maps.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when final testing for Phase One of the National Flood and Coastal Defence Database was completed; what progress has been made with Phase Two; and if she will make a statement. [89637]

Margaret Beckett: The Environment Agency have confirmed that Phase One of the National Flood and Coastal Defence Database (NFCDD) has been successfully tested within the EA, but testing with the other operating authorities is not yet complete. The development of Phase Two of the NFCDD is currently being completed and is planned to be implemented in the EA and available to the operating authorities, together with Phase One, by June 2003.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much money was spent by the Environment Agency on *(a)* flood protection and flood management and *(b)* coastal defence in (i) 2000–01, (ii) 2001–02 and (iii) 2002–03; and if she will place in the Library an analysis by project of each year's expenditure. [90629]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 14 January 2003]:* Expenditure by the Environment Agency in England for managing flood risk from main rivers and the sea is:

£ 000s

2000–01 (actual)	*2001–02 (actual)*	*2002–03 (forecast)*
259,462	307,771	349,128

I regret an analysis of the above by *(a)* flood protection and flood management and *(b)* coastal defence, together with an analysis by project of each year's expenditure, could not be provided without incurring disproportionate cost.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the distribution of her Department's wholetime equivalent staff was, including the staff in agencies and other bodies reporting to her, in each Government office region and nation of the UK *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the most recent available period. [90474]

Alun Michael: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Alexander) on 15 January, *Official Report,* column 609W.

Documentation

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs pursuant to the answers of 16 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 576W and the answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) on 18 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 801W, if she will make a statement on the reason underlying the number of copies of the document *(a)* printed and *(b)* distributed; and what the cost of its production and distribution was. [89765]

Mr. Meacher: We arranged for 5,000 copies of the consultation document to be printed because we believed this would be a sufficient number to allow distribution to all stakeholders with an interest in the issues set out in the document. The 5,000 figure also allowed for the Department to retain sufficient copies which could be distributed to members of the public who made direct requests for copies.

1,400 copies were handed out at the Urban Summit, where the consultation was launched. Over 2,000 copies were initially sent out to local authorities, police, businesses, trade associations, Government Departments and a variety of other agencies and bodies. We sent a copy to all bodies known to have a direct interest in the outcome of the proposals set out in the consultation. The majority of the remaining copies have since been sent out to people who made direct approaches to the Policy Team in the Department and the Department's publications section.

The total cost of production of the Defra consultation document was £12,000. Initial distribution was handled by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister when it published its own document, "Living Places—Cleaner, Safer, Greener". The initial distribution cost for the two documents was £5,241.50.

Drainage Boards

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list *(a)* the local drainage boards for England and Wales and *(b)* the budget of each board for (i) 2000–01, (ii) 2001–02, (iii) 2002–03, (iv) 2003–04 and (v) 2004–05. [89623]

Margaret Beckett: A list of drainage boards wholly or partly in England, together with income and expenditure figures for the years 2000–01 and 2001–02, have today been placed in the Libraries of the House. Information for later years is not yet available, as this is submitted on an annual basis. Flood defence is a fully devolved responsibility and the information related to boards in Wales should be sought from the National Assembly.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her policy is on the future of local drainage boards. [89624]

Margaret Beckett: The current institutional arrangements for flood and coastal defence are currently being considered in the Flood and Coastal Defence Funding Review. While, along with ministerial colleagues, I am currently considering the conclusions of the review, I would expect to see a continuing role for internal drainage boards as, whatever future arrangements evolve, the Environment Agency could not take on all the essentially local work done by the Boards. It will, however, be necessary to ensure that, under future arrangements, the Boards are structured in such a way that they can deliver their responsibilities and duties effectively.

Early Retirement

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what sums she has allocated in the current financial year and in each of the next three years for *(a)* the costing and training and *(b)* early retirements expected to arise from her Department's leadership review. [91050]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* £7 million has been allocated over the next three years for the leadership development programme. £429 thousand has been set aside for the current financial year. The profile of expenditure for individual years has yet to be agreed within the Department. The leadership review will combine development and some assessment. Most people who go through the Development Centres will continue to work in Defra, making use of a leadership development programme which will follow up training and development needs identified at the centres. For some, it is expected that the results will encourage them to seek early retirement. To meet that eventuality, £3 million, £7 million and £7 million have been earmarked over the next three financial years respectively. There are no staff reduction targets or estimates of the numbers likely to leave Defra following participation in the leadership development programme.

Environment Agency

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the *(a)* duration of and *(b)* reasons for the recent suspension of public access to the Environment Agency's website. [89617]

Margaret Beckett: The Environment Agency's website suffered problems in its service between 1–6 January. This was primarily because of the excessive load during that period and in spite of previous testing to ensure that flood incident loads could be met. A number of technical changes have now been carried out to improve the site's performance.

While this reduction in service was regrettable, the agency's website is not the primary means of providing flood warning. The main flood warning systems operated effectively, including the agency's Floodline telephone service, automatic voice warning systems, news media information and direct manual warnings in flood warned areas.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what reports she has received from the Environment Agency in pursuance of its duty under High Level Target 5b. [89746]

Margaret Beckett: The Agency has provided a draft report under this target for 2001–02 but information in it is still being validated between the Agency and the Local Government Association.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much public money *(a)* was and *(b)* is planned to be allocated to the Environment Agency for each year from 2000–01 to 2005–06 in respect of (i) flood protection and flood management and (ii) coastal defence. [90630]

Margaret Beckett *[holding answer 14 January 2003]:* The two sources of public funding to support the Environment Agency's work in England in managing the risk of flooding from main rivers and the sea are levies on local authorities as agreed by Flood Defence Committees and grant for specific capital projects and contributions to national initiatives provided by Defra. The former are reimbursed to a large extent by funding to local authorities from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). Figures for public monies allocated in the current and two past years are:

£ million

	2000–01[1]	*2001–02*[1]	*2002–03*[2]
Defra capital grant for specific projects and contributions to national initiatives	41.9	61.5	70.0
Local authority levies	214.6	233.6	247.8
Total	256.5	295.1	317.8

I regret an analysis of the above by *(a)* flood protection and flood management and *(b)* coastal defence could not be provided without incurring disproportionate cost.

For future years, provision is:

£ million

	2003–04	*2004–05*	*2005–06*
Defra capital grant for specific projects to all operating authorities and contributions to Agency national initiatives[1]	126	129	154
ODPM funding to support local authority levies to the Agency and their own spend on management of flood and coastal erosion risk	295	332	382

[1] For all flood and coastal defence operating authorities—the Environment Agency, local authorities and Internal Drainage Boards.

I cannot be more specific about these years as Defra capital allocations and local authority levies are still being decided for 2003–04 and have not been considered at all yet for the later years.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what criteria are used by the Environment Agency to decide which flood defence assets to inspect in accordance with High Level Target 4. [89742]

Margaret Beckett: High Level Target 4 relates to the development of the National Flood and Coastal Defence Database and does not require the inspection of any flood defence assets.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what *(a)* flood defence assets, *(b)* main rivers and *(c)* critical ordinary watercourses were inspected by the Environment Agency during (i) 2001–02, and (ii) 2002–03, in accordance with High Level Target 5a. [89744]

Margaret Beckett: The Agency has provided a draft report under this target for 2001–02, but information in it is still being validated between the Agency and the Local Government Association.

The report for 2002–03 is not due until April 2003.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she has received the Environment Agency's report on flood warning service standards, due in September 2002. [89611]

Margaret Beckett: High Level Target 2 requires the Environment Agency to report to Defra annually in April on achievement of their flood warning service standards. The latest report to Defra, covering April 2001 to March 2002, was published in May 2002 and I am therefore not expecting a further report until April 2003.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what objectives she has set the Environment Agency to improve its performance in meeting its two hour flood warning target. [89740]

Margaret Beckett: All High Level Targets are to be reviewed this year, including those relating to flood warning under target 2.

Flood Prevention

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she will publish the national assessment of flood risk. [89634]

Margaret Beckett: This Department, as an aid for planning by all flood and coastal operating authorities, commissioned research to produce a national appraisal of the assets at risk from flooding and coastal erosion in 1999. The results were published in July 2000 and an update version was published in September 2001. Further research on large scale risk assessment has since been carried out under the joint Environment Agency/Defra research programme in flood management and results of the first phase of this work have been applied to the latest information collated for input to the national flood and coastal defence database. The results of this research application which take account of updated estimates of property flood damage from other research are currently being compiled and reviewed. They will be made available once the necessary quality checks have been completed. It should be stressed that the new research methodology is at the leading edge of developments in risk analysis at this scale so the results will have to be interpreted with some caution.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when the most recent meeting was between Ministers in her Department and the Association of British Insurers to discuss flood prevention; and if she will make a statement. [89633]

Margaret Beckett: The most recent meeting was on 17 September 2002 following which the ABI issued their Statement of Principles to apply from 1 January 2003. There are also regular discussions between my officials and the ABI.

Flooding

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what discussions there have been within the last six months between the Environment Agency and the insurance industry on the relationship between flood defence provision and the continuation of insurance cover for property owners against the risk of flooding. [89628]

Margaret Beckett: There has been regular discussion between the Environment Agency and the insurance industry on this subject during the last six months, which contributed to the announcement in September 2002 by the Association of British Insurers of their Statement of Principle, and there has subsequently been a continuing dialogue between the ABI and the EA on the information to be provided.

Foot and Mouth

Sir Archy Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will instruct her Department to make payments on account to Mr. Houldey of Granthouse, Berwickshire, a sub-contractor of Peter Boddy Ltd. [88502]

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs whether animal grazing will be permitted in 2003 on sites used for mass burning of carcasses during the foot and mouth epidemic. [89807]

Mr. Morley: Each site used for mass burial will be reviewed. As a general rule, where the ash has been removed or buried in accordance with Defra and Environment Agency/SEPA guidelines, and where the sites have been fully reinstated, there are no overriding reasons why grazing should not be permitted this year.

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 7 January 2003]:* The Department has no contractual relationship with Mr. Houldey of Granthouse, Berwickshire. No entitlement to payments on account arises. Financial matters pertaining to the commercial relationship between Peter Boddy Ltd. and their sub-contractor, Mr. Houldey, are entirely their responsibility, as is normal in any contractual relationship of this kind.

Fraud

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her estimate is of the cost of theft and fraud to *(a)* her Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies in 2002. [89864]

Alun Michael: The Department's annual return of actual and suspected fraud and corruption submitted to HMT for the year 1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002 showed the following:

	Total cost (£)
Core-DEFRA	99,744
Agencies	226,11
Non-departmental public bodies	N/A

Illegal Meat Imports

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many seizures of illegally imported meat were made at *(a)* Stranraer and *(b)* Cairnryan in each year since 1999. [90406]

Mr. Morley: No seizures of illegally imported meat made at Stranraer or Cairnryan have been reported to DEFRA, HM Customs or the Scottish Executive. These ports handle internal United Kingdom traffic from Northern Ireland, and vessels do not use them as their first point of call in the European Union.

Lake Pollution

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what percentage of lakes in the UK are designated as polluted. [91122]

Mr. Morley: The Environment Agency does not monitor all lakes in England on a routine basis but takes action where there is evidence of a water quality problem.

A study commissioned by English Nature in the 1990s showed that 46 per cent. of lakes designated as sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs) showed nutrient enrichment. This can affect water quality in some circumstances.

English Nature are carrying out condition reassessments on these SSSIs. Results will be available later this year.

Since this is a devolved matter, this reply relates to England only.

Meat Hygiene

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what estimate she has made of the costs to British abattoirs of complying with *(a)* the official feed and food control regulations and *(b)* the arrangements for blood storage and disposal included in the Animal By-Products Regulations. [89616]

Margaret Beckett: The Commission has not yet made proposals on charges to abattoirs for health inspections but we have made plain our preference for the existing structure and levels of meat hygiene charges. With respect to disposal of blood, officials are working with industry representatives to achieve satisfactory outcomes both in terms of regulatory requirements and the ability of industry to change existing practices at minimum cost and disruption.

Mineral Water

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her latest estimate is of the number of litres of bottled mineral water consumed in the UK, in the last period for which figures are available. [91002]

Mr. Morley: It is estimated that 741 million litres of mineral water were consumed in the UK in the 12-month period starting in April 2001. This estimate is based upon records of consumer purchases from the Expenditure and Food Survey.

Postcodes

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what use her Department and its agencies make of postcode areas for *(a)* the collection and publication of data, *(b)* devising formulae for the distribution of grants and awards and *(c)* the delivery of services; and when such usages were last reviewed. [87738]

Alun Michael: Postcoded data are used extensively by Defra and the Countryside Agency in the collection and publication of data on rural services. Postcoded data are not used for categories *(b)* and *(c)*.

Research Contract

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list the organisations who *(a)* were invited to tender and *(b)* tendered unsuccessfully for the research contract which was awarded to MCM Research Ltd. [91306]

Alun Michael: Five organisations in total were invited to tender. These were the University of Birmingham, University of the West of England, Ken Dibble Acoustics, Symonds Group and MCM Research Ltd. All the organisations except the University of Birmingham submitted tenders and all but MCM Research Ltd. were unsuccessful.

RIMNET3

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what research has been conducted by or for her Department on the effectiveness of RIMNET3; [90229]

(2) what role her Department has in the maintenance and running of RIMNET3; and what changes have taken place and are planned to this system. [90228]

Mr. Meacher: DEFRA is the lead Government Department with responsibility for the co-ordination of the UK response to overseas nuclear accidents. RIMNET3 will replace the existing RIMNET (Radioactive Incident Monitoring Network) system which was developed and put in place in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. DEFRA is responsible for ensuring the operation and maintenance of the RIMNET system but all Government Departments and Agencies with responsibilities to respond to an overseas nuclear accident have access to the system and each is individually responsible for negotiating support and maintenance contracts with the prime support contractor (Siemens).

The RIMNET3 supply, support and maintenance contract was let to Logica plc in 1992 following an international competitive tender exercise. As RIMNET3 is not yet operational, the support and maintenance provisions have not yet been implemented and no research has been undertaken on its effectiveness in use. However, the RIMNET Co-ordinating Committee brings together representatives from the appropriate Government Departments and Agencies and all their requirements have been reflected in the design and development process. RIMNET3 will deliver all the functionality of the existing RIMNET system on more up-to-date technology and using commercially available software. There is a planned "technology refresh" during the 10-year life of RIMNET3 and any required improvements identified through regular testing of the system and through the extensive programme of domestic and international emergency exercises, will be implemented as appropriate.

School Fruit Scheme

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will fund the provision of organic fruit to school children as part of the national school fruit scheme. [88255]

Mr. Meacher: The national school fruit scheme will entitle every child aged 4 to 6 to a free piece of fruit each school day from 2004. The scheme is currently being expanded to all eligible schools through large scale pilots on a region by region basis with funding of £42 million from the new opportunities fund.

Since most organic fruit is currently imported, direct funding of the provision of organic fruit would result in increased imports at least in the short-term. However, we shall assist growers to respond to the consumer demand for organically produced fruit by means of a conversion aid which it is intended will start later this year.

Sheep (EU Regulations)

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations she has received from the farming industry on the proposed EU Draft Regulations on the double-tagging of sheep; and if she will make a statement. [91418]

Mr. Morley: The main industry associations with an interest in these proposals have been consulted and we await their views. In addition, we have received a number of representations from individuals in the industry expressing concerns over the potential impact of the proposals on their businesses.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what advice she has received on the animal welfare implications of the use of distance-readable tags proposed in the EU Draft Regulations on sheep tagging; and if she will make a statement. [91419]

Mr. Morley: The EU proposals do not provide for distance-readable tags but do require tags to be applied on a place easily visible at a distance. We shall be seeking views on the proposals from the Farm Animal Welfare Council, other animal welfare organisations and from Government veterinary officials.

Sheep Tagging

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her policy is on the European Commission's draft regulations for the tagging of sheep. [89614]

Margaret Beckett: The Government support the European Commission's objectives to improve sheep and goat identification and traceability in order to control the spread of animal diseases.

However, the Commission's proposals in their present form could cause practical problems for the UK sheep industry. The Government will be negotiating to try and ensure that that the eventual Regulations are both workable and enforceable, and that the timescales for implementation are realistic.

Sulphur Emissions

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what measures are in place to encourage power plants to reduce their SO_2 emissions and to increase the use of flue gas desulphurisation systems. [90458]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 13 January 2003]:* Power plants are currently regulated under the Integrated Pollution Control (IPC) regime. IPC is established by the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and regulates industrial pollution through a system of permits. Operators are required to demonstrate that they would be carrying out the Best Available Techniques not Entailing Excessive Cost (BATNEEC) for their activities before being issued an authorisation to operate. BATNEEC is applied to prevent, and where that is not practicable, to minimise releases of substances to air, water and land.

Authorisations set strict limits for sulphur dioxide emissions for the given power plant. In demonstrating the use of BATNEEC the operator would be required to consider techniques that would reduce emissions (including the application of flue gas desulphurisation). Each application is considered on a case by case basis, but all applicants must demonstrate BATNEEC.

IPC is being superseded by the Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control (IPPC) regime, established by a Directive of the same name (EC/96/61). Existing power plants will be regulated by IPPC from 2006; new plants or those undergoing substantial change will be required to apply for an IPPC permit with immediate effect. Operators are required to demonstrate that they use the Best Available Techniques (BAT) for their activities prior to a permit being issued. Again, permits will include limits on sulphur dioxide emissions.

Sustainability

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps she is taking to promote understanding that the actions of UK citizens have global consequences and to introduce the principles of sustainability into local communities. [90459]

Mr. Meacher: We are committed to raising awareness among UK citizens of the global consequences of their actions. For example, through our Environmental Action Fund we are assisting voluntary groups to run projects on education for sustainable development aimed at adults, schools and communities. DEFRA also directly supports a range of bodies that promote sustainable living, production and consumption. These include the Energy Saving Trust which works on energy efficiency, the Carbon Trust which supports technological innovation and encourages more efficient business working practices, and Environmental Campaigns (ENCAMS), an umbrella organisation which encompasses all the activities undertaken by the Tidy Britain Group and Going for Green. ENCAMS works with community groups, local authorities, businesses and other partners to promote sustainable development at the local level, with a particular focus on local environmental quality and anti-social behaviour.

Our communications directorate are currently developing a new communications strategy on sustainable development. They will be considering all aspects of communications, including the use of the internet, media relations and paid publicity. We intend to seek stakeholder's views on proposals later in the year.

Since 2000 the Local Government Act has placed a duty on local authorities to prepare community strategies for promoting the economic, social and environmental well being of their communities and contributing to sustainable development in the UK. The Government's statutory guidance on community strategies says that community strategies should articulate how global concerns can be addressed through local action.

Tallow

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will publish the notification and results of tenders to dispose of tallow produced under the over-thirty-months scheme. [90842]

Alun Michael: The tender exercise for the disposal of stored tallow from the over-thirty-months (slaughter) scheme is currently being considered by the Rural Payments Agency. Discussions with individual tenderers are taking place to determine likely quantities and availability and it is expected that decisions on successful bidders can be made shortly. Once determined, the results will be published in the Official Journal of the European Communities.

Teleworking

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what estimate she has made of the impact of teleworking on rural communities. [91540]

Alun Michael: Modern communications technology which enables people to work from home can bring economic benefits to rural communities, and especially to those remote rural communities which do not have good transport links to urban centres, which might otherwise be denied to them. Higher bandwidth internet links will help with this and the Government are committed to extending the availability of broadband to rural areas, through for example the work of the UK Broadband Task Force, so that more businesses will be able to reap the benefits.

Water Framework Directive

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the planned timetable is for implementing the Water Framework Directive in the United Kingdom. [88434]

Margaret Beckett: The Directive itself sets out the timetable for its implementation, which we are following. Among the key dates are: that it must be transposed into domestic legislation by 2003; that that the characteristics of water bodies must be analysed by 2004; that river basin management plans must be published by 2009; that programmes of measures must be made operational by 2012; and that key environmental objectives must be met by 2015.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Appointments

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to which bodies his Department makes appointments; how many members there are *(a)* in total and *(b)* in each body; and how many of those appointed are (i) businessmen, (ii) businessmen in SMEs and (iii) businessmen in micro-businesses. [87395]

Jane Kennedy: I would refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office on 16 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 608W.

Child Pornography

Mr. Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people have been charged with offences arising out of information from the US authorities passed to the PSNI concerning child pornography in the last 12 months. [85685]

Jane Kennedy: One person has been charged with offences at the present time

Construction Industry

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has for Northern Ireland to follow practice in Great Britain with respect to the sectoral skills support for the construction industry through merging the support services relating to electrical, plumbing and building services. [91778]

Jane Kennedy: Unlike the situation in Great Britain plumbing and building services in Northern Ireland are within the scope of the Construction Industry Training Board (NI) which is a non-departmental public body established under the Industrial Training Act with the purpose of encouraging training and careers within the construction industry. The board is empowered to collect a statutory levy from companies within its scope

Electrical skills are outside the scope of the board. The electrical contracting sector is facilitated in Northern Ireland by the Electrical Training Trust (ETT) a voluntary body. These arrangements represent the wishes of employers in the various sub sectors of the local construction industry as expressed in consultation.

The Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA), a UK wide organisation established with the support of the devolved administrations , is working with the construction sector to form a sector skills council which will represent the industry in relation to skills issues. The Northern Ireland Construction Industry Training Board and Electrical Training Trust are involved in that work.

Employment Programmes

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has to create *(a)* employers' forums and *(b)* job assist centres for the four areas targeted for special action regarding employability. [91779]

Jane Kennedy: On 16 December I launched the report of the Taskforce on Employability and Long-Term Unemployment and announced my intention to pilot Targeted Initiatives as a new approach to tackling these issues in four areas. As part of the pilot arrangements the Department for Employment and Learning will implement the commitment in the Taskforce report to put in place a local consultative process in each targeted area. This process will actively involve employers whose support will be a key factor in helping people overcome their barriers to employment and find work. A range of measures, including a model Job Assist Centre, will also be put in place in each area. My officials are currently developing the arrangements necessary for the implementation of these initiatives.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the costs per participant are on *(a)* the Northern Ireland Employment Support Programme and *(b)* the Workstep programme in Great Britain. [91850]

Jane Kennedy: The costs per participant on the Employment Support programme in Northern Ireland were approximately £5,500 in 2001–02, the latest year for which figures are available. This figure includes the wage subsidy paid to employers to take account of the disabled workers assessed output and the fee paid to the sponsor organisations that deliver the programme on behalf of the Department.

The costs per participant on the Workstep programme in GB in 2001–02 were £3,800. This amount is paid at a flat rate to delivery organisations with no account taken of the level of wages paid or the severity of the disability of the worker.

The delivery mechanism and funding arrangements for the Employment Support programme in Northern Ireland are presently under review and a public consultation was carried out at the end of 2002.

Fair Trade Criteria

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what fair trade criteria he sets when deciding upon what suppliers to use. [89917]

Mr. Pearson: There is no government-wide approach to the procurement of Fairtrade products. However, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has made clear, the Government are committed to supporting ethical trading wherever possible and provides significant support to the Fairtrade Foundation's efforts in promoting the supply and marketing of Fairtrade products.

Catering in the Northern Ireland Departments is contracted out to private sector service providers and it is primarily a matter for them as to where they procure the goods which they require. The Department of Finance and Personnel has facilitated War on Want NI by jointly organising with them an event at Parliament Buildings to promote the aims and objectives of the Fairtrade Campaign.

All of the major catering service providers to the Northern Ireland Departments attended the event and it was acknowledged as being very successful in raising awareness of Fairtrade issues within the Northern Ireland catering supply chain.

General Grant

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much of the general grant will be allocated to each district council in 2002–03; and how much he estimates will be allocated to each district council during 2003–04. [90761]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The estimated general grant allocated to each district council for the financial years 2002–03 and 2003–04 are set out in the table:

	2002–03		*2003–04*	
District council	*Derating element*	*Resources element*	*Derating element*	*Resources element*
Antrim Borough Council	903,353	0	854,416	0
Ards Borough Council	844,826	1,076,102	874,079	1,024,975
Armagh City and District Council	621,005	2,211,802	658,360	1,770,367
Ballymena Borough Council	1,059,536	0	1,082,962	0
Ballymoney Borough Council	352,906	1,009,866	315,008	1,026,368
Banbridge District Council	494,331	1,040,650	469,018	935,925
Belfast City Council	6,725,784	0	6,502,085	0
Carrickfergus Borough Council	335,689	794,967	532,007	37,686
Castlereagh Borough Council	927,808	0	870,779	0
Coleraine Borough Council	535,519	0	526,582	0
Cookstown District Council	648,720	562,700	661,712	947,132
Craigavon Borough Council	2,272,601	64,592	2,502,081	0
Derry City Council	1,471,380	630,064	1,370,102	1,207,414
Down District Council	449,410	2,071,040	435,010	1,680,731
Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council	1,183,627	646,353	1,189,591	1,053,781
Fermanagh District Council	696,275	751,104	671,874	1,450,609
Larne Borough Council	463,838	0	523,808	140,964
Limavady Borough Council	115,888	1,011,770	131,137	1,273,410
Lisburn City Council	1,783,040	0	1,706,646	0
Magherafelt District Council	622,630	1,137,254	631,281	1,420,561
Moyle District Council	144,224	559,866	158,893	600,636
Newry and Mourne District Council	1,020,266	3,145,676	1,121,110	1,908,614
Newtownabbey Borough Council	1,731,125	0	1,836,130	0
North Down Borough Council	578,326	0	560,867	0
Omagh District Council	558,686	850,293	609,335	1,411,497
Strabane District Council	333,306	1,908,898	375,739	2,082,330

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the percentage change in rates will be for each district council during 2003–04 compared to 2002–03 as a result of changes to the general grant formulae; and what transitional arrangements will be made to moderate the effect of the changes in the local government general grant formulae to those councils for which funding has been reduced. [90762]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The level of district rates fixed each year is a matter entirely for individual councils. While the general grant contribution is a significant factor in the calculation of the rates, councils determine estimated expenditure and corresponding income. It would not be possible, therefore, for the Department to anticipate percentage change in rates year on year.

The Department is currently considering how those councils that are adversely affected under the new formula for distribution of the resources element of general grant might be assisted in the coming period.

Grants

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the grants funded by his Department for which individual members of the public and organisations may apply, and if he will make a statement as to *(a)* the total of such funding in the last financial year, *(b)* the total number of awards and *(c)* their administrative costs. [82187]

Jane Kennedy: *(a)* The Total of such funding in the last Financial Year (1 April 2001—31 March 2002) was £426,124,585.43.

(b) The Total number of Awards was 55,880 [a].

(c) The Administrative costs were 125,881.22 [b].

A full list of grants has been placed in the Library.

[a] Figures were not available for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

[b] Figures were not available for Department of Education, Department of Finance & Personnel, Department of the Environment, Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister; Department of Enterprise Trade & Investment, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Department of Health Social Services & Public Safety and Department of Culture Arts & Leisure.

Lisburn-Antrim Railway Line

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if a decision has been made about the future of the Lisburn to Antrim railway line. [91643]

Angela Smith: The future of rail services on the Lisburn to Antrim line has been uncertain since the Railways Task Force produced its report in September 2000. The Consolidation Option in this report included the mothballing of the Lisburn to Antrim line when the line from Antrim to Belfast via Bleach Green junction reopened. Subsequently the Northern Ireland Assembly, in its budget of December 2000, agreed to provide funding for railways on the basis of the Consolidation Option. Since taking office I have been giving careful consideration to the future services on this line. On the basis of the data available the case for the continuance of regular services on this line is not compelling. I am awaiting receipt of a further economic appraisal on an option for the line. It is my intention to make a written statement on this matter in the near future. Clearly, that statement will be informed by the additional economic appraisal and made against the backdrop of competing transportation priorities in Northern Ireland.

Luigi Marotta

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what factors were taken into consideration before granting the compassionate leave from prison to Luigi Marotta. [90309]

Jane Kennedy: The Northern Ireland Prison Service had concerns about the likelihood of Marotta absconding and had initially refused temporary release. Following judicial review and directions by the court to reconsider this decision in the light of the recent implementation of human rights leglisation, the decision was reversed. Prior to release a sum of £150k was required to be lodged as surety by Marotta's solicitors.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland who authorised the compassionate leave from prison of Luigi Marotta. [90310]

Jane Kennedy: The authorisation was given by the Operations Directorate of the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the prospect of obtaining the extradition of Luigi Marotta from Paris. [90311]

Mr. Paul Murphy: It is not Government policy to comment on whether an individual is being sought for fear of hampering any investigation

MLAs

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what research facilities for MLAs are available at Parliament Buildings, Stormont. [89437]

Mr. Paul Murphy: There are currently no research facilities available for MLAs at Parliament Buildings, Stormont. The Office Costs allowance, which continues to be paid to MLAs, is to help fund constituency offices including research assistance.

I have received representations regarding the provision of the research facilities at Parliament Buildings which I am currently considering.

Police Ombudsman

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many complaints have been received by the Police Ombudsman's office since its inception; how many complaints have been *(a)* processed and *(b)* upheld; how many PSNI officers have been suspended; what is the average length of suspension from duty of PSNI officers during investigation by the Ombudsman; and how many reports arising from complaints received and processed by the Ombudsman have been passed to the Director of Public Prosecution. [86457]

Jane Kennedy: The Police Ombudsman has advised me that the number of complaints received since the inception of the office to the end of November 2002 is 7,362. The number of complaints processed and closed[1] is 6,106 and 1,256 complaints are current. The Police Ombudsman has passed 211 cases to the Director of Public Prosecutions. The Chief Constable, who has responsibility for the suspension of any police officers, has advised me that 11 officers have been suspended as a result of investigations by the Police Ombudsman. The average length of suspension during investigation by the Police Ombudsman is 21.6 weeks.

[1] Complaints are closed under categories listed by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabularies and "upheld" is not a category listed

Pre-school Places

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will provide funding for all pre-school places proposed, through the PEAGS scheme, by the South Eastern Education and Library Board for the year 2003–04. [90620]

Jane Kennedy: The Department of Education has received proposals for the funding of pre-school places in 2003–04 from each education and library board's Pre-school Education Advisory Group (PEAG), and all will be considered in the context of identified needs and available financial resources. In particular, consideration of proposals for places in the voluntary sector must take into account the anticipated decline in the size of the pre-school age group in 2003–04. The Department is currently working on financial allocations to the Boards for 2003–04 and these will be notified to them shortly.

Prisoners

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made about the likelihood of a prisoner absconding prior to granting compassionate leave from prison; and if he will make a statement. [90307]

Jane Kennedy: An assessment is made in all cases of temporary release of the risk a prisoner poses of absconding. This takes account of all relevant issues including previous criminal history, the length of time served, the police view, behaviour in prison and any assessments carried out by professional staff.

PSNI

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what proposals he has to maintain a band and music tradition in the Police Service of Northern Ireland. [90308]

Jane Kennedy: The Police Service of Northern Ireland has indicated its intention to stand down the current Police band on 31 March 2003. The Chief Constable has no proposals to maintain a full-time formal band and music tradition beyond this date.

An invitation has however been extended to the present band members asking them to consider forming an association where they would come together on a voluntary basis, both to rehearse and carry out engagements. The PSNI has made it clear that it would support the officers if they wished to form a voluntary association perhaps by making available the current instruments, other equipment and some financial support.

Student Religion

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the religious breakdown is of students studying at *(a)* Queen's University Belfast and *(b)* the University of Ulster. [90020]

Jane Kennedy: The latest information available relates to the 2001–02 academic year. Religion is only recorded for NI domiciled students at the NI Higher Education institutions and the breakdown of religion for the University of Ulster and Queen's University Belfast is shown in the table:

NI domiciled students enrolled on courses at Northern Ireland Higher Education institutions by religion 2001–02[1]

Institution	*The Queen's University of Belfast*	*University of Ulster*	*Total*
Protestant	4,715	5,797	10,512
Catholic	6,113	8,628	14,741
Other	1,084	602	1,686
Not known/available	5,634	2,585	8,219
Total	17,546	17,612	35,158

[1] 2001–02 data is provisional

Source:

HESA dataset

HEALTH

Number of Trainee Doctors

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many students in the United Kingdom were training as doctors in *(a)* 1972, *(b)* 1982, *(c)* 1992 and *(d)* 2001. [84657]

Mr. Hutton: In autumn 2002, the United Kingdom medical school intake was 6,740, an increase of over 1,675 than in autumn 1997. This is an increase of 33 per cent, between 1997 and 2002. Intake is planned to be over 7,050 next autumn, the highest figure ever which would be an increase of 39.5 per cent, over 1997.

We do not have data relating to the total number of students in medical schools, training to qualify as doctors. We are able to provide the actual UK intake to medical schools, per academic year, for the years in question. This information is shown in the table:

Academic year	*UK intake*
1972–73	[1]3,123
1982–83	4,154
1992–93	4,449
2001–02	6,115

[1] In 1972–73, the figure is for Great Britain only. It excludes Northern Ireland.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of amublance staff retired early due to ill health in the latest year for which figures are available. [85768]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not collected centrally, but may be available from individual National Health Service ambulance trusts.

The number of staff who have taken a retirement pension since the establishment of ambulance trusts, is 1,645, to November 2002. The number of ambulance staff in service at September 2001 was 16,920.

"Human Bodies, Human Choices"

Linda Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many responses he has received to the consultation document "Human Bodies, Human Choices"; and if he will make a statement. [90635]

Mr. Lammy: The Department has received 214 responses to the consultation document "Human Bodies, Human Choices". A further 17 responses have been received by the Welsh Assembly Government, with whom the document was published. The Department is currently analysing the responses. A summary report of the consultation workshops and national conference, as well as the written responses, will be published shortly. New legislation will be introduced when parliamentary time allows.

Adoption and Children Act

Margaret Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance has been issued to local authorities in respect of section 116 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. [91135]

Jacqui Smith: A local authority circular is being prepared in respect of section 116 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, which amends section 17 of the Children Act 1989 to make it clear that local authorities' powers under this section include providing help with accommodation. It will be issued shortly.

Advisory Committees on Training

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his policy is on the proposed abolition of advisory committees on training by the European Commission. [88174]

Mr. Hutton: We are concerned that the advisory committees on training have fallen into disuse. The Commission has proposed in the draft Directive on Recognition of Qualifications to replace them with a single committee to cover all professions. We will seek clarification of how this committee will function to ensure that public safety concerns and health training issues are fully taken into account. We will continue to address this matter in the European Union working group.

Annual Report

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much producing his Department's latest Annual Report cost; how many copies were printed; how many copies of it were sold at its cover price; to whom copies of the report have been provided free of charge; and how many copies were provided free of charge. [90883]

Mr. Lammy: The total cost to the Department of producing the 2002–03 Departmental Report was £31,668. This included £21,185 for design, typesetting and artwork and a further £10,483 for the cost of the copies ordered by the Department. However The Stationery Office (TSO) met all the remaining costs for printing and publication.

This year over 1,000 copies of the 2002–03 Departmental Report were printed.

TSO have indicated that so far 395 have been sold at the cover price of £19.50. A total of over 670 copies were provided free of charge.

The report is also freely available on the internet at www.doh.gov.uk/dohreport.

Anti-smoking Campaign

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his estimate is of the likely changes that will take place in the next five year totals of *(a)* male and *(b)* female smokers as a result of the ban on tobacco advertising and the future use of nicotine replacement therapies and Zyban. [90215]

Ms Blears: Information is not available in the form requested.

The Government have set the following targets in reducing smoking:

To reduce smoking among children from 13 per cent., the 1996 figure, to 11 per cent., by 2005 and 9 per cent., by 2010.

To reduce adult smoking in all social classes so that the overall rates falls from 28 per cent., the 1996 figure, to 26 per cent., by 2005 and 24 per cent., by 2010.

To reduce the percentage of women who smoke during pregnancy from 23 per cent., the 1995 figure, to 18 per cent., by 2005 and 15 per cent., by 2010.

Smoking rates among manual groups will be reduced from 32 per cent., in 1998 to 26 per cent., by 2010.

The priorities and planning framework (PPF), published on 2 October 2002, set out the priorities for the next three years for the national health service and social services and described what local organisations and communities need to do to plan for and implement the improvements.

Two of the targets set in the PPF drive the existing programmes to tackle smoking.

In the cancer section:

"Reduce the rate of smoking, contributing to the national target of: reducing the rate in manual groups from 32 per cent., in 1998 to 26 per cent., by 2010; 800,000 smokers from all groups successfully quitting at the 4 week stage by 2006"

In the Reducing Health Inequalities section:

"Deliver a one percentage point reduction per year in the proportion of women continuing to smoke throughout pregnancy, focussing especially on smokers from disadvantaged groups as a contribution to the national target to reduce by at least 10 per cent., the gap in mortality between "routine and manual" groups and the population as a whole by 2010, starting with children under one year."

These changes will be delivered through a comprehensive tobacco control strategy, including an advertising ban and the provision of nicotine replacement therapy and Zyban. It is estimated that banning tobacco advertising and promotion will result in a 2.5 per cent., reduction in tobacco consumption, eventually saving up to 3,000 lives a year.

In the short term, the ban will save 1,500 or more lives a year.

Capacity Planning

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library the results of the work undertaken by strategic health authorities on behalf of PCTs concerning capacity planning; and if he will set out the national and regional level data arising from the franchise plans produced by strategic health authorities. [88564]

Mr. Hutton: The information drawn from the capacity planning process—which is not yet complete—will form part strategic health authority local delivery plans. These plans are based on the new planning framework, Investment, Expansion and Reform, a copy of which is available in the Library.

Child Medicine (Consultants)

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many consultants in child medicine are employed in the NHS. [89927]

Mr. Hutton: Paediatricians treat general childhood conditions. There are a number of other specialties that specialise in the treatment of specific childhood conditions.

The following table shows the number of consultants, employed in the national health service in England, in child and adolescent psychiatry, paediatric surgery and within the paediatric group.

Hospital, Public Health Medicine and Community Health Services (HCHS):
Specialties of consultants in child medicine

England at 31 March 2002	*Numbers (headcount)*
Child and adolescent psychiatry	480
Paediatric surgery	120
Paediatrics group, of which:	
General paediatrics (including paediatric neurology)	1,530
Paediatric cardiology	50
Paediatric dentistry	20

Source:
Department of Health medical and dental workforce census

Community Psychiatric Nurses

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many of the community psychiatric nurses employed between 1995 and 2000 were working directly in *(a)* primary care GP practices or health centres and *(b)* secondary or tertiary care settings. [89924]

Mr. Hutton: The number of qualified nurses working in community psychiatric care who are employed by secondary and tertiary care organisations is shown in the table. These nurses work across the range of care settings. Information on nurses employed by general practitioner practices and health centres is not collected centrally.

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): qualified community psychiatric nursing staff in England as at 30 September each year

	Headcount
1995	8,564
1996	9,333
1997	9,736
1998	10,231
1999	10,552
2000	11,080
2001	12,224

Note:
Figures exclude learners and agency staff.
Source:
Department of Health non-medical work force census.

Complaints (Doctors)

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will require the General Medical Council to publish information on the number of complaints against doctors currently unresolved which indicates those outstanding for more than *(a)* six and *(b)* 12 months. [90898]

Mr. Hutton: The General Medical Council (GMC) has met its target, set in July 2000, that 100 per cent. of cases referred from the preliminary proceedings committee to the professional conduct committee were heard within a year.

The GMC is an independent statutory body which derives its powers from the Medical Act 1983. The Secretary of State has no power to require the GMC to publish such information. Data on the work of the fitness to practise directorate is available on the GMC website and the GMC will, of course, respond to specific queries.

Consultants

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of hospital consultants in *(a)* Doncaster *(b)* Yorkshire and *(c)* England do not undertake private work. [89115]

Mr. Hutton: We do not collect information centrally about the proportion of consultants undertaking private practice. However, the Department collects statistics about the contractual status of consultants. While these statistics do not represent an accurate indication of the number of consultants undertaking private practice, they can give a broad indication of the amount of private practice undertaken in a region.

Maximum part-time contract holders are those practitioners that have opted for maximum part-time contracts, or who have been required to change their status to maximum part-time because the volume of private practice undertaken exceeds the limit of 10 per cent. that applies to other whole-time contract holders. Maximum part-time contract holders have no limit on the amount of private practice they are permitted to undertake.

Nationally 23.7 per cent. of all consultants hold maximum part-time contracts. The proportion of consultants on maximum part-time contracts in Yorkshire, at 19.4 per cent., is lower than the national average and in Doncaster the figure is considerably lower at 6.3 per cent, of all consultants. The table shows numbers of medical and dental consultants working maximum part-time contracts.

Hospital, Public Health Medicine and Community Health Services (HCHS): Medical and dental consultants working maximum part time contracts

England at 31 March 2002	*All Contracts*	*numbers (headcount) of which Maximum Part-Time*
England of which	26,350	6,240
Yorkshire[1] of which	2,570	500
Doncaster	160	10

Notes:

Figures are rounded to the nearest ten

[1] Statistics for "Yorkshire" are based on the mean figures for North and East Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire Strategic health Authority (excluding Northern Lincolnshire), South Yorkshire Strategic Health Authority and West Yorkshire Strategic Health Authority.

Source:

Department of Health medical and dental workforce census.

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the answer of 12 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 494W, on consultants, if he will list the specialities in which offers of appointment have been made under the NHS International Fellowship Scheme. [90312]

Mr. Hutton: We piloted the International Fellowship Scheme with an initial recruitment round in spring and summer 2002.

As a result of the pilot, 39 offers of appointment have been made and accepted, although subsequently two have been deferred due to personal reasons. A further six candidates have potential offers under negotiation. 17 candidates have been invited for interviews in the new year. Of the 37 offers of employment, two are in cardiothoracic surgery, seven in histopathology, 26 in psychiatry and two in radiology.

Contractor Fraud

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much contractor fraud was detected in the NHS in each of the last four years. [89030]

Mr. Lammy: The available figures are shown in the table:

	1999–2000	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Number of cases detected	95	238	201
Value of loss identified[1] (£)	450,041	3,334,010	4,296,395

[1] Subject to recovery

The National Health Service Counter Fraud Service (NHS CFS) was created in 1998 and became operational during 1999–2000. Since then detection, referral, conviction and recovery rates for cases involving NHS fraud have improved significantly.

Every health body in England and Wales is also required, in Secretary of State Directions, to have a dedicated and accredited local counter fraud specialist (LCFS) who can be contacted by NHS staff to report any suspicion of fraud in the NHS. The presence of LCFS in each health body not only improves the detection rates for fraud and corruption but also contributes to a wider change in public and staff attitudes towards fraud in the NHS.

In addition, the NHS CFS has a fraud and corruption reporting line, which is a secure channel for members of the public and NHS staff to report any suspicion of fraud in the NHS.

Correspondence

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to reply to the letter of John C. Wood of Barton-on-Sea of 21 November 2002. [90695]

Mr. Lammy: A reply was sent to Mr. Wood on 13 January 2003.

Departmental Expenditure (Newsprint)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the total expenditure of his Department was on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in 2002. [90518]

Mr. Lammy: The approximate total expenditure on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in 200–02 was £469,880.

The expenditure covers central purchasing through the Department's library, the Regional Offices and direct purchasing by individual units. The figures do not include expenditure by Agencies or official publications, which are published weekly, monthly or quarterly by The Stationery Office.

Disability and Discrimination Act

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for each primary care team what training they offer staff to comply with the Disability and Discrimination Act 1995. [86158]

Mr. Hutton: Data on the local training arrangements at primary care trust (PCT) or primary care team level is not collected centrally. However, the National Health Service Executive issued management guidance to NHS trusts, health authorities (HAs) and primary care groups on implementing Part III of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in July 1999. HAs were asked to develop a strategy to ensure that Section 21 of the DDA was implemented across their premises including hospitals, primary care premises, health centres and clinics.

In addition, the Department has issued a guide, Doubly Disabled, to help NHS managers and staff improve their awareness of the needs of disabled people whether they are patients, carers or employees. A distance learning package on disability awareness for NHS staff, particularly front line staff, commissioned by the Department, has been available since November 1999.

Drugs (Black Market)

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with pharmaceutical companies about drugs provided at cost to African countries being resold on the black market in the UK. [89938]

Mr. Lammy: Officials from the Department and others have had extensive discussions with pharmaceutical companies about the problem of drugs sold at discounted prices to poorer countries being diverted into the European Union and other developed country markets. The subject was also discussed in the working group on access to medicines, chaired by my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for International Development, and which reported to the Prime Minister on 28 November 2002.

The report, a copy of which is available in the Library, recognised that measures to prevent diversion were one of the essential elements of a wider framework of measures to enable companies to offer substantially lower prices in poorer countries. The Government continue to work with the United Kingdom and industry internationally to take forward the proposals in the report.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he has taken in collaboration with the Secretary of State for International Development to combat the illicit resale of drugs provided by pharmaceutical companies at cost to African countries into European markets. [89939]

Mr. Lammy: The working group on access to medicines, chaired by my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for International Development, included in its discussions possible measures for preventing discounted medicines destined for poorer countries from being diverted to the European Union and other developed markets. A copy of the report, published on 28 November 2002, is available in the Library.

There are a range of measures that could help—for example, effective control of distribution within the developing country; border measures in developed country markets; and differentiation of product packaging. These issues are under discussion as part of the follow-up to the working group report. In addition, the European Commission has published a draft Regulation to strengthen customs controls in this area. It is still under discussion among EU member states.

Regardless of these possible measures, any suspected sales in the United Kingdom of medicines that do not comply with the licensing requirements of the Medicines Act 1968 can be reported to and investigated by the Medicines Control Agency.

E. Coli

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans the Government have for the implementation of the recommendations of the Task Force report on E. coli 0157. [88945]

Ms Blears: The Department has welcomed the report of the task force on E. coli 0157and has accepted its recommendations. Many of the recommendations have already been implemented. These include research into the epidemiology of E. coli 0157 infection, steps to increase the awareness of both the public and the medical profession of the risks of this infection and how to avoid them, and the production of guidance for farmers, schools and others at risk from recreational activities.

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how the Government plan to reduce the number of cases of E. coli 0157; [88946]

(2) what plans the Government have for improving the speed of detection of E. coli 0157 bacterium; [88948]

(3) what plans the Government have for the introduction of a standard testing protocol for the bacterium E. coli 0157 across the UK. [88949]

Ms Blears: The Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) undertakes microbiological and epidemiological surveillance of E. coli 0157 infections and has given a high priority to work on Vero cytotoxin-producing E. coli 0157.

Research by the PHLS has led to significant improvements in laboratory methods for the detection of E. coli 0157 from clinical specimens as well as animals and foods. They produced guidelines on the testing of samples for E. coli 0157 in 2000. These guidelines include advice from the advisory committee on microbiological safety of food that all diarrhoeal stool samples submitted to public health laboratories for testing should be examined for E. coli 0157. Shared protocols for testing E. coli 0157 are being developed with the veterinary laboratories agency to ensure consistency in both animal and human diagnostics. In addition to providing full identification and typing for all E. coli, the PHLS reference laboratory also subtypes E. coli 0157 using a range of methods, and is currently evaluating a simple non-invasive test for antibodies to E. coli 0157 in saliva. Molecular methods for the detection of E. coli 0157 are now used routinely.

The Food Standards Agency has set itself a target of reducing foodborne disease by 20 per cent., by April 2006. This includes foodborne cases of E. coli 0157. The strategy for achieving this target, which was published on the Agency website (www.food.gov.uk) in July 2001, involves a range of measures to reduce microbial contamination of foods and to improve food handling and preparation. Laboratory reports of E. coli 0157 in the UK fell from 1,139 cases in 2000 to a provisional figure of 1,049 in 2001.

The Department has taken steps to increase the awareness of both the public and the medical profession of the risks of this infection and how to avoid them. The Department has worked with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the Scottish Executive, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Education and Skills in producing guidance for farmers, for schools and for those at risk from recreational activities. The Department, together with the HSE, is also planning to undertake a renewed educational and public awareness campaign on the risks in the agricultural environment.

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans the Government have to set up a central data base on the incidence, diagnosis and treatment of E. coli 0157 to assist in the treatment and diagnosis and long term monitoring of the effects of infection from E. coli 0157. [88987]

Ms Blears: The Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) is developing plans for a central database on the incidence, diagnosis and treatment of E. coli 0157. All food-borne incidence of confirmed E. coli 0157 is already recorded by the PHLS communicable disease surveillance centre.

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will consult the charities and voluntary organisations concerned with the issue of infection from E coli-0157 on the future development of services for research, diagnosis and treatment of E coli-0157 related conditions; [88992]

(2) what plans the Government have for research into the causes, prevention and treatment of the infection by E coli-0157 and the long-term care of those suffering from the consequences of infection; [88991]

(3) what research the Government have undertaken into whether the use of certain types of antibiotics can help spread the E coli-0157 bacteria in patients; and what action is planned as a result. [88947]

Ms Blears: There are a number of research projects in progress that are directed at both providing a better understanding of the virulence mechanisms of E coli-0157 and leading to improved typing methods for application in epidemiological investigations. A number of case-control studies have already been conducted in the UK and have helped to define the risk factors for E coli-0157infection.

Enhanced surveillance of E coli-0157 infections has been co-ordinated by the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS). A study of childhood haemolytic uraemic syndrome (HUS) is also being conducted by the PHLS in association with the British Paediatric Surveillance Unit, the British Association of Paediatric Nephrologists, the Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health and the Royal Hospitals Aberdeen national health service trust.

The use of antibiotics for the treatment of uncomplicated diarrhoea is discouraged. The Department has issued specific advice to medical personnel to ensure that they are aware that the use of antibiotics for the treatment of E coli-0157 may increase the risk of severe kidney disease.

The task force on E coli-0157 consulted widely with relevant charities and voluntary organisations. Officials representing both the Department and the Food Standards Agency (FSA) regularly meet representatives of HUS charities to discuss matters including research, diagnosis and treatment. The FSA has regular meetings with stakeholders to discuss its policies and their implementation.

Elective Surgery

Dr. Richard Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what mechanisms are in place to ensure that expenditure on elective surgery on NHS patients in the private sector is minimised, and the use of NHS services is optimised. [91502]

Mr. Hutton: Health Service Circular 2000/007, "Securing Service Delivery: Commissioning Freedoms of Primary Care Trusts", issued in April 2002, made clear that primary care trusts should feel free to commission care from wherever they can obtain the best services for patients. Commissioning decisions should be judged against the twin tests of high clinical standards and good value for money.

Ethical Banking

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what contracts have been concluded as a result of the Government's commitment to support ethical banking. [89920]

Mr. Lammy: The Government believe it is important for consumers to have choice in financial products, including the availability of 'ethical' products. However, it would not be appropriate for the Government to exclusively support the development of one specific group of financial service providers. It is for individual consumers to decide the attributes they most value from their financial services and for financial services firms to be transparent about their use of funds and investments.

External Consultants

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the total cost to his Department was of the use of external consultants in 2002. [90507]

Mr. Lammy: Expenditure by the Department (excluding Agencies) on external consultants in 2002 was £6,800,521.

Fitness

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what local action to tackle obesity and increase physical activity entails, as mentioned in his Department's press release of 12 December 2002, Improving the Nation's Health: Government to produce food and action plan. [89354]

Ms Blears: Local action to tackle obesity and increase physical activity is being taken forward as part of the national service framework for coronary heart disease (NSF CHD) and the NHS Plan.

Standard One of the NSF CHD required all national health service bodies to have agreed and be contributing to the delivery of a local programme of effective policies on increasing physical activity and reducing overweight and obesity, and have quantified data on the programme. Examples of local action to tackle obesity and increase physical activity include initiatives in the primary care setting such as weight management clinics, exercise referral schemes, workplace interventions, and school based projects on diet and exercise which are being taken forward through the healthy schools programme.

Together with Sport England and the Countryside Agency, the Department is developing a £2.6 million programme of local exercise action pilots to investigate effective approaches to increasing physical activity, the results of which will inform and lead action on exercise across the NHS.

Foundation Trusts

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the financial duties for NHS foundation trusts will include the requirement to achieve a rate of return on assets. [87817]

Mr. Hutton: The financial duties of National Health Service foundation trusts will be set out in forthcoming legislation.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what method he will adopt to test whether local people support the establishment of a foundation trust; who will be consulted; and whether local people will be able to reject the establishment of such a trust. [91361]

Mr. Hutton: It is up to applicants for national health service foundation trust status to decide how best to consult local stakeholders ("A Guide to NHS Foundation Trusts" paragraph 7.11). Second-stage applicants will need to provide evidence that both the NHS trust board and key stakeholders—for example primary care trusts, staff, partner organisations and local people—have been consulted and support the application and the strategic vision. Each application will be assessed individually based on the evidence provided ("A Guide to NHS Foundation Trusts" paragraph 7.12).

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which key shareholders he plans to consult on proposals to establish a foundation trust; by what means such consultations will be conducted; and whether organisations will be required to consult their staff before replying. [91362]

Mr. Hutton: The process for assessing national health service foundation trust applications is described in paragraph 7.12 of "A Guide to NHS Foundation Trusts". The assessment will take account of evidence provided in support of the application as set out in paragraphs 7.9–7.11 of "A Guide to NHS Foundation Trusts". In this evidence, applicants will need to show that their key local stakeholders have been consulted and support the application and strategic vision.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which representatives of partner organisations will be eligible to become members of foundation trusts; how the number of representatives from each partner organisation will be determined; and whether it will be a requirement of membership that representatives of partner organisations live in the area served by the trust. [91363]

Mr. Hutton: It will be up to individual applicants to develop proposals on the size and composition of the Board of Governors to suit local circumstances, subject to demonstrating that the proposals meet the minimum requirements as set out in "A Guide to NHS Foundation Trusts" (paragraphs 2.17–2.18).

General Practitioners

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many general practitioner vacancies there were in each primary care trust in the last two years. [83289]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested was not collected at primary care trust level in the last two years.

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his target is for the number of general practitioners per head of population. [90297]

Mr. Hutton: The NHS Plan implemented a commitment to increase the overall number of general practitioners (GPs) by 2000 in England between 1999 and 2004. Based on the latest available statistics, the number of whole-time equivalent GPs per 100,000 weighted population is 54.5. To meet the national target entails an increase to an average 55.7 GPs per 100,000 weighted population.

We want to see GP numbers expand further. Guidance to primary care trusts (PCTs) set out three parameters within which all PCTs should be aiming to recruit additional GPs during 2003–04:

those PCTs which are below the existing average 53.2 should aim to recruit sufficient GPs to raise their GP numbers by at least 6 per cent., or to at least 55.7, with the aim of achieving at least the lesser of these aims;

those PCTs which are more than the existing average of 53.2, but below the projected average of 55.7, should aim to recruit up to 6 per cent. more GPs. In some appropriate circumstances—and where it is possible—PCTs may exceed this; and

those PCTs at or above the projected average of 55.7 should aim to recruit up to 3 per cent. more GPs. In some appropriate circumstances—and where it is possible—PCTs may exceed this.

Health and Social Services (Rural Provision)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he is taking to ensure the delivery of *(a)* health care and *(b)* social services in sparsely populated rural areas, in particular pockets of rural deprivation; and what resources he is making available for this. [87708]

Mr. Hutton: Resources to both local National Health Service bodies and local authorities take account of variations in local circumstances, while leaving these bodies to decide the best distribution of services in response to those circumstances. A number of recent initiatives in funding allocations have recognised the need to take account of remoteness.

The NHS revenue allocations for 2003–04, 2004–05 and 2005–06 announced on 11 December were made using a new formula. The new formula provides a better measure of health need in all areas. In calculating health need in rural areas, it takes account of the effects of access, transport and poverty.

The NHS confederation is currently negotiating a new general medical services (GMS) contract with the general practitioners committee of the British Medical Association. The two sides have commissioned York University to develop a GMS allocation formula that will take account of the costs and pressures of delivering high-quality primary care in different areas, including those associated with rurality and remoteness. The current timetable envisages that this work will be completed early in the New Year, when general practitioners will be balloted on the detailed and costed framework.

For social services funding, we will be increasing the sparsity factor in the older people's social services funding formula from 2002–03 onwards, in response to new evidence on travel effects in the provision of domiciliary care commissioned by the county councils network.

Improving access to services, especially in rural and other areas which are currently under-served, was identified as a priority in the cross-cutting spending review on health inequalities. The review also recognised that there are pockets of deprivation right across the country and that health inequalities will need to be tackled in all these areas if the national health inequalities targets are to be met. The results of the review are being fed into a cross-government delivery plan on action to tackle health inequalities and meet the targets. The delivery plan will be published in the New Year.

Health and Social Services Performance Review

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the information collected as part of the Health and Social Services Performance Review. [88559]

Mr. Hutton: The Health and Social Services Performance Review is a quarterly document which monitors the progress of programme areas and strategic health authorities towards key indicators in the delivery of the Department's public commitments. The document also reports on patient activity and provides a concise overview of financial performance. At the end of the financial year the Department publishes an annual report which includes details of progress against public service agreement targets.

Hillingdon Hospital

Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on how many occasions in each of the last 10 years Hillingdon Hospital has been closed for admissions; and what the length of time involved was in each case. [89662]

Mr. Hutton: This information is not held centrally. Accident and emergency closures at Hillingdon Hospital have been kept on record by the London Ambulance Service (LAS) since December 1996. The LAS records indicate one full closure in June 2002 for five hours ten minutes due to flooding.

Hospital Projects (Funding)

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many new hospitals or hospital reprovision projects have been commenced since 1997; and what proportion of these have been financed through *(a)* PFI and *(b)* PPP schemes. [91594]

Mr. Hutton: 114 hospital schemes have been given the go ahead since 1997, of which 104, or 91 per cent., have been or are to be financed through private finance initiative or public private partnership, subject to approval of their full business case.

Hospital Treatment

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what restrictions are applied by *(a)* regulation, *(b)* his policy and *(c)* regional policies on primary care trusts' decisions on where patients should be sent for hospital treatment; [90684]

(2) if he will make a statement on the standards required for the accreditation of non-NHS hospitals for the provision of NHS services *(a)* as contractors with primary care trusts and *(b)* as sub-contractors of hospital trusts; and whether the standard for a particular procedure varies between *(a)* and *(b)*. [90683]

Mr. Hutton: There are no regulations which impose restrictions on decisions by primary care trusts (PCTs) on where patients should be sent for hospital treatment. Such decisions are up to each PCT in the light of all relevant factors including available resources and the clinical needs of the person.

Health Service Circular 2000–07, Securing Service Delivery: Commissioning Freedoms of Primary Care Trusts, issued in April 2002 made clear that PCTs should feel free to commission care from wherever they can obtain the best services for patients. Commissioning decisions should be judged against the twin tests of high clinical standards and good value for money. This applies to decisions to commission services from both National Health Service hospitals and non-NHS hospitals. NHS trusts are similarly free to commission services from such non-NHS hospitals as they consider appropriate, against the same tests of high clinical standards and good value for money.

In their commissioning role, PCTs will, when appropriate, need to collaborate with neighbouring PCTs and work as part of consortia. However the consortium is set up, the decisions made by that consortium will be binding on all members.

Hospital-acquired Infection

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made towards the establishment of a mandatory national surveillance scheme to measure the extent of hospital-acquired infection; and what reduction in the rate of infection has been achieved. [90278]

Ms Blears: The first phase of the national mandatory surveillance system for hospital acquired infection on methicillin resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) blood stream infections was introduced in April 2001.

The results for the first year of this scheme, from April 2001 to March 2002, for every national health service acute trust in England were published in the Communicable Disease Report (CDR) Weekly on 20 June 2002. These are available on Public Health Laboratory Service's website at www.phls.co.uk/pubications/cdr/PDFfiles/2002/cdr2502.pdf.

This first year's data provides a baseline from which progress can be measured and a MRSA improvement score has been included in the NHS performance management system for 2002–03.

The second phase of the surveillance system will be implemented shortly.

Health Protection Agency

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will make a statement on the organisational structure of the HPA after 1 April 2003; [90050]

(2) what proportion of senior management positions in the HPA have been filled; [90085]

(3) when he expects to announce the location of the headquarters of the Health Protection Agency. [90080]

Ms Blears: We aim to establish the Health Protection Agency as a special health authority from 1 April 2003. The HPA Board will be responsible for agreeing the organisational structure and other organisational issues such as the location of the headquarters. Until a Board is established and is in a position to take these decisions, there will be interim organisational arrangements. These were publicised in a newsletter to the staff and organisations affected by the HPA changes on 13 January 2003. A copy of the newsletter has been placed in the Library. These interim arrangements do not pre-empt either the Board's consideration of permanent structures or the filling of substantive posts under equal opportunities policies or the change management protocol agreed between management and trades unions which govern the changes.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether there is a register of the outputs and capabilities provided by the component organisations of the HPA. [90066]

Ms Blears: Our plans for establishing the Health Protection Agency (HPA) were set out in my reply of 7 January 2003 to the hon. Member, *Official Report*, column 190W.

The outputs and capabilities of the Public Health Laboratory Service, the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research and the National Radiological Protection Board are described in their business and corporate plans and in their annual accounts, which are placed in the Libraries of the House. Information for other elements intended for transfer to the HPA, which are currently part of broader national health service organisations or other bodies, are not held in a similar form.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which individual on the HPA Executive will be responsible for the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research. [90068]

Ms Blears: Under the interim arrangements set out in my answer to the hon. Member today, Dr. Roger Gilmour, the current chief executive, will continue to be responsible for the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research.

Junior Scholarship Scheme

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when the first batch of Junior Scholarship young people will begin working within the NHS; and if he will make a statement; [88068]

(2) how many young people are expected to take part in the Junior Scholarships scheme as part of the NHS University; and if he will make a statement. [88067]

Mr. Hutton: The Department of Health has recently launched a development plan for the National Health Service University entitled "Learning for everyone". The plan contains a range of proposals, options and questions on how NHSU could support learning for staff working in and for the NHS.

NHSU is currently undertaking a period of consultation with the NHS, with clinical teams, staff and managers, and with stakeholders including higher and further education institutions on what role NHSU should play in supporting learning and what its priorities should be.

One proposal in the development plan is to offer junior scholarships to young people aged 14, 15 and 16 years. The aim of these scholarships is to encourage people from communities that are under-represented in our health services to consider 'earning and learning' opportunities in the NHS.

The operation of junior scholarships will build on existing development within the NHS being led by work force development confederations. The scheme will require local partnerships between schools, NHS work force development confederations and trusts, parents and the young people themselves.

An indicative number of 100 places per year per work force development confederation (around 3,000 places nationally) has been proposed.

The details of the scholarships will be developed following the period of consultation, which concludes in February next year, taking into account comments and feedback received. The scheme is likely to be piloted in 2003.

King Edward VII Hospital

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what NHS contracts have been carried out by the King Edward VII Hospital Midhurst since May 1997; [89934]

(2) what part he plans to play in facilitating a rescue plan to enable the King Edward VII Hospital Midhurst to continue operating; [89935]

(3) what discussions he has held with the King Edward VII Hospital in Midhurst on the appointment of a provisional liquidator. [89933]

Ms Blears: This information is not held centrally.

Ministers and departmental officials have received a number of representations regarding the situation at the hospital. Discussions with the liquidator are currently ongoing. In view of that, it would not be appropriate for Ministers to comment further, although these discussions will of course focus on the continuing provision of appropriate care for national health service patients.

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what estimate he has made of the effect on waiting times at St. Richard's hospital, Chichester of the impending closure of King Edward VII hospital at Midhurst; [90142]

(2) what budgeting constraints prevent orthopaedic treatment provided by the NHS in hospitals abroad from being provided in King Edward VII hospital Midhurst; and what the cost differential is. [90141]

Ms Blears: Overseas treatment is one of the options open to national health service commissioners seeking to increase the number of patients treated and reduce waiting times. Any NHS body can commission treatment abroad for its patients and a relatively small-scale pilot was undertaken to establish good practice. It is up to local commissioners to decide, in the light of capacity constraints across their local health economies, and taking into account the different commissioning options available to them, whether or not to refer patients overseas for treatment.

At present a liquidator has been called in to King Edward VII hospital and discussions are now taking place to secure health provision for the local-community. The West Sussex health community is working to ensure that any adverse impact is kept to a minimum.

London Agency Project

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the London Agency Project. [89654]

Mr. Hutton: The London Agency Project has been developed by national health service trusts in London to improve both the quality of temporary agency workers supplied to the NHS from commercial agencies and to achieve value for money for public services.

Phase one of the London Agency Project was implemented on 1 September 2001. 29 agencies were awarded a place on the phase one London framework agreement to supply specialist nurses to London trusts. Phase two of the London Agency Project was launched in April 2002 for the procurement of all other nurses and midwives and health care assistants. As a result, 72 commercial agencies have been awarded a place on the phase two framework agreement that comes into effect on 1 April 2003.

Medical Practitioner Registration

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health under what treaty provisions the European Commission has jurisdiction over the registration of medical practitioners. [88177]

Mr. Hutton: The Treaty establishing the European Community guaranteed the freedom for every European citizen to work, set up business or provide services in any member state. Subsequent Directives set out the provisions for automatic mutual recognition of qualifications in many health professions and other professions, such as veterinary surgeons and architects. Member states must implement these Directives into their domestic legislation.

The registration procedures used by a member state to regulate medical practitioners remains a responsibility of the individual member state, not [illegible] the European Commission. In the United Kingdom, the General Medical Council is the body responsible for registration of medical practitioners.

Medical Staff Recruitment

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* doctors and *(b)* nurses from Ethiopia are employed in the NHS. [89361]

Mr. Hutton: The Department does not collect data on nationality, as requested. The number of national health service hospital doctors and general medical practitioners by country of primary medical qualification is shown in the table.

The data for country of qualification by individual countries are far from complete. There are large numbers of doctors who qualified outside the United Kingdom, for whom we cannot ascribe an individual country.

NHS doctors and nurses in England whose country of primary medical qualification is Ethiopia; 2001

	Numbers (headcount)
HCHS doctors	8
General medical practitioners	0
Nurses	—

Note:

Data on nationality are not collected, only country of primary medical qualification. This does not extend to nurses however, about which no such data are collected. Data as at 30 September 2001

Sources:

Department of Health General and Personal Medical Services Statistics

Department of Health Medical and Dental Workforce Census

Information on the number of nurses employed in the NHS from Ethiopia is not collected centrally.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what discussions he has had with medical staff recruitment agencies about recruitment of doctors and nurses from Ethiopia; [89362]

(2) what his policy is on recruitment of doctors and nurses from Ethiopia. [89363]

Mr. Hutton: The Department published the code of practice for National Health Service employers involved in the international recruitment of healthcare professionals in October 2001. The code provides a detailed explanation of the processes that must be carried out when recruiting internationally to ensure that developing countries and those countries suffering significant staff shortages of their own are not targeted.

The Department has established a list of agencies who are operating in line with the code of practice and information about the list has been conveyed to NHS employers who are strongly advised to refer to the list when establishing new contracts The Department has written to all commercial agencies it is aware of, asking them to provide references from both NHS and other customers confirming compliance with the code of practice. The code states that developing countries should not be targeted for recruitment.

Ethiopia is classed as a developing country. The active recruitment of healthcare professionals from the country is therefore against the Department's code of practice.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what agreements he has reached with the Ethiopian Government about recruitment of Ethiopian doctors and nurses by the NHS. [89393]

Mr. Hutton: There has been no contact between the Department and the Ethiopian Government at Ministerial or any other level.

Modernisation Agency

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the role of the Modernisation Agency is in delivering best practice in the NHS; and what its budget is for this in 2002–03. [87536]

Mr. Hutton: The role of the Modernisation Agency is to support the National Health Service in making radical and sustainable changes to services for the benefit of patients and staff. The Agency's focus is delivery. Their work programme is closely aligned with achievement of NHS Plan targets.

The budget for the Modernisation Agency for 2002–03 is £121 million.

Mortuary Facilities

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which hospitals have had recourse to the use of refrigerated lorries to provide mortuary facilities in the past year. [88421]

Mr. Lammy: Guidance to national health service trusts on the need for temporary body storage facilities to be of a standard which respects patients' dignity was issued in 2000. This made explicit that refrigerated vehicles were not acceptable. The Department is not aware of any NHS trust failing to comply with this guidance.

Multiple Sclerosis

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what progress has been made on the prescription-plus-monitoring scheme for disease-modifying drugs for MS; [89819]

(2) if he will list the centres that have been authorised to prescribe beta interferons through his Department's prescription-plus-monitoring scheme; [89820]

(3) how many people he estimates will receive beta interferons under the prescription-plus-monitoring scheme; [89817]

(4) how long he estimates it will be before all people who may benefit from beta interferons have been assessed by a neurologist for the prescription-plus-monitoring scheme. [89818]

Mr. Lammy: The designation of centres is a matter for local agreement. A list of centres is maintained by the scheme co-ordinator, Sheffield University's School of Health and Related Research, who should be approached for up to date information.

Health Service Circular HSC 2002/004, which introduced the scheme, stated the intention to complete recruitment of patients within 18 months of the scheme being initiated by centres.

It has been estimated that up to 9,000 patients in England and Wales may be eligible for treatment under the scheme.

We understand that the majority of centres are now recruiting patients under the scheme.

National Service Framework for Older People

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures are in place to assess the implementation of the national service framework for older people in England. [91150]

Jacqui Smith: Monitoring the implementation of the national service framework for older people is ongoing and draws on a variety of processes. Information on meeting the 2001 and 2002 milestones has been collected from health and social care organisations. Less formal information gathering takes place regularly through a network of national health service and social services older people leads. A two-year progress report is due to be published in March 2003.

NHS Targets

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the baseline date was for the 24 and 48 hour access targets set out in the NHS plan; and what proportion of GP practices in England met the 24 and 48 hour access targets at that date. [83717]

Mr. Hutton: The NHS Plan primary care access target was informed by the results of the 1998 National Patient Survey, which found that 53 per cent. of patients had been able to get an appointment with their general practitioner within two days of their preferred date. Both the baseline data and the target are expressed in terms of the access available to patients rather than the performance of practices.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the national targets adopted by the NHS. [88169]

Mr. Hutton: The NHS Plan set out the Government's vision for the national health service and makes clear the commitments that we have made for improving services. A copy is available in the Library.

We also recently published "Improvement, Expansion and Reform: Planning and Priorities Framework 2003–20056 (PPF)" which sets out the health and social care priorities for the next three years.

A copy of the PPF is available in the Library.

NHS Trusts (Foundation Status)

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health why he will not disclose the names of the NHS trusts which expressed an interest in foundation status. [89541]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 13 January 2003]:* 31 national health service trusts expressed an interest in foundation status in June 2002. A number of these 31 NHS trusts did not retain their three star status in the performance ratings published in July 2002 and are no longer eligible to apply for foundation status so this list is out of date.

Following publication of "A Guide to NHS Foundation trusts" on 11 December 2002, applications have been invited from current three star acute and specialist NHS trusts to become NHS foundation trusts. The application process has now begun and the closing date for preliminary applications is February 2003. In March 2003, we intend to announce a shortlist of candidates once the preliminary applications have been assessed.

Overseas Doctors (Language Requirements)

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the relationship between the change to the English language requirement for overseas doctors as outlined in the Medical Act 1993 Amendment Order 2002 and the provisions of Article 49 of the European draft directive on medical qualifications. [88173]

Mr. Hutton: It is desirable that a doctor should have to satisfy the General Medical Council that he or she has the necessary knowledge of English before he or she can be registered. Our recent changes to the Medical Act and our position on the Commission's proposal both express this principle. We have also made it clear that we expect employers to ensure that all staff have the knowledge of English necessary for the work to be done, regardless of their registration status.

Overseas Doctors

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will make a statement on the proposed 16 week rule for doctors coming to work in the UK from elsewhere in Europe; and what representations he has made to the EU about the proposed 16 week rule for doctors; [88170]

(2) if he will make a statement on the draft EU directive on the recognition of professional medical qualifications. [88175]

Mr. Hutton: The aim of improving mobility of workers in the European Union is one we fully support. Exchanges of professional staff bring mutual benefits to this country, the national health service and other member states. However, free movement provisions must be balanced with proper safeguards for service quality and public protection and this view has been represented in European Union working groups and council debates on the Directive by both the United Kingdom and other member states. We shall ensure that this concern, including reservations about the 16-week provision of services, is addressed in ongoing negotiations on the Directive.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many doctors who are citizens of *(a)* Pakistan and *(b)* India are working (i) in NHS hospitals and (ii) in general practice. [88958]

Mr. Hutton: The Department does not collect data on citizenship, as requested. The number of national health service hospital doctors and general medical practitioners by country of primary medical qualification is shown in the table.

The data for country of qualification by individual countries are far from complete. There are large numbers of doctors who qualified outside the United Kingdom, for whom we cannot ascribe an individual country. Information for country of primary medical qualification is derived from data supplied by the general medical council.

NHS Hospital Doctors and General Medical Practitioners[1] by country of primary medical qualification—2001

Number (headcount)

	India	*Pakistan*
NHS Hospital Medical Doctors	5,783	1,106
GMPs	2,768	374

[1] Includes GMS Unrestricted Principals, PMS Contracted GPs, PMS Salaried GPs, Restricted Principals, Assistants, GP Registrars, Salaried Doctors (Para. 52 SFA), PMS Other and GP Retainers.

Note:

Data as at 30 September 2001.

Sources:

Department of Health General and Personal Medical Services Statistics.

Department of Health Medical and Dental Workforce Census.

Overseas Treatment

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what definition his Department uses of undue delay when assessing rights of NHS patients to access treatment in continental European hospitals. [89932]

Mr. Hutton: The concept of undue delay applied by the European Court of Justice in Case 157/99 Geraets-Smits and Peerbooms was concerned with the conditions for the grant of authorisation for treatment in another member state.

I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) on 2 November 2001, *Official Report*, column 895W.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his assessment is of the pilot scheme to send NHS patients for treatment in continental Europe; and when he plans to extend the availability of treatment in continental European hospitals of all NHS patients. [89931]

Mr. Hutton: The evaluation report of the overseas treatment pilot carried out by York University Health Economics Consortium was published in August. Copies are available in the Library and on the Department of Health website at http://www.doh.gov.uk/international/evaluationreports.htm.

Overseas treatment is an option open to national health service commissioners seeking to increase the number of patients treated, and reduce waiting times. Any NHS body can legally commission treatment abroad for its patients. However, it is up to local commissioners to decide, in the light of capacity constraints across their local health economies, and taking into account the different commissioning options available to them, whether or not to refer patients overseas for treatment.

The Department has advised any trust wishing to refer patients overseas to contact one of the two "lead commissioners" who are responsible on behalf of the

NHS in England for selecting overseas providers and contracting with them for treatment for NHS patients. These lead commissioners are based in Guy's and St. Thomas' Trust, and Kent and Medway Health Authority.

Public Health Laboratory Service

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the risks that those public health laboratories transferring to NHS trusts will lose their accreditation with United Kingdom Accreditation Services or with Clinical Pathology Accreditation; and what action has been taken to minimise these risks. [90093]

Ms Blears: Our assessment is that transfer to national health services trusts does not affect the accreditation status of transferring laboratories with either Clinical Pathology Accreditation or United Kingdom Accreditation Services.

Polish Health Care Staff

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will make a statement on progress towards the recognition of qualifications and accreditation of dentists trained and qualified in Poland with a view to their being allowed to practise in the United Kingdom on Poland's accession to the European Union; [89859]

(2) if he will make a statement on progress towards the recognition of qualifications and accreditation of *(a)* surgeons, *(b)* doctors and *(c)* nurses trained and qualified in Poland with a view to their possible recruitment to the NHS on Poland's accession to the European Union. [89860]

Mr. Hutton: Once ratified, the Accession Treaty, which is currently being finalised following the agreement in Copenhagen, will provide for the recognition of Polish health professional qualifications on the same basis as for those awarded by other member states. Qualifications awarded following training begun after accession will comply with minimum Community requirements and be automatically recognised. In other cases, evidence of recent and substantial experience in Poland may be required. Arrangements for the recruitment of health professionals to the national health service are currently the subject of separate discussions between the Department and the Polish authorities.

Primary Care Trusts

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the primary care trusts which have been classified as being in under-doctored areas on the basis of the number of general practitioner principals, or equivalents, per weighted head of the population; what funding is being targeted at these primary care trusts in order to aid general practitioner recruitment; and if he will make a statement. [89828]

Mr. Hutton: A list of the primary care trusts which have been classified as under-doctored areas have been placed in the Library. The following strategic health authorities have no PCTs with under-doctored areas:

North Central London
North West London
Avon Gloucestershire and Wiltshire
South West Peninsula
Thames Valley.

The average PCT budget will grow over the next three years by 30.8 per cent. No PCT will receive an increase in funding over the next three years of less than 28 per cent. None of the growth money has been identified for specific purposes. PCTs will be able to use these extra resources to deliver on both national and local priorities.

The Department has a series of measures to enhance general practitioner recruitment and retention. These include 'golden hello' payments, a returners campaign, a flexible career scheme, a retainers scheme, international recruitment and delayed retirement payments.

In the 50 per cent. of PCTs with the lowest numbers of GPs per 100,000 weighted population, 'golden hello' payments of up to £12,000 are available rather than a maximum of £5,000 for other areas.

To date, 1,988 GPs have received a 'golden hello' payment, 993 of which by GPs taking up posts in under-doctored areas.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the funding allocated to primary care trusts for 2003–04 according to their distance from target funding. [90953]

Mr. Hutton: Primary care trust revenue allocations for 2003–04, ranked by their distances from targets as determined by the weighted capitation formula, have been placed in the Library.

Mr. Challen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he has issued to primary care trusts on their freedom to use private contractors as suppliers in the provision of health services. [91353]

Mr. Hutton: Health Service Circular 2000/007, "Securing Service Delivery: Commissioning Freedoms of Primary Care Trusts", issued in April 2002, made clear that primary care trusts should feel free to commission care from wherever they can obtain the best services for patients. Commissioning decisions should be judged against the twin tests of high clinical standards and good value for money.

Prostate Cancer

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to implement the prostate cancer public awareness programme proposed as part of the NHS Prostate Cancer Programme launched in September 2002. [89656]

Ms Blears: The national health service prostate cancer programme stated that an education programme for the public, patients and professionals on the risks associated with individual testing for prostate cancer will be introduced. This has been achieved through the prostate cancer risk management programme, which sent out evidence-based primary care resource packs to all general practitioners in England from 23 September 2002 to aid them in counselling men who are worried about prostate cancer. This ensures that men make an informed choice about whether or not to have a prostate specific antigen (PSA) test based on an information leaflet developed specifically for men about the advantages and disadvantages of having a PSA test.

The Department of Health is funding a Section 64 grant to the Prostate Cancer Charity to increase further information about prostate cancer. This is supporting the creation, review, provision and dissemination of a range of awareness material, supported by £135,000 over three years.

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he estimates that the prostate cancer five year survival rate in England will reach the current European average. [89659]

Ms Blears: The actions set out in the National Health Service Cancer Plan will mean that England will have the fastest improvement in cancer services across Europe over the next five years and eventually a reduction in the death rate from cancer among people aged under 75 years by at least 20 per cent. by 2010. The NHS prostate cancer programme sets out the specific action proposed for prostate cancer.

European comparisons of cancer survival rates require careful interpretation, especially for prostate cancer, where differing levels of prostate specific antigen testing affect the numbers of men identified with the disease and where a significant proportion of men with prostate cancer will die of another cause.

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what action he is taking to improve the five year survival rates from prostate cancer in England; and if he will make a statement; [89680]

(2) what progress has been made towards the achievement of the Government's NHS prostate cancer programme; and if he will make a statement; [89669]

(3) what plans he has to encourage men to make more use of *(a)* traditional prostate cancer tests and *(b)* PSA tests; [89657]

(4) what action he is taking to encourage *(a)* more charitable funding and *(b)* more Government funding for research into prostate cancer. [89658]

Ms Blears: Good progress has been made since the national health service prostate cancer programme was launched on 6 September 2000, setting out the Government's approach to improving prostate cancer services in England and Wales.

As part of the prostate cancer risk management programme (PCRMP), evidence-based primary care resource packs were sent to all general practitioners in England from 23 September 2002 to aid them in counselling men who are worried about prostate cancer, ensuring the men make an informed choice about whether or not to have a prostate specific antigen (PSA) test.

Other elements of the PCRMP include ensuring that a systematic and standardised follow-up pathway is available for individuals whose test result is above the PSA threshold and action to improve the quality of laboratory testing of PSA samples. Primary care and laboratories were informed of recommendations from the scientific reference group which supports the PCRMP in September 2002.

By 2003–04 the Department of Health will be directly funding £4.2 million of research a year on prostate cancer. This is a 20-fold increase compared with 1999–2000. Two National Cancer Research Institute prostate cancer research collaboratives have been established in Newcastle and London. Funded research includes studies on various treatments for prostate cancer, improving the PSA test and ethnic differences in prostate cancer incidence. The National Cancer Research Institute considered prostate cancer as part of its Strategic Analysis in 2002, but made no specific recommendations.

The Department of Health is funding a Section 64 grant to the Prostate Cancer Charity to increase further information about prostate cancer. This is supporting the creation, review, provision and dissemination of a range of awareness material, supported by £135,000 over three years.

92.4 per cent. of patients with suspected urological cancers (including prostate) were seen for their first outpatient appointment within two weeks of their general practitioner deciding they should be urgently referred, and the hospital receiving the referral within 24 hours, in April to June 2002.

The cancer services collaborative is modernising cancer care, including prostate cancer, by reducing unnecessary delays in the system for patients throughout the cancer journey.

The number of consultant urologists grew from 382 in 2000 to 427 in 2001, and is set to grow to 504 in 2005. There may be around an additional 100 trained specialists available to take up consultant posts in urology.

The National Institute of Clinical Excellence's guidance on urological cancers, including prostate cancer, entitled 'Improving Outcomes in Urological Cancers: The Manual', was published in September 2002.

Psychotherapy (Doctors in Training)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the reasons are for the change in the number of hospital doctors in training for psychotherapy since 1997. [90045]

Mr. Hutton: The Royal College of Psychiatrists changed training arrangements after the introduction of the specialist registrar grade so that trainees spend more time at senior house officer (SHO) level, and less time as specialist registrars. Changes of this type take time to filter through. There has been an increase in SHO numbers but not at a sufficient rate to compensate for more experienced specialist registrars moving on to become consultants.

The table shows the number of doctors in training within the specialty of psychotherapy since 1997.

Hospital medical doctors in training with the psychotherapy specialty

England at 30 September *numbers (headcount)*

	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Doctors in training	50	40	40	40	40
of which					
Registrar Group	40	40	30	30	30
Senior House Officers	[1]—	10	10	10	20
House Officers	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—

[1] Denotes five or less than five

Notes:

Figures are rounded to the nearest ten.

Due to rounding totals may not equal the sum of component parts.

Source:

Department of Health medical and dental workforce census

Registered GP Patients

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of *(a)* people over 18, *(b)* people under 18 and *(c)* the total population were registered with a general practitioner in (i) England and (ii) each NHS region in each year since 1996. [83799]

Mr. Hutton: This information is contained respectively in the primary care trusts' lists of populations registered with a general practitioner and in the national Office of National Statistics census resident population. These two data sources are different and do not allow the requested comparison to be made.

Reservists

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of *(a)* general practitioners, *(b)* consultants, *(c)* nurses and *(d)* other NHS staff who will be required to serve overseas in the event of a conflict with Iraq (i) from the West Midlands (South) Strategic Health Authority area and (ii) from the NHS. [90347]

Mr. Lammy: At this stage, we do not know how many national health service staff in the Coventry, Warwickshire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire Strategic Health Authority area or in the NHS as a whole might be required to serve overseas in any possible action against Iraq.

Roaccutane

Clive Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when the Medical Control Agency will complete the review of the safety of Roaccutane; and what independent sources of information have been used by the Medical Control Agency in the assessment of the side effects of Roaccutane; [90766]

(2) what research has been undertaken into those suffering the most serious side effects of Roaccutane to identify those who may be vulnerable; and if he will review advice given to doctors and patients regarding the side effects of Roaccutane; [90767]

(3) how many reported cases of patients suffering side effects of Roaccutane there have been in each year since it was first prescribed. [90768]

Mr. Lammy: Roaccutane (isotretinoin), a vitamin A derivative for the treatment of severe acne, was launched on the United Kingdom market in 1983. The table provides a breakdown of the number of reports of suspected adverse reactions received each year through the Yellow Card Scheme for oral isotretinoin.

Year reaction occurred	*Number of reports*
1983	10
1984	36
1985	59
1986	89
1987	75
1988	64
1989	36
1990	56
1991	44
1992	60
1993	57
1994	75
1995	56
1996	57
1997	64
1998	100
1999	82
2000	97
2001	65
2002	43

A report of a suspected adverse reaction does not necessarily mean that it was caused by the medicine. The number of reports received should not be used as a basis for determining the incidence of a reaction as neither the total number of reactions occurring, nor the number of patients using the drug is known.

The safety of all medicines on the UK market is continuously monitored by the Medicines Control Agency (MCA) with independent expert advice from the Committee on Safety of Medicines (CSM). The sources of information used in this process include UK and foreign reports of suspected adverse reactions, published literature and unpublished studies, information on the level of drug prescribing, information received from other regulatory authorities throughout the world as well as information received from the marketing authorisation holder. There is a substantial body of published research on the safety of isotretinoin and a list of relevant publications has been placed in the House Library.

Warnings about risk factors are included in the summary of product characteristics (SPC) for prescribers and the patient information leaflet (PIL). The product information for oral isotretinoin products states that it should not be used in patients with the following risk factors for side effects: known hypersensitivity (allergy) to the product, liver and kidney disease and in patients taking certain antibiotics (tetracyclines). In addition, isotretinoin should not be used during pregnancy because of the risk of major foetal abnormalities and should not be given to breast feeding women. Warnings are also present about a possible increase in the risk of side effects in patients with a history of depression, patients with diabetes, obesity, alcoholism or lipid metabolism disorders and asthmatic patients.

Advice about the side effects associated with the use of isotretinoin and the risk of teratogenicity (birth defects) has been issued to all doctors and pharmacists in the MCA/GSM bulletin "Current Problems in Pharmacovigilance" in October 1983, December 1997 and August 1998 as well as in the British National Formulary which is issued to health professionals twice a year.

The MCA is currently leading a European-wide review of the product information of isotretinoin products including Roaccutane, with the aim to ensure that up-to-date and consistent information is provided to health professionals and patients to optimise its safe use. This review is likely to take some months to complete. Any new advice will be communicated to health professionals and patients.

Romford (New Hospital)

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent discussions he has had with the NHS Trust in Havering regarding the building of a new hospital in Romford; and if he will make a statement. [90299]

Mr. Hutton: I have had no discussions with the national health service trust in Havering regarding the building of a new hospital in Romford.

Barking Havering and Redbridge Hospitals NHS Trust is making good progress with the development of the private finance initiative solution for the new hospital. It has selected a preferred bidder and the full business case (FBC) is now with the Department of Health. Subject to approval of the FBC, it is anticipated that contracts will be signed by March 2003.

Section 56 Grants

Mr. Hendry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of organisations applying for section 56 grants have been successful in each of the past 10 years; and what the average grant given was in each of those years. [88995]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answer 7 January 2003]:* The Department's Section 64 General Scheme of grants is its main support of national voluntary organisations working in the health and social care fields. Grants may be awarded for up to three financial years. In each application round, on average, only one in three or one in four applications for new/renewal grants are successful.

During 1996–97, a new database was set up to control records and the table shows the data held.

Financial year	*Applications received*	*Total grants paid*	*Voluntary organisations receiving grants*	*Total amount of grants paid £ million*	*Average grant £000*
1995–96	—[1]	595	416	19.9	33.4
1996–97	629	581	450	20.8	35.8
1997–98	627	612	440	21.4	35.0
1998–99	784	643	469	21.1	32.8
1999–2000	717	643	410	22.2	34.5
2000–01	713	579	373	22.6	39.0
2001–02	764	583	397	21.5	36.9

[1] Not available.

Note:

Column 2 shows the total number of applications for separate grants received for each financial year. Records are not kept, however, of the number of voluntary organisations applying. Variations in the total amount of grants paid in column 5 reflect in-year transfers of funds for particular grants or initiatives.

Sterile Service Facilities

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what consultations his Department has had *(a)* within and *(b)* outside the NHS about the (i) provision of sterilisation services and (ii) proposals for a new network of centralised sterile service facilities for the NHS in England. [90618]

Mr. Lammy: The Department has not organised any formal consultation exercise about the provision of decontamination services. We did, however, organise a series of roadshows on decontamination for the national health service in 2001. Officials have also had numerous discussions with individual NHS trusts and other NHS organisations.

The Department is actively seeking to develop the market in sterile services and is encouraging new entrants as well as existing suppliers to participate in procurements. To that end, officials have met existing and potential suppliers on over 100 occasions: in specially arranged conferences and workshops, private meetings with individual companies, visits to reference sites and meetings with trade associations.

Student Nurses

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average value is of the bursary for students of nursing degrees in terms of pounds per hour. [88659]

Mr. Hutton: Nursing degree students are required to complete a minimum number of training hours over the whole of any course. The number of actual hours of study in an academic year will vary considerably. There are also significant variations in the levels of bursary degree students receive to take account of individual circumstances.

For these reasons it is not possible to provide an average value of nursing students' bursaries in terms of pounds per hour.

Thames Gateway

Jon Cruddas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the extra resources required to support the growth and development of new communities in the Thames Gateway area; what discussions he has had with other Government Departments in relation to supporting the growth and development of new communities in the Thames Gateway; and what resources he has allocated to support the growth and development of new communities in the Thames Gateway. [90424]

Mr. Hutton: National health service organisations covering the Thames Gateway area, in North East London, South East London, South Essex and North Kent, are actively working with a range of partners on developing plans for the Thames Gateway. The aims are to ensure new communities are sustainable, and both enjoy good health and have access to high quality health services.

The Department is ensuring that there is a strategic overview and will analyse the outcome of this local planning in the form of a 'Health Scenario' for the Thames Gateway as a whole. This work will detail the additional health and social service provision needed to support the development of new sustainable communities. It is anticipated that this work will be finalised in the spring.

Planning for the Thames Gateway is led by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and co-ordinated by the Thames Gateway Strategic Partnership. I represent the Department on this partnership.

Funding for services in the Thames Gateway will be allocated in the normal way through primary care trusts. Those PCTs covering the Thames Gateway area will see an overall increase of 34 per cent., or nearly £705 million, in monies available to them over the next three financial years. Some PCTs will see a much bigger increase, including Barking and Dagenham PCT, whose resources will increase by 42.5 per cent. This increased level of resource, along with additional capital building programmes in the Gateway, including a new £230 million, 860 bed hospital at Romford, will result in an expansion in the services available to the residents of the Thames Gateway.

The increased growth in population resulting from promoting the Thames Gateway as an area of population growth is expected to take place beyond 2006–07. The resources needed to support additional health and social care provision in the Thames Gateway will therefore need to be identified in future Spending Reviews.

Ukrainian Health Care Staff

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his policy on the recognition of qualifications and accreditation of professional medical staff, including surgeons and nurses, in the Ukraine with a view to possible recruitment to the NHS. [89861]

Mr. Hutton: We welcome the contribution made to the national health service by overseas qualified professionals. Practitioners must be registered to work in the NHS. The assessment of applications for registration is the responsibility of the General Medical Council for doctors, and of the Nursing and Midwifery Council for nurses.

Waiting Times

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made towards meeting the four hour maximum waiting time target for accident and emergency departments in *(a)* England and *(b)* each NHS region. [91128]

Mr. Lammy: The NHS Plan set the target for accident and emergency (A&E) departments to reduce the maximum wait in A&E from arrival to admission, transfer or discharge to four hours by December 2004.

In quarter two 2002–03, 77 per cent. of patients spent less than four hours total time in A&E in England.

The table shows this figure broken down into strategic health authorities.

Name of strategic health authority in England	*Total attendances at major A&E*	*Percentage of patients who spent less than four hours in A&E*
England	3,095,650	77
Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire HA	106,095	83
Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire HA	86,041	76
Essex HA	84,375	72
North West London HA	160,240	74
North Central London HA	101,049	77
North East London HA	116,966	63
South East London HA	118,576	72
South West London HA	91,844	68
Northumberland, Tyne and Wear HA	88,259	89
County Durham and Tees Valley HA	71,301	93
North and East Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire HA	87,462	83
West Yorkshire HA	176,184	85
Cumbria and Lancashire HA	120,115	89

Name of strategic health authority in England	*Total attendances at major A&E*	*Percentage of patients who spent less than four hours in A&E*
Greater Manchester HA	214,486	77
Cheshire and Merseyside HA	179,833	75
Thames Valley HA	101,727	71
Hampshire and Isle of Wight HA	78,699	79
Kent and Medway HA	88,867	71
Surrey and Sussex HA	155,325	75
Avon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire HA	118,453	78
South West Peninsula HA	76,484	79
Somerset and Dorset HA	57,018	84
South Yorkshire HA	95,108	90
Trent HA	127,945	83
Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and Rutland HA	59,710	68
Shropshire and Staffordshire HA	72,812	73
Birmingham and the Black Country HA	176,872	83
Coventry, Warwickshire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire HA	83,804	82

Winter Vomiting Virus

Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many hospitals have been closed for admissions in each of the last 10 years as a result of winter vomiting virus. [89661]

Mr. Hutton: Detailed information over the last ten years in the form requested is not held centrally. It would be very unusual for a hospital to be completely closed to admissions. However, partial restrictions on some admissions may be applied for a range of reasons including winter vomiting virus. These restrictions usually apply for very short periods until operational pressures have eased.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Child Care

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many full-time child care places are provided through Sure Start programmes. [87966]

Maria Eagle: The first 260 round 1–4 Sure Start local programmes plan to have created 10,000 new full time childcare places by 2003–04. The programmes approved continues to grow towards the target of at least 500 programmes. Programmes beyond the first 260 will create further childcare places.

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what steps he is taking to improve access to child care for working parents. [91056]

Maria Eagle *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* We have funded an unprecedented expansion in child care provision throughout the country through the National Childcare Strategy. Since 1997, 553,000 new places have been created benefiting more than one million children.

A new Unit, led by my colleague the Minister for Sure Start (Baroness Catherine Ashton) and accountable for delivery to both the Department for Education and Skills and the Department for Work and Pensions, will administer a budget of £1.5 billion a year by 2006. This includes more than doubling child care spending.

By March 2004, new child care places for 1.6 million children will be created, with further new places established for 450,000 children by 2006. Specific initiatives, such as the establishment of Children's Centres and Neighbourhood Nurseries, will expand high quality, safe child care in disadvantaged areas, increasingly provided alongside early education and family support.

Substantial help with child care costs is provided to lower income families through the child care tax credit element of the Working Families Tax Credit. This assistance will continue in an improved and more flexible form as part of the new Working Tax Credit from April 2003.

Departmental Consultation

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) what his arrangements are for consulting the governors of *(a)* community schools, *(b)* foundation schools and *(c)* voluntary schools on changes to regulations; and if he will make a statement on the circumstances in which such consultations have been undertaken through an intermediary body in the last 12 months; [91242]

(2) what his arrangements are for consulting the trustees of voluntary schools *(a)* in the trusteeship of dioceses and *(b)* in other trusteeships on changes to regulations; and if he will make a statement on the circumstances in which such consultations have been undertaken through an intermediary body in the last 12 months. [91243]

Mr. Miliband: The arrangements for consulting the groups in question on changes to regulations are in line with the arrangements that we have for consulting schools more generally in England on proposed changes to regulations.

The Department follows the code of practice which was issued by the Cabinet Office in November 2000. In planning distribution and coverage we take a number of factors into account including *(a)* the likely impact and burden of bureaucracy on schools in automatically being sent mailings from DfES; *(b)* the likely time resource that is required at the school end to respond in a full and effective way to consultation documents within the specified time and *(c)* the type of regulation, or changes to regulations, proposed.

With these factors in mind documents are sent to a randomly selected and representative cross sample of schools within a particular school type category. Simultaneously consultation documents are routinely placed on the DfES public website and recorded in the DfES publication "Spectrum" which allows all types of schools and other bodies to access and view consultation documents as they see fit.

As well as the random cross sample of schools to which consultation documents are sent, a number of organisations and bodies external to schools also receive them. These will generally include intermediaries such as dioceses who are sent paper copies of consultation papers about school matters. The following list shows the consultations of relevance to schools that have taken place in the past 12 months to which, through a variety of means, intermediary bodies will have had access.

Consultation title

Consultation on Accessible Schools: Planning to increase access to schools for disabled pupils

Revised Guidance on Exclusion from School-Draft for Consultation

Quinquennial Review of Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)

Consultation on Raising Standards-Training and Development for Leaders and Managers

14–19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards (Adults)

National Centre for Excellence in Science Teaching

14–19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards (Young People)

Publication of School and College Performance Tables in2002 Consultation

Proposals to introduce a mandatory requirement for first-time headteachers to hold the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH)

Electronic Communications in Education: an Order under the Electronic Communications Act 2000

STRB report on teacher workload

Performance Pay Progression: Reconsultation on Revised Special Grant Report

Investment to Support the Provision of New Pupil Places in Schools

Consultation on the Constitution of School Governing Bodies

Consultation on School Organisation Proposals by the Learning and Skills Council under the Education Act 2002

Teachers Pension Scheme: Amendments to the Teachers' Pensions Regulations 1997

Extending the National Curriculum for England to Include the Foundation Stage

Consultation on Revised School Admissions and Admission Appeals Codes of Practice and Accompanying Regulations

Consultation on Acoustic Design of Schools

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will list the consultations undertaken by his Department in the last calendar year, indicating those which did not comply with the good government guidance on consultation. [91245]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: A list of the public consultations undertaken by my Department, which commenced after 1 January 2002 and closed before 31 December 2002 is in the following table. The Department has complied with the Cabinet Office Code of Practice on Written Consultation, in each case applying exemptions where appropriate, especially where for the conduct of efficient business and in the public interest my Department was required to take urgent action. I have indicated where my Department applied an exemption to the 12 week minimum period for a consultation, as specified in criterion 5 of the Code.

Consultation title	*Consultation period if less than 12 weeks*
Consultation on Accessible Schools: Planning to increase access to schools for disabled pupils	10 weeks
Revised Guidance on Exclusion from School—Draft for Consultation	
Quinquennial Review of Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)	6 weeks
Quinquennial Review of Investors in People UK	4 weeks
Consultation on Raising Standards—Training and Development for Leaders and Managers	
14–19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards (Adults)	
National Centre for Excellence in Science Teaching	
The Adult Common Basic Data Set	
Early Years and Childcare Regulation	
14–19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards (Young People)	
Investors in Children Consultation Paper	
Publication of School and College Performance Tables in 2002 Consultation	9 weeks
Proposals to introduce a mandatory requirement for first-time headteachers to hold the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH)	
Electronic Communications in Education: an Order under the Electronic Communications Act 2000	
STRB report on teacher workload	8 weeks
Performance Pay Progression: Reconsultation on Revised Special Grant Report	4 weeks
Together From The Start—Practical guidance for professionals working with disabled children (birth to 2) and their families	
Developing Early Intervention/Support Services for Deaf Children and their Families	
The Department for Education and Skills—Race Equality Scheme	
Supporting the cost of home-based child care	
Success for All: Reforming Further Education and Training	
Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications	
Investment to Support the Provision of New Pupil Places in Schools	

Consultation title	*Consultation period if less than 12 weeks*
Consultation on the Constitution of School Governing Bodies	
Consultation on School Organisation Proposals by the Learning and Skills Council under the Education Act 2002	
Teachers Pension Scheme: Amendments to the Teachers' Pensions Regulations 1997	9 weeks
Extending the National Curriculum for England to include the foundation stage	7 weeks
Consultation on Revised School Admissions and Admission Appeals Codes of Practice and Accompanying Regulations	3 weeks
Consultation on Acoustic Design of Schools	

Departmental Expenditure (Newsprint)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the total expenditure of his Department was on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in 2002. [90544]

Mr. Charles Clarke: During the 2001–02 financial year the Department spent £294,000 on the purchase of books, newspapers, magazines and periodicals. This figure includes expenditure incurred before some functions transferred to the Department for Work and Pensions and other departments. It is not possible to separate costs further without disproportionate cost.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the distribution of his Department's wholetime equivalent staff was, including the staff in agencies and other bodies reporting to him, in each Government office region and nation of the UK *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the most recent available period. [90478]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 15 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 609W.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many full-time equivalent staff are employed in *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of the agencies it sponsors; and what the equivalent figures were for 1997. [90676]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 697W.

Education Business Links

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what role Education Business Links play in facilitating work-related learning placements with small and medium sized enterprises. [90929]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: Education/business links have an important role to play in providing experiences of the world of work for young people. We are providing £25 million in 2002–03 to promote closer links between schools and business. Education/business links organisations work with many small and medium sized enterprises to provide opportunities for work-related learning for young people, including work experience placements undertaken by 95 per cent. of pupils at Key Stage 4.

In addition, through our "Increased Flexibility for 14–16 Year Olds" programme, we are making available £38 million which will create over 30,000 part-time placements per annum in 2002–04. This programme will give many young people at Key Stage 4 the chance to pursue vocational courses in colleges, with training providers and with employers. Early indications are that education/business links organisations and small and medium sized enterprises are involved in the local delivery of the programme.

Ethical Banking

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what contracts have been concluded as a result of the Government's commitment to support ethical banking. [89949]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: The Government believe it is important for consumers to have choice in financial products, including the availability of 'ethical' products. However, it would not be appropriate for the Government to exclusively support the development of one specific group of financial service providers. It is for individual consumers to decide the attributes they most value from their financial services and for financial services firms to be transparent about their use of funds and investments.

External Consultants

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the total cost to his Department was of the use of external consultants in 2002. [90506]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: For 2001–02 £5.7 million[1] was spent on administrative consultancy costs and for 2002–03 £2 million has been spent to date. This figure excludes programme consultancy costs which are currently not collected centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. From April 2003 arrangements will be made to collect centrally expenditure information for programme consultancy costs.

[1] This figure includes consultancy spend incurred by central functions that subsequently transferred to other Government Departments under Machinery of Government changes.

Fair Trade

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what fair trade criteria he sets when deciding upon what suppliers to use. [89916]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: I refer the hon. Member to the answer provided by the Chief Secretary on 9 December 2002, *Official report*, column 92W which read as follows.

> "There is no Government-wide approach to the procurement of Fair trade products. Each Government Department is responsible for making its own decisions on such products, against the background of the Government's value for money policy, the EC procurement rules and the Department's objectives. However, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has made clear, the Government are committed to supporting ethical trading wherever possible and provide significant support to the Fair trade Foundation's efforts in promoting the supply and marketing of Fair trade products".

In line with Government procurement policy the evaluation of tenders is based on value for money considerations having due regard to propriety and regularity. The use of fair trade products was given due consideration alongside other requirements during the recent catering service procurement with a subsequent clause included within the contract requiring that, wherever possible, fair trade beverages are offered for sale in all DfES Head Office restaurants.

Job Sharing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will make a statement on the extent of job sharing in his Department. [90867]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: The Department promotes and supports the use of a range of flexible working patterns including job sharing, to enable staff to balance home and work responsibilities. Flexible working options for staff include part-time work, a flexi-time system, compressed hours, part-year working and home working. Internal vacancies in the Department are open to all staff, irrespective of their working arrangements or pattern of work. Applicants for external vacancies are also invited to apply on a full time, part time or job share basis.

The Department does not keep a record of the number of people specifically employed on job share contracts. 12.5 per cent. (569) of staff are employed under a range of part-time work patterns.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills pursuant to his answer of 8 January 2003, ref. 89323, if he will give details of each ministerial visit during 2002 on departmental business to *(a)* Belgium, *(b)* France, *(c)* Slovakia, *(d)* Italy, *(e)* Australia and *(f)* the United States, including (i) the purpose of the visit, (ii) the Ministers involved, (iii) the number of officials accompanying the Minister, (iv) the number of advisers accompanying the Minister and (v) the cost of the visit. [90443]

Mr. Stephen Twigg *[holding answer 13 January 2003]*: The Government publish an annual list of Cabinet Ministers' visits overseas costing more than £500, and the annual cost of all Ministers' visitsoverseas. For details of visits overseas during the period 1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002, I refer the hon. Member to the answer provided by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 24 July 2002, *Official Report*, column 1375W. Similar details for 2002–03 will be published as soon as possible after the end of the current financial year.

Post-16 Funding

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the budget is for school sixth form and college access funds for *(a)* 2002–03 and *(b)* 2003–04. [87956]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 19 December 2002]*: The Department for Education and Skills has allocated £129.38m in 2002–03 for Learner Support Funds (access funds) and £159.68m in 2003–2004.

Funding is distributed via the Learning & Skills Council to colleges, external institutions, school and college sixth forms in the further education sector.

Public Bodies

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will list the present appointees of the *(a)* Centre for Information on Language Teaching, *(b)* Construction Industry Training Board, *(c)* Engineering Construction Industry Training Board, *(d)* Equal Opportunities Commission, *(e)* Funding Agency for Schools, *(f)* Further Education Funding Council, *(g)* Further Education Funding Council Yorkshire and Humberside Regional Committee, *(h)* Higher Education Funding Council for England, *(i)* Investors in People UK, *(j)* Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, *(k)* REMPLOY, *(l)* National Advisory Council on Employment of People with Disabilities, *(m)* National Disability Council and *(n)* Teacher Training Agency. [90987]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: The information requested is as follows:

Current Teacher Training Agency—Board Members

Executive Members	
Sir Professor Clive Booth	Chair
Dr. John Crater	Director and Chief Executive Edgehill College of FE
Carole Evans	Retired Primary Head
Professor David Reynolds	Dept of Education Loughborough University
Maggie Semple	Chief Exec: The Experience Corp
Professor Eileen Baker	Principal and Chief Exec, Bishop Grosseteste College
Prof Barbara Mac Gilchrist	Dean of ITT, ULIE
David Kershaw	Head Coundon Court School and Community College
Victoria Nye	Director, Association of Unit Trusts and Investments Funds
Christopher Baker	Freelance Consultant
Non Executive Member	
Ralph Tabberer	Chief Executive TTA

Investors in People UK—Board Members

Tim Melville-Ross	Chair
Hans Reismann	Scotland
Sheila Drury	Wales
Geraldine Keegan	Northern Ireland
Martin Henry	CBI-SMEs
Samantha Gemmell	Small Business Council
Michael Stark	LSC
Lord Tom Sawyer	Ex Gen Sec Labour Party
Sue Thomas	Redwood
Garry Hawkes	Accord PLC
Ed Sweeney	TU-UNIFI
Norman McLean	National Mentoring Consortium
Hugh Try	DfES interests
Janice Shiner	DfES Assessor
Stephen Marston	DfES Assessor
Ruth Spellman	IiPUK
John Rhodes	DTI (Observer)

Centre for Information on Language Training—Board of Governors

Mr. Stephen Jones	Chair
Mr. Jim Beale	
Mr. Richard Bunker	
Mr. Jonathan Day	Head of Languages, The Lord Grey School, Milton Keynes
Mr. Peter Downes	
Ms Anne Farren	Richmond LEA
Mr. Colin Flint QBE	
Mr. Terry Lamb	Department of Educational Studies, The University of Sheffield
Mr. Ian A. Lamont QBE	Rector, Alva Academy
Dr. Peter Lehmann CBE	Energy Saving Trust
Mr. Anthony Lunch	Managing Director, Business Link
Mr. Hugh Morgan-Williams	Canford Audio plc
Dr. Susan Price	Pro-Vice Chancellor, University of East London
Mr. Mike Short	Barclay School, Stevenage
Professor Eric Sunderland	
Mr. Peter Thompson	Business in the Community

Higher Education Funding Council for England—Board Members

Chair:

Mr. David Young

Chief Executive:

Professor Sir Howard Newby

Members:

Dr. John Taylor QBE

Professor Sir Ron Cooke

Mrs. Jackie Fisher

Dr. David Potter CBE

Professor Sir Gareth Roberts

Ms Dorma Urwin

Mr. Stephen Bundred

Professor Peter Scott

Mr. Richard Coldwell

Mr. Peter Saraga

Professor Nigel Savage

Mrs. Ann Lloyd

Sir Richard Sykes

In April 2001 the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) replaced the Further Education Funding Council. Current members of the LSC National Council are as folows.

Members	
Bryan Sanderson	Chair
John Harwood	Chief Executive
Chris Banks	Chief Executive, Big Thoughts Ltd.
Vincent Watts	Chair, East of England Regional Development Agency
Jane Drabble QBE	Former Director of Education, BBC
Imtiaz Farookhi	Chief Executive, National House Building Council
Professor Bob Fryer CBE	Chief Executive, National Health Service University
John Merry	Deputy Leader, Salford City Council
John Monks	General Secretary, Trade Union Congress
Lynne Morris	Principal, Joseph Chamberlain Sixth Form College, Birmingham
Sir George Sweeney	Principal, Knowsley Community College, Merseyside
Alexandra Burslem	Vice Chancellor, Manchester Metropolitan University
Giles Clarke	Chair and Chief Executive ATL Telecom
Digby Jones	Director General, Confederation of British Industry
Shirley Cramer	Chief Executive, Dyslexia Institute

Engineering Construction Industry Training Board—Board Members

Chair:

Jim Rowland CBE

Employers:

Barbara Rider

Mike Hockey

Douglas Walker

Louise Ferguson

Chris Lloyd-Jones

Richard Leamon

Brian Rogan

Colin Barnes

William McLean

Employer Association officials:

Brenig Williams

Clients: (Two posts)

Jeffrey House

Dr. Alix Thorn

Trade Union representatives:

Paul Corby

Neil Moore

HE representative:

Prof Ron McCaffer

FE representative:

Rae Angus

Construction Industry Training Board—Board Members

Chairman:

Sir Michael Latham

Deputy Chairman:

Peter Rogerson

Employers:

Stewart Tilley

John Milne

Malcolm Harris

Michael Fitchett

Trevor Gamble

Howard Baggaley

Roderick Tait

Neil Telling

Maurice Denyer

Geoffrey Snow

Geoffrey Lister

Margaret Sullivan

James Wates

Clients:

David Adamson

Trade Union representatives:

George Brumwell

Robert Blackman

HE representative:

Prof Brian Lee

FE representative:

Mrs. Sadie Walton

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority—Board Members

Sir Anthony Greener	Chair
Ian McAllister	Deputy Chair
Ken Boston	Chief Executive QCA
Anne Duke	Headteacher, Southwater County Infant School
Jenny Fitton	Principal, Taunton's College
Ed Gould	Master, Marlborough College
Terry Morgan	Chief Executive, Tube lines
Dennis Richards	Headteacher, St. Aiden's C of E High School
Ray Shostak	Director of Children, Schools and Families Service
Nick Stuart	Vice President, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
Ted Wragg	School of Education, Exeter University

The Funding Agency for Schools

The Funding Agency for Schools was responsible for grant payments to Grant Maintained Schools, and associated planning issues. Following the reversion of GM schools into the LEA sector in 1999, the agency (which was a Non-Departmental Public Body) was wound up on 1 November 1999 under s.132 of the School Standards and Framework Act.

The Department for Education and Skills does not have responsibility for the following organisations:

REMPLOY	Department for Work and Pensions
National advisory Council on Employment of People with Disabilities	Department for Work and Pensions
National Disability Council	Department for Work and Pensions
Equal Opportunities Commission Department of Trade and Industry	Department of Trade and Industry

School Fires

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what discussions he has had over the past year on measures to reduce arson attacks on schools; and if he will make a statement. [91310]

Mr. Miliband: Officials from this Department sit on the Arson in Schools Working Group. This comprises experts representing the insurance industry, the fire and police services, local authorities and Government Departments. The group meets regularly to review new data on school fires and advises on ways of reducing the risks of arson in schools through seminars and publications. One of its outputs has been the publication of the guide "How to Combat Arson in Schools", copies of which have been sent to all maintained schools in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what discussions he has had on measures to mitigate the effects of fires in schools; and if he will make a statement. [91311]

Mr. Miliband: If a fire should happen in a school, the Department's primary concern is for the safety of pupils, teachers and other users. Regulation 17 of the Education (School Premises) Regulations 1999 requires that every part of a school building, and of the land provided for a school, shall be such that the safe escape of the occupants in case of fire is reasonably assured. Schools are also covered by the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and by subsequent related regulations. These include aspects of fire safety.

To help schools manage fire safety, the Department published Managing School Facilities Guide 6, "Fire Safety", in 2000. This offers guidance on how to minimise the risk of fire, including identifying hazards and carrying out risk assessments. It also gives advice on training and on fire detection and alarm systems.

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what plans he has for *(a)* issuing guidance and *(b)* making it a statutory obligation that newly built schools should have fire sprinklers installed. [91313]

Mr. Miliband: Since April 2001, all new construction work at schools has been subject to approval under the Building Regulations. Projects will not be approved unless they are designed in accordance with the 2000 edition of Approved Document B (Fire Safety), which accompanies the regulations. The Building Regulations do not require the installation of fire sprinkler systems in new school accommodation and the Department does not intend to seek such a change.

The Department's guide "Fire Safety" includes information on fire sprinklers. It states that, though expensive to install, their use may be worthwhile in schools where the risk of arson is high. In these circumstances sprinkler systems can help minimise the loss of valuable course work and teaching materials through fire, and prevent major disruption to the life of a school.

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what was the estimated cost of arson attacks in schools in each of the past five years. [91314]

Mr. Miliband: The Department does not collect these figures.

School Laboratories

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what information the appraisal of asset management plans generated on the condition of accommodation and equipment in secondary school science laboratories. [90955]

Mr. Miliband: The condition data that have been collected from local education authorities in connection with their asset management plans do not separately identify the condition of science laboratories or the equipment they contain. To have asked for spaces to be separately identified would have placed an undue burden on authorities.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what plans he has to ask OFSTED to monitor spending on schools' laboratories and equipment supplies in more detail than at present. [90956]

Mr. Miliband: OFSTED as part of its general remit assesses the suitability of school buildings for delivery of the National Curriculum, including the sciences. There are at present no plans to ask OFSTED separately to monitor the spending on schools' laboratories and equipment supplies. Generally, we do not monitor details of capital investment at LEA level because of the bureaucratic burden that this would impose. An evaluation report of £60 million capital funding that was allocated to LEAs for the School Laboratories for 21st Century scheme in 2000–01 and 2001–02, covering a sample of 149 participating LEAs will be prepared over the next 12 months.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what provisions will be made for schools with unsatisfactory or worse science accommodation that did not benefit from the funding made available through the School Laboratories for the 21st Century scheme. [90957]

Mr. Miliband: The central Government funding available for investment in school buildings will rise from £3 billion this year, to £3.8 billion for 2003–04, and will rise further to over £5 billion by 2005–06. The bulk of this funding is allocated by formula to schools and to local education authorities (LEAs) to support investment in their priority needs. LEAs have Asset Management Plans (AMPs) to prioritise these needs locally in a rigorous, open and consultative process, based on a full survey of the building needs of all their schools, including for science teaching and learning, and reflecting government priorities such as our aim to improve the provision of laboratories. Schools now receive substantial direct capital funding, to give them a direct stake in investment in their buildings, including in laboratories. A secondary school of 1,000 pupils will in 2003–04 receive about £75,000 of direct capital, and this funding can be rolled over for up to three years to allow major projects to be addressed.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many working days were lost due to illness in his Department in *(a)* 2002 and *(b)* each of the preceding five years. [90746]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: The overall sickness absence rate in the Department for Education and Skills for 2001 was 8.4 days per staff year.

The overall sickness absence rate in the former Department for Education and Employment for each of the years from 2000 to 1997 was:

2000—11.3 days per staff year

1999—11.0 days per staff year

1998—11.6 days per staff year

1997—12.6 days per staff year.

The figures are taken from the report 'Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service', published annually by the Cabinet Office. The figures for 2002 will be announced in due course.

My Department is committed to managing sickness absence effectively and to maintaining its efforts to try and meet the 2003 target for reduced sickness absence as set out in its Service Delivery Agreement.

Study Support

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills pursuant to the Answers to the hon. Members for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Lynne Jones) and for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber) of 18 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 832W, when he expects to announce detailed plans for the funding of study support activities. [90783]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: We announced at the end of December our plans for increased total spending on the main study support programmes over the next three years: £85m in 2003–04; £115m in 2004–05; and £159m in 2005–06. The bulk of this money will go to schools and local education authorities, with additional funds targeted on Excellence in Cities areas, and in support of our national Key Stage 3 strategy to raise standards in the early secondary years. We will also provide extra funding to expand the Playing for Success scheme with more study support centres; and funding for national organisations which provide advice, training and project support to those delivering study support activities. We will announce further details in due course.

Teachers

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the total cost was to *(a)* local government, *(b)* central Government and *(c)* both local and central Government of employing (i) teachers, (ii) deputy head teachers, (iii) head teachers and (iv) all teachers in each year since 1997. [91521]

Mr. Miliband: Expenditure by local education authorities in England on teaching staff in each year since 1997 was as follows.

Expenditure on teaching staff—England, 1997–98 to 2000–01

	Expenditure (£ million in cash terms)
1997–98	9,859
1998–99	10,249
1999–2000	12,236
2000–01	13,214

Employment costs for teachers at maintained schools are not met directly by central Government but by the LEAs and schools which employ them. No figures are held centrally on the breakdown of these costs between heads, deputies and other teachers.

Teaching Assistants

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what his definition is of a High Level Teaching Assistant; and what the *(a)* minimum qualification levels, *(b)* training requirements and *(c)* salary scales are. [91584]

Mr. Miliband: The term "higher-level teaching assistant" has been used in my Department's recent consultation document "Developing the role of support staff" to describe individuals without Qualified Teacher Status who could assist classroom teachers with higher-level tasks directly associated with teaching and learning. Details of their training and qualifications will be developed following the end of the consultation period on 22 January 2003, but the consultation document proposes that they should be trained to a level between that of the existing NVQ level 3 qualification for teaching assistants and the level of Qualified Teacher Status. Decisions about pay for all school support staff are made at a local level by schools and LEAs but the consultation document also indicates that my officials will work with local government employers and support staff unions to ensure that greater responsibilities are reflected in pay.

Top-up Fees

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland regarding the introduction of university top-up fees. [90018].

Margaret Hodge: My right hon. Friend meets the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland from time to time in the course of normal business. There have also been specific discussions during the higher education review, including on the issue of top-up fees.

Unused School Rooms

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what incentives he gives to local education authorities to find alternative uses for unused rooms in schools. [85555]

Mr. Miliband *[holding answer 5 December 2002]:* Through the Asset Management Planning process, we encourage local education authorities and schools to make best value use of school buildings. For example, as part of the development of Asset Management Plans, we are currently surveying all school buildings to give schools and authorities up-to-date information on their school buildings, including the split of space between teaching and non-teaching areas and space not used directly for education. We also plan shortly to advise all headteacher and governing bodies on best practice in estate management. We encourage schools and authorities to develop community use of school buildings.

Youth Crime

Mr. Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what measures he is taking to educate young people about the penalties for shop theft. [90263]

Mr. Miliband: Pupils learn about the penalties of crime as part of Citizenship education—now a statutory subject in secondary schools—and as part of the national framework for Personal, Social and Health Education and Citizenship in primary schools. Detailed guidance sent to all schools by the QCA includes specific units to help teachers to develop pupils' understanding of issues of crime, including the role and operation of the criminal and civil justice system. For example, the unit 'Respect for property' helps pupils in KS 1 and 2 (age 5–10) to discuss and learn about the consequences of crime and the concept of taking responsibility for property in the community. In another unit 'Crime' pupils in KS3 (age 11–14) build on what they have learned in primary schools to explore how crime affects young people, victims of crime and their communities.

Mr. Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills when he last met the Home Secretary to discuss crimes by schoolchildren. [90264]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: My right hon. Friend has regular meetings with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary about this and other relevant issues.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Private Letting

Keith Vaz: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what legal advice, in addition to that provided by the Citizens Advice Bureaux, is available to tenants whose landlord breaches the letting agreement. [90999]

Mr. McNulty: Tenants can seek legal advice from a solicitor in all legal matters. Advice is also available from community law services such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, Law Centres, or the local authority's housing advice centre.

Keith Vaz: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will establish an official body responsible for tenants' deposits and able to act as an authoritative third party in private letting contracts. [90997]

Mr. McNulty: Currently the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has no plans to intervene in the contractual relationship between private landlords and their tenants by legislating for a third party to intervene and adjudicate in their disputes. However, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has issued a consultation paper "Tenancy money: probity and protection", in which views were requested on whether to move to a mandatory system for the protection of tenancy deposits; and, if so, what arrangements should provide for it. The deadline for responses is 28 February. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will consider whether and how to legislate in the light of responses received.

Audit Commission

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many PSA targets the Audit Commission has. [91510]

Mr. Leslie: The Audit Commission has no PSA targets. However, the work of the Commission contributes to the achievement of my Department's target of improving the delivery and value for money of local services.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister whether people who work for the Audit Commission are required to declare other jobs. [91511]

Mr. Leslie: The Audit Commission's code of conduct requires employees to obtain prior approval for external work for which they will be paid, for other work which they will undertake in the Audit Commission's time or which is connected with their work for the Commission.

Consultation Exercises

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister which of the non-departmental public bodies sponsored by his Department *(a)* hold public meetings, *(b)* conduct public consultation exercises, *(c)* conduct consultation exercises with outside commercial interests, *(d)* publish a register of members' interests, *(e)* publish agendas for meetings and *(f)* publish the minutes of meetings; and whether in each case this is a statutory requirement. [91625]

Mr Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister sponsors a range of executive, advisory or tribunal non-departmental public bodies. Of these:

(a) the Audit Commission, English Partnerships, Housing Action Trusts, the Parliamentary Boundary Commissions and the Rent Assessment Panels hold public meetings. This is a statutory requirement for the Parliamentary Boundary Commissions and the Rent Assessment Panels;

(b) the Advisory Panel on Beacon Councils, Audit Commission, English Partnerships, Housing Action Trusts, Housing Corporation, the Parliamentary Boundary Commissions and the Standards Board for England conduct public consultation exercises. This is a statutory requirement for the Audit Commission in some cases, the Housing Action Trusts and the Parliamentary Boundary Commissions;

(c) the Audit Commission, English Partnerships, Housing Corporation and the Rent Assessment Panels conduct consultation exercises with outside commercial interests. This is a statutory requirement for the Audit Commission in some cases;

(d) the Community Forum, English Partnerships, Housing Action Trusts, Housing Corporation, Parliamentary Boundary Commissions, Rent Assessment Panels and the Standards Board for England publish aregister of members' interests. In addition the Advisory Panel on Beacon Councils, Audit Commission, Building Regulations Advisory Committee and the Property Advisory Group also keep a register which can be made available on request. This is not a statutory requirement for any of these NDPBs;

(e) Housing Action Trusts and the Housing Corporation publish agendas for meetings, expect where items may be of a confidential nature. This is not a statutory requirement;

(f) Housing Action Trusts publish minutes of meetings except for confidential items. This is not a statutory requirement.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the distribution of his Office's whole-time equivalent staff including the staff in agencies and other bodies reporting to him was in each Government office region and nation of the UK *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the most recent available period. [90480]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister was established following machinery of Government changes in May 2002. I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 15 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 609W, which sets out the number of staff for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's predecessors bodies.

English House Condition Survey

Ms Walley: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he will publish the results of the 2001 English House Condition Survey. [91065]

Mr. McNulty: The report is currently being drafted with an aim to being published in spring 2003.

Fire Deaths

Adam Price: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many deaths there were due to fires in the United Kingdom in each of the last five years between *(a)* 10.00 pm and 6.00 am, *(b)* 6.00 am and 2.00 pm and *(c)* 2.00 pm and 10.00 pm. [91895]

Mr. Raynsford: The latest data for the information requested on the number of deaths due to fires in the United Kingdom broken down by the times requested are in the following tables.

These data indicate the importance of fire prevention. The Government believe that each household should have a properly considered escape plan and working smoke alarms; this is key to reducing deaths and injuries while people sleep.

Primary fires[1] and deaths, UK, 1997–2001

	Yearly totals		
	Number		
	Fires	Deaths	Death rate per 1,000 fires
1997	200,559	723	3.6
1998	199,928	656	3.3
1999	218,404	623	2.9
2000[3]	219,535	623	2.8
2000[4]	—	(595)	—
2001[3]	228,136	627	2.7
2001[4]	—	(606)	—

Emergency call received between 10 pm and 6 am[2]

	Number		Proportion of yearly total (Percentage)		
	Fires	Deaths	Fires	Deaths	Death rate per 1,000 fires
1997	58,855	283	29	39	4.8
1998	60,089	246	30	38	4.1
1999	67,957	207	31	33	3.0
2000[3]	70,076	237	32	38	3.4
2000[4]	—	—	—	—	—
2001[3]	73,753	226	32	36	3.1
2001[4]	—	—	—	—	—

Emergency call received between 2 pm and 10 pm[2]

	Number		Proportion of yearly total (Percentage)		
	Fires	Deaths	Fires	Deaths	Death rate per 1,000 fires
1997	92,455	205	46	28	2.2
1998	92,519	192	46	29	2.1
1999	101,109	199	46	32	2.0
2000[3]	101,616	191	46	31	1.9
2000[4]	—	—	—	—	—
2001[3]	105,396	215	46	34	2.0
2001[4]	—	—	—	—	—

[1] A primary fire is any fire in a building or vehicle and/or a fire which involved casualties or rescues.

[2] The time of the fire is denoted as the time the emergency call was received by the local authority fire brigade.

[3] Provisional

[4] The 2000 and 2001 data for fatalities are estimated to account for the revisions as later information is received. Calculations are based on the provisional total of deaths.

Historic Environment Scheme

Ms Walley: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the progress of the Historic Environment Scheme Notification within the European Community. [89469]

Dr. Howells: I have been asked to reply.

I understand from the Department for Trade and Industry that the United Kingdom responded in November 2002 to the European Commission's most recent request for information on the various heritage aid schemes. The Commission is still considering this response. The DTI believes the Commission has been given sufficient information to reach an early decision. Officials from the United Kingdom Permanent Representation are in contact with the relevant desk officer in the Commission and are monitoring progress.

Local Government Finance

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the average grant entitlement increase awarded to county councils for the forthcoming financial year has been; and what the percentage increase provided for Essex was. [91396]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government's proposals for the funding of local authority revenue expenditure, as set out in the provisional local government finance settlement 2003–04 announced on 5 December 2002, provide for an average formula grant increase for county councils of 5.7per cent. The increase for Essex is 3.7per cent.

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what average domestic rates were paid to local councils in the most recent annual period for which figures are available; and what the average amount of rates paid in Essex was in the same period. [91398]

Mr. Leslie: The average council tax in England in 2002–03 for a Band D dwelling (occupied by two or more adults) is £976.

The average council tax in Essex (including Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock) in 2002–03 for a Band D dwelling (occupied by two or more adults) is £965.

Local Government Finance (London)

Harry Cohen: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will list for *(a)* London Borough of Waltham Forest, *(b)* London Borough of Redbridge and *(c)* London boroughs as a whole (i) the amount of grant received in the 2002–03 settlement and what percentage this was of the overall national settlement; and (ii) the amount of grant received in the 2003–04 settlement and what percentage this is of the overall national settlement. [91094]

Mr. Raynsford: The table shows the amount of Revenue Support Grant, nationally redistributed non-domestic rates and principal formula Police Grant received in 2002–03, and the proposed amount for 2003–04. The House will have the opportunity to debate the final amounts for 2003–04 in due course.

	2002–03		2003–04	
	£ million	Percentage of total	£ million	Percentage of total
Waltham Forest	203.903	0.5	216.753	0.5
Redbridge	175.930	0.4	190.573	0.4
London boroughs	6,228.817	15.4	6,728.282	15.3
England	40,323.132	100.0	43,892.049	100.0

Harry Cohen: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister which London local authorities have received the floor level of grant in the recent local authorities financial settlement; and if he will make a statement on the reasons underlying the decision in each case. [91095]

Mr. Raynsford: The following authorities had the minimum 3.5 per cent. like-for-like increase in grant (excluding capital adjustments) in the provisional settlement: Barnet, Bexley, Bromley, Croydon, Hammersmith and Fulham, Haringey, Havering, Kensington and Chelsea, Richmond-upon-Thames, Waltham Forest, Wandsworth and Westminster.

The principal reasons for these outcomes are substantial losses of population in many boroughs arising from the 2001 Census and relative reductions in wage levels in the outer eastern boroughs affecting their area cost adjustment. There are many other factors affecting these authorities, both positively and negatively.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister which of the non-departmental public bodies sponsored by his Department *(a)* have a statutory base, *(b)* publish their advice to Government, *(c)* publish an annual report and *(d)* lay an annual report before Parliament; and whether this is a statutory requirement in each case. [91624]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister sponsors a range of executive, advisory and tribunal non-departmental public bodies. Of these:

(a) the Audit Commission, Building Regulations Advisory Committee, English Partnerships, Housing Action Trusts, Housing Corporation, the Parliamentary Boundary Commissions, the Rent Assessment Panels and the Standards Board for England have a statutory base;

(b) the Audit Commission, Advisory Panel on Beacon Councils, Advisory Panel on Standards in the Planning Inspectorate and the Parliamentary Boundary Commissions publish their advice to Government. This is a statutory requirement for the Audit Commission and the Parliamentary Boundary Commissions;

(c) All NDPBs sponsored by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister publish an annual report. This is a statutory requirement for the Audit Commission, English Partnerships, Housing Corporation and the Standards Board for England;

(d) the Audit Commission, English Partnerships, Housing Action Trusts, Housing Corporation and the Standards Board for England lay their annual report before Parliament as a statutory requirement.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister which of his Department's non-departmental public bodies the Government are required to *(a)* consult prior to legislative proposals and *(b)* publish their response to advice from. [91626]

Mr. Leslie: The Government consults with relevant NDPBs prior to legislative proposals and publishes their response to any advice given by NDPBs as appropriate.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister which of the executive non-departmental public bodies sponsored by his Department have a statutory base; which of those bodies *(a)* admit members of the public to all board and committee meetings and *(b)* hold open meetings for the public; and whether in each case this is a statutory requirement. [91627]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister sponsors the following executive non-departmental public bodies; Audit Commission, English Partnerships, Housing Action Trusts, Housing Corporation and Standards Board for England, all of which have a statutory base. Of these *(a)* Housing Action Trusts admit members of the public to all board and committee meetings except where items are of a confidential nature and *(b)* Housing Action Trusts, Audit Commission and English Partnerships hold open meetings for the public. These are not statutory requirements for any of these bodies.

Regional Assemblies

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many representations he has received from electors living in *(a)* the south-east region, *(b)* Hampshire and *(c)* the New Forest East constituency in favour of the establishment of an elected regional assembly for the south-east. [91399]

Mr. Raynsford: "Your Region, Your Choice", the White Paper on Regional Governance, was not a consultation exercise, except on the issue of stakeholder involvement with elected regional assemblies. It therefore did not invite views either for or against the principle of establishing assemblies. Representations in response to the White Paper have been received by letter and by e-mail. It is not possible to identify the region, county or constituency of origin of many of the e-mailed responses. However, between the dates of 9 May 2002, when the White Paper was published, and 30 November 2002, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister recorded 18 respondents from the south-east who were in favour of an elected regional assembly in the region, of whom two were from Hampshire. Our analysis of responses did not record respondents' parliamentary constituencies.

Social Housing (Solar Heating)

Gareth Thomas: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what recent discussions he has had with housing associations about developing solar heating and photovoltaic applications for social housing; and if he will make a statement. [91112]

Mr. McNulty: Responsibility for photovoltaic solar heating development and deployment programmes for which housing associations can apply are the responsibility of my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

The Housing Corporation promotes the sustainability of social housing owned by housing associations through its Regulatory Code. Housing associations are expected to demonstrate a commitment to effective protection of the environment and the prudent use of natural resources. The Housing Corporation is funding a "Generating Solar Homes" project, through its Innovation and Good Practice programme, to encourage housing associations' active involvement in the Government's photovoltaic programme.

South-east Region

Norman Baker: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the advantages of sub-dividing the south-east region so that Kent, East Sussex, West Sussex and Surrey comprise one new region. [91534]

Mr. Leslie: The current regional boundaries are now the most widely accepted and used regional boundaries. A large number of regional bodies, including the Government Offices, Regional Development Agencies and other parts of Central Government, operate to these boundaries, and all regions now have recognised voluntary regional chambers. The current regions are of a sufficient spatial and demographic size to support the work of these organisations.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister believes that any debate on regional boundaries would generate no obvious prospect that more practicable or more widely acceptable boundaries would result.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Alcohol (Minors)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of incidents of minors purchasing alcoholic beverages *(a)* in Lancashire and *(b)* in the UK in the last 12 months. [90723]

Mr. Denham: The number of incidents of minors purchasing alcoholic beverages in Lancaster, or in the UK as a whole, is not collected centrally. However, some information is available from the Department of Health's annual, nationally representative school survey looking at smoking, drinking and drug use among young people aged 11 to 15 years old in England. Questions were last asked about purchasing alcohol in the 2000 survey. The results are shown in the table. All information relates to England. Estimates for Lancashire are not available.

Where children usually buy alcohol

Percentages	*11 to 15 year olds*
In a pub or bar	9
In a club or disco	7
From an off-licence	17
From a shop or supermarket	9
From a friend or relative	17
From someone else	8
I never by alcohol	46
Base N (all pupils who drink now)	3,952

Note:

Percentages total more than 100 because pupils could give more than one answer.

Source:

Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use Among Young People in England in 2000.

The Home Office Court Proceedings Database does contain statistics on the number of prosecutions and convictions for offences of buying and selling intoxicating liquor to underage. However, due to the small numbers of incidents proceeded against, it would not give an accurate picture of minors purchasing alcoholic beverages.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Government intend to implement the recommendations of the House of Lords report on the use of animals in scientific procedures. [91308]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The Government's response to the report of the House of Lords Select Committee on animals in scientific procedures was published on 20 January 2003 (Cm 5729). Copies have been placed in the Library.

The Government welcome the Select Committee's report and notes in particular, and endorses, its finding that animal experiments are currently necessary to develop human and veterinary medicines and to protect humans and the environment. We have reaffirmed our commitment to the fullest possible application of the 3Rs—the refinement of scientific procedures, the reduction in numbers of animals used and their replacement wherever possible—and to greater openness regarding the use of animals in scientific procedures, subject to safeguards for personal and confidential information. We have also accepted that the administrative burden imposed by the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 must be kept to a minimum without compromising the welfare of the animals used. We will pursue these issues and a number of other actions arising from our response to the Select Committee's report over the coming months.

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make it his policy that a welfare assessment of new strains of animals, including genetically modified ones, must be made as a matter of course. [91309]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: It has long been policy to assess and satisfy the welfare needs of animals bred and used under the licensing controls of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. All such animals have to be housed and cared for according to standards set out in published codes of practice. There is not at present a practical and universally accepted assessment system as regards genetically modified animals, but discussions are progressing with funding bodies to try to develop one that can be widely applied.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for (a) asylum and (b) naturalisation were received by the Home Office in each year since 1997; and how many are still outstanding for each year. [90849]

Beverley Hughes: The table shows the number of applications for asylum in the United Kingdom which have been lodged since 1997.

Year	*Applications received* [1,2]
1997	32,500
1998	46,015
1999	71,160
2000	80,315
2001[3]	71,700
Jan-Sept 2002[3]	62,480

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest five.

[2] May exclude some cases lodged at Local Enforcement Offices between January
1999 and March 2000.

[3] Provisional figures.

Statistics on the total number of applications for British citizenship received, in 1997 to 2001, the latest available, are given in the table.

Year	*Applications received*
1997	66,000
1998	68,030
1999	67,400
2000	62,475
2001	109,005

Information on the number of asylum applications lodged in each year since 1997 which are still outstanding is unavailable and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost by examination of individual case records.

At the end of September 2002, there were a total of 37,200 asylum cases awaiting an initial decision, including work in progress. This figure relates to the number of cases i.e. the number of principal applicants. On the same date, there were an estimated 47,000 appeals lodged with the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) that had not yet been sent to the Immigration Appellate Authority. This figure includes non-asylum appeals.

Information on the number of applications for British citizenship outstanding for each year is not available.

Information on asylum and citizenship is available from the Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate web site at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers, broken down by year of initial application, are in each stage of the process towards admission or deportation. [91254]

Beverley Hughes: Information on the number of asylum applications outstanding by year of application is unavailable and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost by examination of individual case records.

The number of asylum cases awaiting an initial decision has been reduced from a peak of 120,000 to 37,200 at the end of September 2002. This includes work in progress and relates to the number of cases i.e. the number of principal applicants. On the same date, there were an estimated 47,000 appeals lodged with the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) that had not yet been sent to the Immigration Appellate Authority. This figure includes non-asylum appeals.

Information on the number of cases outstanding in other divisions of IND is not available. Information on the number of asylum cases awaiting an initial decision is published quarterly on the Home Office website at: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html

Capita Group

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the contracts that have been awarded to the Capita Group by his Department. [89970]

Mr. Blunkett: The list of contracts awarded to the Capita Group by the Home Department since 1997 is as follows:

	Contract
Capita[1]	Designing and Managing Building Projects
Capita EC	Environment/Space Planning
Capita Business Service	Recruitment of General Managers
Capita Training	Conferences and Training
Capita Business Service	Consultancy Support
Capita Business Service	Productions of Purchase Manual Efficiency Review
Capita Business Service	Her Majesty's prison Blakenhurst Bid Team
Capita Business Service	Quantum Project
Capita	Criminal Records Bureau
Capita	Recruitment
Capita	Recruitment
Capita	Management Recruitment Scheme
Capita	Civil Service Short Answer Test
Capita[1]	Finance related work—Central Police Training and Development Authority
Capita[1]	Provision of Human Resources Staff
Capita Group Contract	Multi-Disciplinary Term Commission

[1] Contracts for which Capita was not the prime contractor

Christmas Expenses

Mr. Djanogly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many departmental Christmas cards he and his Ministers intend to send in 2002; how much these cards will cost *(a)* to buy, *(b)* to post and *(c)* in staff time to sign, address and place in envelopes; and if she will place in the Library a sample copy of the official Christmas card she has sent this year. [88115]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 19 December 2002]:* A total of 971 cards have been sent by Home Office Ministers at an approximate cost of 68p each. An approximate £211 was spent on postage with 21 hours of staff time involved in processing. A copy of the official Christmas card has been forwarded to the Library.

All expenditure incurred in the purchase and despatch of official Christmas cards is made in accordance with the departmental guidance on financial procedures and propriety, based on the principles set out in Government Accounting.

Mr. Djanogly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much will be spent on *(a)* entertaining, *(b)* Christmas decorations and *(c)* other festive activities this Christmas season by his Department and government agencies answerable to his Department; and of this sum how much will be spent in Ministers' (i) private offices and (ii) official residences. [88130]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 19 December 2002]:* A breakdown of expenditure as requested could be supplied only at disproportionate costs.

However, any expenditure incurred on decorations, entertainment and any other festive activities is strictly for official purposes only, and is made in accordance with the departmental guidance on financial procedures and propriety, based on the principles set out in Government Accounting.

Community Support Officers

Huw Irranca-Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what Government support is available to police authorities that are considering introducing community support officers or accredited community safety organisations; [89479]

(2) how many accredited community safety organisations have been established in England and Wales, broken down by local authority area. [89481]

Mr. Denham: On 23 September 2002 my right hon. Friend, the Home Secretary, announced a fund of £19 million for the recruitment of more than 1,000 community support officers (CSOs) in England and Wales this financial year. All 27 forces who made bids for this funding were successful. We are committed to the development of CSOs throughout England and Wales and continue to work with all interested parties to drive forward this important strand of the police reform programme. General guidance on issues relating to CSOs, including the powers available to these officers, was placed on the police reform website on 2 December last year.

Police forces who recruit CSOs under this year's funding initiative will receive full salary and direct on costs from the Home Office during the next financial year and substantial assistance for the following two years. We are also planning to invite all forces to bid for a share of a further tranche of CSO funding available in the next financial year as the next step towards reaching our target of 4,000 CSOs by the end of 2005.

Under Section 40 of the Police Reform Act 2002, the Chief Officer of any police force may establish a community safety accreditation scheme in their force area for the purpose of accrediting suitable individuals with certain low level police powers to deal with anti-social behaviour and environmental problems in the local communities in which they work.

No accreditation schemes have been established yet but we have commenced discussions with individual forces and the Association of Chief Police Officers to take this forward.

Coquelles Refugee Centre

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what information he has received on the *(a)* establishment and *(b)* capacity of the residential refugee centre in Coquelles, France. [91991]

Beverley Hughes: There is no residential refugee centre in Coquelles. A detention centre with 80 places was opened in Coquelles on 2 January 2003. This is to hold people who have already been through French proceedings and are in the process of being removed. This expansion in capacity has been planned since June 2002. It forms part of French improvements to their asylum and immigration procedures, which we welcome.

Correspondence

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to reply to the correspondence from the hon. Member for Nottingham, North of 29 May, 9 September and 6 November on Mr. A. Cobbinah, ref. 18289/2. [88719]

Beverley Hughes: I wrote to my hon. Friend on 16 January 2003.

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letter to him dated 11 November from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Miss H. U. Abdi. [89238]

Mr. Blunkett: I wrote to my right hon. Friend on 20 January 2003.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East will receive responses to his letters of 6 June, 6 August, 4 October, 4 November and 4 December 2002 regarding the case of Mr.Siraj Ismail Patel (HO ref P386124). [90628]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 14 January 2003]:* I wrote to my hon. Friend on 16 January 2003.

Criminal Records Bureau

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to measure *(a)* the effects that the Criminal Records Bureau has had on local volunteer development agencies and *(b)* costs caused by delays. [87250]

Hilary Benn: From the outset of work on the development of the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB), we have been anxious to involve the voluntary sector in the process in order to ensure that the arrangements were appropriate to the needs and circumstances of those within the sector. In order to take this further, now that the CRB is operational, we have established a Voluntary and Community Sector Working Group to provide a specific forum for discussion between the sector and the CRB. The Group has already begun to address issues identified by the sector, including ensuring that there are appropriate and cost-effective arrangements to access the Disclosure service.

The Criminal Records Bureau has a settled policy on the payment of compensation, and, where appropriate, claims for compensation are resolved by an ex grati[illegible] payment. Such payments will not be made as a resu[illegible] delays in processing applications. There must be an element of maladministration in dealing with an application. Ex gratia payments will be made only to applicants and not to employers, potential employers or others.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been assessed by the Criminal Records Bureau; and how many applications are pending. [88522]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 7 January 2003]:* Since 11 March 2002 the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) has received 1,164,784 disclosure applications and has issued over 938,981 disclosures. Many of the total number of applications outstanding, currently 225,803, were returned to applicants to provide missing information. Over the last six full weeks before Christmas the CRB has been averaging around 45,000 dDisclosures per week, which is over double the weekly output issued by the police under the previous arrangements.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the proportion of Criminal Record Bureau checks *(a)* carried out and *(b)* awaiting completion, broken down into the five most frequently active areas. [88703]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 7 January 2003]:* The information is not available in the form requested as there are no information technology (IT) procedures at present to extract this data from the Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) database. It is expected that this capacity will become available in future IT upgrades to the CRB computer system. Since 11 March 2002, the Criminal Records Bureau has received 1,164,784 disclosure applications and has issued over 938,981 disclosures. Over the last six full weeks before Christmas the CRB has been averaging around 45,000 disclosures per week, which is over double the weekly output issued by the police under the previous arrangements. Approximately, 80 per cent. of applications for standard disclosures are now being issued within three weeks and 70 per cent. of applications for enhanced disclosures within six weeks.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will make a statement about the Criminal Record Bureau's organisational preparedness to introduce basic disclosure; [90112]

(2) what recommendations have been presented to him by Patrick Carter in his interim report into Criminal Records Bureau checks; and if he will place a copy of the report in the Library; [89992]

(3) when he expects to publish the final report by Patrick Carter into the Criminal Records Bureau; [89981]

(4) when he will publish the interim report from Patrick Carter regarding the performance of *(a)* Capita and *(b)* the Criminal Records Bureau. [89986]

Hilary Benn: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary appointed Patrick Carter to lead a team of three to conduct an independent review of the Criminal Records Bureau so as to identify the longer-term measures needed to ensure that the Bureau is able to meet the demand for Disclosures. The team provided some initial oral feedback to Ministers in September and reported their final conclusions and recommendations at the end of the year. These took the form of advice to Ministers, including advice on matters that are commercially confidential; as such they are not in a form suitable for publication. We shall be considering the review team's findings and recommendations very carefully and are minded to publish a summary document, together with the Government's response, in due course. A judgment will be reached on Basic Disclosures in the light of the team's findings.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Criminal Records Bureau have made of the gaps in coverage by umbrella registered bodies. [90114]

Hilary Benn: The Criminal Records Bureau maintains a record of umbrella registered bodies by geographical area which shows that there are good numbers of such bodies in each, with the exception of mid and north Wales where numbers are lower. Up to 10 January, a total of 1,199 bodies had so registered, included 520 who are prepared to act as "open" umbrella—i.e., countersign applications at the request of others outside their own circle or sector (but, in some cases, subject to a geographical restriction stated by the umbrella body on registration). Organisations seeking the services of an umbrella body are not restricted to using those in their own area. Any organisation needing to find an umbrella body should access the Bureau's website www.disclosure.gov.uk which has a search facility, or contact the CRB direct on 0870 90 90 90 811.

Criminal Records Bureau Checks

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will estimate how many persons caring for *(a)* children and *(b)* vulnerable adults will not have Criminal Records Bureau checks. [89989]

(2) when his Department will publish guidance to registered bodies about the postponement of Criminal Records Bureau checks as set out in the announcement of 1 November 2002. [89983]

(3) if he will estimate how many *(a)* children, and *(b)* vulnerable adults will be cared for by adults who had not received a Criminal Records Bureau check following the announcement of 1 November 2002. [89933]

(4) how many *(a)* nurses supplied by nurses agencies and *(b)* staff supplied by domiciliary care agencies he estimates will no longer have to have Criminal Records Bureau checks. [89979]

(5) how many care home staff who would have required Criminal Records Bureau checks before 1 April have had checks postponed until *(a)* 31 March and *(b)* 2004. [89985]

(6) when he expects the Criminal Records Bureau will be able to cope with the demand associated with implementing the protection of vulnerable adults list. [90139]

Hilary Benn: I refer the hon. Member to the reply my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary gave my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) on 4 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 99W, in the light of a review of the projected likely capacity of the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) against projected demand for its service, it has been necessary to take temporary measures not to increase the level of demand by postponing certain requirements for mandatory checks.

In care homes for adults, only providers and managers were subject to checks prior to 1 April 2002. An estimated 100,000 new staff per year will continue to be subject to CRB checks, as will providers and managers. But an estimated 300,000 staff who were already in post on 1 April and who have not already applied for checks will not need to be checked for the time being. These checks will now be required during the course of 2004.

Both new and existing nurses supplied by nurses agencies, and staff supplied by domiciliary care agencies, will also not need to be checked for the time being. A requirement for all such personnel to be checked in the current financial year would have entailed up to an estimated 200,000 in each group.

Thereafter, it is estimated that some 50,000 staff supplied by nurses agencies and 60,000 staff supplied by domiciliary care agencies would have needed to be checked each year. Nurses supplied as new staff to establishments where requirements for mandatory checks are in force (including adult care homes and children's homes) will continue to be subject to checks. So will providers and managers of nurses agencies and domiciliary care agencies.

Finally, school governors will also not be required to have CRB checks for the time being. Such checks would have generated an estimated 70,000—90,000 applications per year.

We remain firmly committed to introducing requirements for CRB checks, and to the implementation of the protection of vulnerable adults list, at the earliest opportunity.

The CRB issued guidance to all registered bodies detailing these changes on 4 November 2002; the guidance is available on the CRB's disclosure website at 222.disclosure.gov.uk. The Department for Education and Skills also issued guidance to Local Education Authorities on 29 November (available on www.teachernet.gov.uk).

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps have been taken to ensure that prison service staff who come into contact with juvenile offenders in adult prisons have been subject to a Criminal Records Bureau check. [91203]

Hilary Benn: The Prison Service has arrangements in place instructing governors to undertake a check on all those who have regular contact with children under 18 years of age using the Criminal Records Bureau.

The arrangements apply to all staff, fee-paid, contractors, agency staff, researchers/research students, volunteers and project workers who will come into regular contact with children and those who supervise or manage such staff.

Drug Addicts

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment has been made of the relative effectiveness of *(a)* community specialist services and *(b)* residential rehabilitation for drug addicts. [87840]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 17 December 2002]:* I have been asked to reply.

The diagnostic criteria for entry into different types of drug treatment are not directly comparable. The needs of individuals and the background to their substance misuse will have an effect on the type of treatment most appropriate for them. Comparisons between the relative effectiveness of the two types of treatment are therefore complex and potentially misleading. The National Treatment Outcome Research Study, funded by the Department, reported that around half, or 47 per cent., of drug users who have gone through residential programmes and more than a third, or 35 per cent., of those from methadone programmes are still abstinent from opiates at four to five years.

Drug Treatment and Testing Orders

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Drug Treatment and Testing Orders have been made by the courts; how many have been breached; how many have been revoked; and how many revocations have resulted in a custodial sentence. [91010]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: 10,070 Drug Treatment and Testing Orders were made during the period 1 October 2000 to 30 November 2002. Of these, 4,330 were revoked, including 226 for good progress. Figures on breach are currently available only for the period 1 November 2001 to 30 April 2002. During this time, 2;175 breach proceedings were instigated; and in about 40 per cent. of these cases, the order was revoked. Information as to re-sentencing in respect of revoked orders is not available.

Female Prisoners

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his estimate is of the proportion of female prisoners who will be *(a)* offenders in respect of cannabis, *(b)* class A drug offenders and *(c)* housed in hospital wings in each of the next five years. [90269]

Hilary Benn: There are no estimates of the proportion of female prisoners who will be *(a)* offenders in respect of cannabis, *(b)* class A drug offenders and *(c)* housed in hospital wings in each of the next five years.

At the end of October 2002, the female sentenced population for drugs offences was 1,314 (39 per cent. of the total sentenced female population), and the female remand population for drugs offences was 179 (18 per cent. of the total remand female population).

The total number of women prisoners recorded by establishments as having been admitted to prison health care centres between June and September 2002, the last quarter for which statistics are available, was 1,225.

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of female prisoners are mothers to children aged under 10 years. [90272]

Hilary Benn: There is no routinely collected data on the proportion of female prisoners who have dependent children, irrespective of age group. However, a Home Office study of a large sample of imprisoned women and mothers, published in 1997, found that 60 per cent. of female prisoners, sentenced and unsentenced, had dependent children under the age of 18. (There were no research findings relating specifically to children under 10). Another smaller, but more recent, study of women prisoners and their work in custody, published in 2000, found broadly similar results (out of a sample of 567 sentenced women, 66 per cent. had dependent children under the age of 18).

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many mothers with responsibility for children were serving sentences in prisons in England and Wales for the period January 1992 to December 2002, broken down by prison and what estimate he has made of the numbers of mothers with children who will be serving sentences in prisons in England and Wales for the period January 2003 to December 2013. [90488]

Hilary Benn: There is no routinely collected data on the number or proportion of female prisoners who have dependent children (nor are there any projections of such numbers for future years). However, a Home Office study of a large sample of imprisoned women and mothers, published in 1997, found that 60 per cent. of female prisoners had dependent children under the age of 18. Another smaller but more recent study of women prisoners and their work in custody, published in 2000, found broadly similar results (out of a sample of 567 sentenced women, 66 per cent had dependent children under the age of 18).

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures are being taken by his Department to ensure a decrease in the numbers of mothers with children serving sentences in prisons in England and Wales. [90489]

Hilary Benn: The increase in the female prison population, and the wider consequences of this in terms of disrupting families and the lives of children, supports the need to respond specifically to the particular needs and characteristics of women offenders if there is to be a reduction in offending by women and the numbers ending up in custody with child-care responsibilities.

We are taking forward the 'Women's Offending Reduction Programme' over the next three years to respond to the range of factors that have an impact on why women offend, and encourages joint working between departments, agencies and other organisations to tackle those factors. A primary focus will be on improving community-based interventions that are better tailored to the needs of women. Childcare facilities in the community, is one of the issues being looked at. Greater use of such interventions will be encouraged to ensure that custody is only used for women offenders who really need to be there.

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many mothers in prisons in England and Wales have responsibility for babies (a) under nine months old and (b) under 18 months old. [90490]

Hilary Benn: On 6 January 2003, there were 34 mothers in Prison Service mother and baby units with babies under nine months old and 16 mothers with babies between nine and 18 months old.

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women prisoners who were addicts of *(a)* heroin and *(b)* cocaine continued their habits after serving their sentences in each of the last five years; and what proportion died from drugs misuse in the 12 month period after leaving prison. [90266]

Hilary Benn: There is no routinely collected data on the proportion of female prisoners who were addicts of heroin or cocaine and who continued their habit after their sentences. However, the Home Office has commissioned the Office for National Statistics to examine the extent and causes of drug-related mortality among prisoners recently released from prison in England and Wales. The findings, which are due to be published later this quarter, will examine mortality rates among a sample of the general ex-prisoner population (though mainly not differentiating between males and females).

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce reforms to assist women prisoners through *(a)* improved accommodation and *(b)* delaying sentencing orders. [90249]

Hilary Benn: Helping women leaving prison to find appropriate accommodation is one of the key factors in effective resettlement, and we are continuing to improve the range of housing advice available in women's prisons, including prisoner-led schemes. Alongside employment, improving accommodation outcomes for released prisoners forms part of the Prison Service's Custody to Work initiative, in which we are investing £14.5 million a year from April 2003. A proportion of this will be allocated shortly to the women's estate and will be available to support the further development of housing advice services. We have no plans to allow courts generally to defer commencement of sentences, but the new sentence of intermittent custody planned in the Criminal Justice Bill will enable offenders to maintain activities, such as child care, while serving their prison time during certain parts of the week. Additionally, although intermittent custody begins immediately it is imposed by the court, the court can defer the first custodial period. This would enable the offender to make child care arrangements.

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the most recent per capita figures are for the use of neuroleptic drugs in each women's prison; and what percentage of prisoners in each women's prison are users, at least weekly, of *(a)* tranquillisers and *(b)* pain killers. [90271]

Hilary Benn: This information is not available in the form requested. A survey of mental ill health in the prison population of England and Wales, undertaken in 1997 by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), showed that 26 per cent. of women prisoners were taking painkillers, 16 per cent. hypnotic and anxiolytic medication and 10 per cent. anti-psychotic medication.

Immigration

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications were received for asylum in each quarter of the last five years; how many failed; and how many of those who failed *(a)* have left or been removed, *(b)* have been granted leave to remain, *(c)* remain in the legal process and *(d)* have disappeared. [91247]

Beverley Hughes: The table shows the number of applications for asylum in the United Kingdom lodged between Quarter 4 1997 and Quarter 3 2002, and initial decisions made in the same periods. However, data on initial decisions are independent of applications data, and do not necessarily relate to applications made in the same period.

Applications received for asylum in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, and initial decisions[1,2]

Number of principal applicants

		Initial decisions[3,4]					
		Cases considered under normal procedures[5]				*Backlog clearance excercise*[6]	
Quarter	*Total applications*[7]	*Total*	*Recognised as a refugee and granted asylum*[4]	*Not recognised as a refugee but granted exceptional leave*	*Refusals*	*Granted exceptional leave under backlog criteria*[8]	*Refused on non-compliance grounds under backlog criteria*[9]
1997 Q4	8,455	8,380	1 535	720	6,125	—	—
1998 Q1	8,710	9,170	1,485	1,045	6,640	—	—
1998 Q2	9,820	7,555	1,345	880	5,325	—	—
1998 Q3	13,090	8,015	1,420	1,270	5,320	—	—
1998 Q4	14 400	6,835	1,095	715	5,030	—	—
1999 Q1	13,945	4,925	200	580	2,290	1,845	10
1999 Q2	16,405	13,510	6,480	910	2,670	3,330	120
1999 Q3	20,910	7,800	620	365	2,510	3,560	745
1999 Q4	19,895	7,485	515	610	3,550	2,410	400
2000 Q1	18,900	23,245	995	2,070	14,985	4,965	225
2000 Q2	20,125	31,420	5,375	5,495	16,225	3,690	635
2000 Q3	20,435	25,750	1,725	2,285	19,595	1,675	470
2000 Q4	20,855	28,795	2,275	1,640	24,875	—	—
2001 Q1	18,905	46.600	3,940	6,645	36,015	—	—
2001 Q2	15,895	27,845	2,760	4,540	20,550	—	—
2001 Q3	18,860	23,095	2,235	4,140	16,720	—	—
2001 Q4	17,705	21,475	2,245	4,525	14,705	—	—
2002 Q1	19,520	23,105	2,085	6,060	14,965	—	—
2002 Q2	20,400	19,625	1,860	5,205	12,560	—	—
2002 Q3	22,560	20,415	2,080	4,540	13,795	—	—

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest five.

[2] Data for 2001 and 2002 are provisional.

[3] Initial decisions do not necessarily relate to applications made in the same period and exclude the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decisions.

[4] Based on decisions implemented for in-country cases and on decisions made for port cases until April 2000. The Asylum Casework Information Database (A-CID) has been the source of data on decisions since May 2000.

[5] Cases considered under normal procedures after Q3 2000 may include some cases decided under the backlog criteria.

[6] Cases decided under pragmatic measures aimed at reducing the pre 1996 asylum application backlog.

[7] May exclude some cases lodged at Local Enforcement Offices between Q1 1999 and Q1 2000.

[8] Includes cases where asylum or exceptional leave has been granted under the backlog criteria.

[9] Includes some cases where the application has been refused on substantive grounds.

It is not possible to determine the number of these applications which remain outstanding as this information is unavailable and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost by examination of individual case records. At the end of September 2002, there were a total of 37,200 asylum cases awaiting an initial decision, including work in progress. This figure relates to the number of cases ie the number of principal applicants. On the same date, there were an estimated 47,000 appeals lodged with the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) that had not yet been sent to the Immigration Appellate Authority. This figure includes non-asylum appeals.

Of those persons who have been refused over this period, it is not possible to determine how many have subsequently been removed as this information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost by examination of individual case records. Asylum applicants do not always inform the Immigration Service prior to leaving the United Kingdom, so information is not available on how many refused persons have left the country or have disappeared.

Information on asylum applications, initial decisions, appeals and removals is published quarterly. The next publication will cover the period October to December 2002 and will be available from 28 February 2003 on the Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate website at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons were admitted in return for the closure of the Sangatte Red Cross camp and under what power; and under what power were they issued with work permits. [91249]

Beverley Hughes: The Red Cross centre at Sangatte was emptied by 14 December 2002. by 14 December 2002, 1,018 individuals had been admitted to the UK. Four further individuals were brought to the UK having previously been in hospital. One further individual is still currently in hospital and will be brought to the UK when discharged. This will bring the total number of individuals to be admitted to the UK from Sangatte to 1,023.

These individuals have all been granted leave to enter pursuant to section 4(1) of the Immigration Act 1971. Their leave to enter does not restrict their employment and so they are free to seek and take employment.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers came from each country in the last 12 months. [91250]

Beverley Hughes: I regret that reliable information on the entry routes of asylum seekers from their country of origin to the United Kingdom (UK), is not available. The table shows the nationality of applications for asylum in the UK, excluding dependants, received between October 2001 and September 2002.

Applications[1] *for asylum,received in the UK excluding by nationality Quarter 4 2001 to Quarter 3 2002*

	Q4—2001	*Q—2002*	*Q2—2002*	*Q3—2003*	*Total*
Europe					
Albania	250	265	335	330	1,180
Czech Republic	120	80	595	620	1,410
FRY	545	580	685	635	2,445
Poland	155	235	310	275	975
Romania	310	220	320	315	1,165
Russia	110	80	65	70	320
Turkey	810	650	730	700	2,885
Ukraine	100	90	80	90	360
Other former USSR	390	475	445	510	1,820
Other former Yugoslavia	210	125	120	85	540
Others	85	100	95	70	350
Total	3,080	2,890	3,780	3,695	13,450
America					
Colombia	130	140	110	80	460
Equador	75	85	75	75	305
Others	210	235	305	365	1,115
Total	415	460	485	520	1,880
Middle East					
Iran	680	600	525	725	2,535
Iraq	1,800	2,840	3,420	4,300	12,365
Others	230	225	240	295	990
Total	2,715	3,665	4,185	5,325	15,885
Africa					
Algeria	190	260	305	240	1,000
Angola	295	405	355	330	1,380
Democratic Republic of Congo	430	570	475	565	2,035
Ethiopia	140	105	165	220	635
Gambia	20	20	25	35	105
Ghana	45	45	60	90	245
Ivory Coast	55	45	35	35	170
Kenya	85	90	70	80	320
Nigeria	305	265	270	270	1,110
Rwanda	125	170	180	180	655
Sierra Leone	420	355	370	210	1,355
Somalia	1,360	1,295	1,455	2,095	6,205
Sudan	90	80	120	200	485
Tanzania	10	10	10	15	45
Uganda	165	185	165	150	665
Zimbabwe	780	1,495	1,345	2,105	6,725
Others	800	865	910	1,235	3,810
Total	5,315	6,260	6,315	8,050	25,945
Asia					
Afghanistan	2,225	2,350	2,130	1,555	8,255
Bangladesh	125	140	180	160	605
China	790	915	960	955	3,620
India	425	505	405	530	1,870
Pakistan	705	645	615	615	2,575
Sri Lanka	1,410	1,240	900	615	4,165
Other	465	410	375	490	1,740
Total	6,140	6,210	5,570	4,915	22,835
Other and unknown nationalities	40	35	60	50	190
Grand total	17,705	19,520	20,400	22,660	80,185

Information on asylum applications is published quarterly. The next publication will cover the period October to December 2002 and will be available from 28 February 2003 on the Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate web site at:

http://www.homeoffice.govuk/rds/immigration1.html.

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many nationals of *(a)* Canada, *(b)* Australia and *(c)* New Zealand have failed to leave the UK in each of the past five years (i) on the expiry of a limited leave to enter the UK and (ii) after having been granted temporary admission at a port of entry to the UK. [91340]

Beverley Hughes: I regret that information on the number of people who fail to leave the UK upon expiry of their limited leave to enter or temporary admission is not routinely available. However, I can confirm that very few nationals of these countries abscond having been given temporary admission. For each of these nationalities there were less than five individuals who absconded during the first six months of 2002.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 19 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 988W, on immigration, when the evaluation was completed, and by whom; who was consulted; and when she expects to be in a position to write to the hon. Member for Woking. [91894]

Beverley Hughes: The evaluation was completed by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate Intelligence Section (INDIS) on 20 September 2002 and submitted to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) senior managers for consideration. Recommendations were put to Home Office Ministers on 23 December 2002 following a review by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate Board.

The consultation process for the preparation of the evaluation report included INDIS, the Immigration National Enquiry Bureau (INEB) who were responsible for handling all incoming calls, and enforcement officers who assessed the allegations received for local action.

I have remitted the recommendations of the evaluation back to officials for further details on cost and application. I will write again to the hon. Member once these details have been considered.

Immigration and Nationality Telephone Enquiry Bureau

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many telephone calls were made by the public to the Immigration and Nationality Telephone Enquiry Bureau in each year since 1997; and what the average response time was for each year. [90850]

Beverley Hughes: The Immigration and Nationality Enquiry Bureau answered 959,812 calls from members of the public during 2002. Data are not available prior to 2002 because the telephone equipment in use at that time was not able to provide data that differentiated between calls received from members of the public and those from Members of Parliament or other Government Departments and agencies.

The average response time during 2002 for those held in the queue was four minutes and 44 seconds for callers on the General Enquiry line, 25 seconds for callers on the Application Forms line and five minutes and nine seconds for those on the National Asylum Support Service line.

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many members of staff worked at the Immigration and Nationality Telephone Inquiry Bureau in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999, *(d)* 2000, *(e)* 2001 and *(f)* 2002; and what the average level of days absent was in each year. [90988]

Beverley Hughes: Records are available for the years from 2000. The number of full-time equivalent staff employed in the Immigration and Nationality Telephone Enquiry Bureau was 127 in April 2000, 101 in April 2001 and 110 in April 2002.

Data are not recorded in terms of absenteeism. Sickness absence for the Home Office is recorded and published by the Cabinet Office.

Immigration Reception Centre, Oakington

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum applicants are resident at the Immigration Reception Centre at Oakington. [89798]

Beverley Hughes: In order to maximise the impact of the non- suspensive appeal provisions, Oakington has since 7 November 2002 taken only claimants from the 10 EU accession states (Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Eatonia, Hungary, Lativa, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia) listed as 'safe in the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002'. Claims from these countries will be refused and certified as clearly unfounded, generating a non-suspensive appeal (NSA) right, unless the Home Secretary is satisfied they are not.

In these cases, applicants are detained at Oakington for their decision and until removal, unless it is judged necessary to transfer them to secure detention. The daily intake at Oakington has so far been dependent on claims from persons entitled to reside in these 10 countries. Numbers dropped significantly in December 2002 and have so far remained low in January 2003.

As a result, from 12 January 2003 Oakington has resumed a level of intake from the list of 40 previous nationalities from the Oakington suitable list. This will enable us to make best use of Oakington while retaining the flexibility to give absolute priority to the 10 nationalities at present covered by the NSA process and to wider use of that process at present under consideration.

On 10 January 2003 32 people were detained at the centre.

Operation Street Cred

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his assessment is of Operation Street Cred on the Wirral. [90897]

Mr. Denham: Further to my answer to my hon. Friend of 19 September 2002, I am advised by Merseyside Police that a formal review of Operation

Street Cred will be undertaken shortly. I understand that local feedback from the public has been positive and Merseyside Police believe Operation Street Cred has contributed to a significant decrease in reported youth disorder since its introduction in June 2002.

Over-stayers

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many over-staying visa-holders have been given exceptional or other leave to remain in each of the last five years; whether such leave implies a right for dependants to join them; and what call on public funds such persons are entitled to make. [91251]

Beverley Hughes: There are no data available on how many over-staying visa-holders have been given exceptional or other leave to remain. The requested information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost by examination of individual case records.

Where a person is granted exceptional leave to remain, family members would normally qualify to join them only after that person has been in the United Kingdom for four years. Applications may be considered before that point, but entry clearance for dependants will only be granted where there are compelling compassionate circumstances.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons who do not have leave to remain in the United Kingdom are resident in each county in England. [91253]

Beverley Hughes: Information is not available on the number of persons unlawfully present in particular counties in England (nor is there any information available about the total number in the UK as a whole).

However, the Home Office has commissioned a study which considers methods of estimating the size of the illegal population. At present, there is no defined method for estimating the size of the illegally resident population in the UK.

Police Authority Funding

Mr. Challen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of funding will come from *(a)* the precept, *(b)* Government revenue settlement, *(c)* other Government grants and *(d)* other income for each police authority in England and Wales in the financial year 2003–04. [91101]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* The overall provision for policing that will be supported by grants in 2003–04 is £9,683 million. This is an increase of 6.2 per cent. or £566 million over the provision for 2002–03. The proportion of funding from the police precept, Government grants and other income is not yet available. Police authorities have until 1 March 2003 to set precept levels for 2003–04.

Police Retirements

Mr. Challen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the expected retirement rate is for uniformed officers in each Police Authority area over the next five years. [91079]

Mr. Denham: This information is not collected centrally. Overall retirements from the police service are expected to rise, reflecting historic patterns of recruitment to the service.

Postcodes

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what use his Department and its agencies make of postcode areas for *(a)* the collection and publication of data, *(b)* devising formulae for the distribution of grants and awards and *(c)* the delivery of services; and when such usages were last reviewed. [87744]

Beverley Hughes: The available information held centrally is set out as follows:

(i) Collection and publication of data

The Home Department uses a postal address file in major surveys conducted by the Home Office such as the British Crime Survey, Home Office Citizenship Survey and Crime and Justice survey. This involves sampling at postcode sector level (or sometimes in segments of postcode sectors). Sampling is undertaken by independent survey companies and the Home Office is not informed of which areas/addresses have been selected to ensure that the anonymity of respondents is preserved but they do attach other data to the survey datasets using the postcode link (eg indices of local deprivation).

Also, statistics showing the area of residence of asylum seekers supported by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) are currently published for NASS-defined administrative regions and cluster areas. Recent analysis of postcode information recorded on the Asylum Seekers Support System (ASYS), the administrative system maintained by NASS, has allowed provisional statistics to be compiled for standard administrative areas (Government Office Regions and Local Authorities). In the case of those asylum seekers in receipt of subsistence only support, this provides much greater geographical detail than is currently available. These statistics are currently being quality assured and are intended for publication once this process is complete.

(ii) Formulae for the distribution of grants and awards

The Home Department is responsible for devising formulae to allow for the effective distribution of police grant and geographic information (such as postcodes) are used. These data form part of an annual assessment of population within Force and Basic Command Unit (BCU) boundaries (based on estimates of population movement and of changing boundaries within or between Forces).

The information is based on the most current estimates of population and demography available, and is updated at least every year. In addition the forthcoming analysis of the Census will lead to a more substantive revision than is normally the case, as these figures will be used to re-normalise estimates. In addition to the Police Funding Formula, these population changes within Basic Command Units contribute to the crime rates for certain offences. For example Robbery is commonly quoted as a rate per

1,000 (resident) population, as boundaries change and populations change this is therefore reflected in the rates calculated.

Each year based (in some part) upon the demography within a BCU, the home department also revise the so-called BCU families. These families group BCU's in clusters, this grouping uses many variables, and again as boundaries change the characteristics of each BCU changes and this can be reflected in a change of grouping. These groups are currently used for comparison of performance and identifying exceptional performers such that this 'good practice' can be shared.

(iii) Use of postcodes in the delivery of services

In certain instances the Home Department and its agencies work with police and Criminal Justice System (CJS) agencies on special operations which have a specific geographic location such as a specific crime 'hot spot'. Special Home Office funding is often used to support these operations. In these cases the postcodes are more incidental than proactively driving the delivery of services.

The Home Department used postcode data for the locks for pensioners scheme. To be eligible for the scheme the house had to be in a BCU with an above average burglary rate; the Home Department had to translate BCU areas into postcodes so that the scheme managers could tell whether applicants were eligible.

The scheme officially ended in June 2002—ie that was the last day that applications were accepted—but surveying and installation work continued after that date. Most, if not all, should be completed this month.

We also used postcode data on the Crime Reduction Website (www.crimereduction.gov.uk) to provide a facility for people to check if they were eligible for the scheme. Now that the scheme has finished, the facility has been removed.

Prison Overcrowding

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which prisons were overcrowded in *(a)* 1992, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 2002; and by what percentage each was above optimal occupancy; and what definition of overcrowded he uses. [89548]

Hilary Benn: A prison is overcrowded when the number of prisoners held at the prison exceeds its total in use certified normal accommodation (CNA). The CNA of a prison measures its capacity to accommodate prisoners in uncrowded conditions. Operational Capacity is defined as the total number of prisoners that an establishment can hold without serious risk to good order, security and the proper running of planned regimes.

Those prisons where average population for the year exceeded the average CNA for the periods 1992–93, 1998–99 and April to November 2002 are shown in the table.

At no time during the periods 1998–99 and April to November 2002 was the average population in any prison

At no time during the periods 1998–99 and April to November 2002 was the average population in any prison above its operational capacity. Comparative data on operational capacity is not available for 1992–93.

1992–1993	*1998–1999*	*April—November 2002*
Albany	Altcourse	Acklington
Bedford	Bedford	Altcourse
Birmingham	Belmarsh	Ashwell
Bristol	Birmingham	Aylesbury
Brixton	Blakenhurst	Bedford
Bullwood Hall	Brinsford	Belmarsh
Canterbury	Bristol	Birmingham
Cardiff	Brixton	Blakenhurst
Chelmsford	Bullingdon	Blundeston
Dorchester	Bullwood Hall	Brinsford
Durham	Camp Hill	Bristol
Elmley	Canterbury	Brixton
Exeter	Cardiff	Buckley Hall
Feltham	Channings Wood	Bullingdon
Glen Parva	Chelmsford	Bullwood Hall
Hindley	Cookham Wood	Camp Hill
Hull	Doncaster	Canterbury
Lancaster	Dorchester	Cardiff
Leeds	Downview	Channings Wood
Leicester	Drake Hall	Chelmsford
Lewes	Durham	Cookham Wood
Lincoln	East Sutton Park	Dartmoor
Liverpool	Eastwood Park	Doncaster
Low Newton	Elmley	Dorchester
Manchester	Everthorpe	Durham
New Hall	Exeter	Eastwood Park
Northallerton	Feltham	Elmley
Norwich	Glen Parva	Erlestoke
Pentonville	Gloucester	Everthorpe
Preston	Guys Marsh	Exeter
Shepton Mallet	Haverigg	Featherstone
Shrewsbury	Highdown	Garth
Stafford	Highpoint	Glen Parva
Styal	Hollesley Bay	Gloucester
Swansea	Holme House	Guys Marsh
Wandsworth	Hull	Haverigg
Wetherby	Huntercombe	High Down
Winchester	Lancaster Farms	Highpoint
Wormwood Scrubs	Leeds	Hindley
	Leicester	Holme House
	Lewes	Hull
	Lincoln	Lancaster
	Lindholme	Lancaster Farms
	Littlehey	Leeds
	Liverpool	Leicester
	Low Newton	Lewes
	Maidstone	Lincoln
	Manchester	Littlehey
	Moorland	Liverpool
	Mount	Low Newton
	New Hall	Manchester
	Northallerton	Moorland
	Norwich	Mount
	Parkhurst	New Hall
	Pentonville	Northallerton
	Portland	Norwich
	Preston	Nottingham
	Ranby	Pentonville
	Reading	Portland
	Risley	Preston
	Shepton Mallet	Ranby
	Shrewsbury	Reading
	Stocken	Risley
	Swaleside	Shepton Mallet
	Swansea	Shrewsbury
	Swinfen Hall	Stafford
	Usk	Stocken

1992–1993	*1998–1999*	*April—November 2002*
	Verne	Stoke Heath
	Wakefield	Styal
	Wandsworth	Swaleside
1992–1993	*1998–1999*	*April—November 2002*
	Wayland	Swansea
	Wealstun	Usk
	Winchester	Verne
	Woodhill	Wandsworth
	Wormwood Scrubs	Wayland
		Winchester
		Wolds
		Woodhill
		Wormwood Scrubs
		Wymott

Prison Population

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what changes have occurred in the *(a)* numbers and *(b)* percentages of (i) women and (ii) men imprisoned in each of the past five years; and what his estimate is of the likely changes in the next three years. [90265]

Hilary Benn: The number of people in prison in England and Wales in each of the last five years is given in the table.

Prison population as at 30 June

Year	[1]*Male*	[1]*Female*	[2]*Male*	[2]*Female*
1998	62,194	3,105	95.2	4.8
1999	61,523	3,247	95.0	5.0
2000	61,252	3,350	94.8	5.2
2001	62,560	3,740	94.4	5.6
2002	66,824	4,394	93.8	6.2

[1] Number

[2] Percentage of total population

Projections of the male and female prison population are given in Home Office Statistical Bulletin "Projections of Long Term Trends in the Prison Population to 2009", a copy of which is in the Library.

Prison Suicides

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people committed suicide in prisons in each of the past five years; of these, how many took place in safe cells; and if he will make a statement. [90362]

Hilary Benn: The following table covers the 422 apparently self-inflicted deaths between 1 January 1998 and 31 December 2002. There have been six deaths of prisoners located in safer cells in the last five years.

Number of self-inflicted deaths between 1 January 1998 and 31 December 2002 and self-inflicted deaths in safer cells

Year	*Total self-inflicted deaths*	*Total self-inflicted deaths in safer cells*
1998	83	0
1999	91	0
2000	81	0
2001	73	2
2002	94	4
Total	422	6

Note:

The Prison Service employs the term "self-inflicted death" which includes all those deaths where it appears the person may have acted specifically to take his/her own life.

The Prison Service has "safer cells" that can complement a regime providing care of at risk prisoners. The design of these cells has several features which can assist staff in the task of managing those at risk from suicide, such as specially designed furniture and fixtures which are manufactured and installed to make the attachment of ligatures very difficult, and access to window bars prevented via non-opening windows with integral ventilation grills.

The Prison Service is half way through a three-year programme to develop policies and practices to reduce prisoner suicide and self-harm in prisons. This work includes increasing the numbers of safer cells and making safer cell furniture more easily available to establishments. To date installations have been carried out to provide 2,100 adult male and 610 juvenile and young offender safer cells. In addition a further 880 adult male safer cells are planned to come on line in 2003–04. Prototypes for large-scale production of safer cell furniture aim to reduce the current cost of safer cell furniture installations by approximately one third.

Prisoner Costs

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average cost is of maintaining a prisoner in *(a)* Class A, *(b)* Class B, *(c)* Class C and *(d)* open prison. [89547]

Hilary Benn: The average cost per prisoner for 2001–02 by category of prison is given in the table.

These figures are establishment costs only, expressed in resource terms and exclude any share of headquarters overheads. Establishment cost per prisoner figures cannot therefore be compared with the overall Prison Service cost per prisoner figure, which includes all expenditure.

Category	*Average establishment cost per prisoner 2001–2002 (£)*
Dispersal (Cat A) prisons	42,443
Category B prisons	24,059
Category C prisons	18,828
Open prisons	21,267

Prisons (Drugs)

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of *(a)* male and *(b)* female prisoners tested positive for illicit drugs in each British prison in the last year for which figures are available. [90267]

Hilary Benn: Mandatory drug testing (MDT) is part of the wider Prison Service drug strategy. It was introduced with three objectives: to deter prisoners from misusing drugs through the threat of being caught and punished; to supply better information on patterns of drug misuse to improve the targeting of treatment services and to measure the effectiveness of the overall strategy; and to identify individuals in need of treatment.

The table sets out the percentage of prisoners who tested positive under random mandatory drug testing MDT in the last financial year (2001–02) in each prison in England and Wales. The names of the female prisons are highlighted in italic:

Random Mandatory Drug Testing Figures 2001–02

Establishment	*Percentage positive*
Acklington	15.0
Albany	0.0
Altcourse	10.6
Ashfield	13.7
Ashwell	12.6
Askham Grange	*4.8*
Aylesbury	7.9
Bedford	21.9
Belmarsh	12.7
Birmingham	16.2
Blakenhurst	27.5
Blantyre House	2.3
Blundeston	7.5
Brinsford	9.2
Bristol	15.8
Brixton	9.7
Brockhill	*9.3*
Buckley Hall	19.8
Bullingdon	13.2
Bullwood Hall	*8.0*
Camp Hill	13.1
Canterbury	12.9
Cardiff	20.8
Castington	7.8
Channings Wood	5.8
Chelmsford	16.0
Coldingley	11.7
Cookham Wood	*2.2*
Dartmoor	5.9
Deerbolt	9.1
Doncaster	10.5
Dorchester	22.8
Dovegate	14.9
Dover	16.6
Down View	*5.2*
Drake Hall	*14.4*
Durham	13.4
East Sutton Park	*1.7*
Eastwood Park	*8.8*
Elmley	11.9
Erlestoke	18.9
Everthorpe	13.9
Exeter	17.8
Featherstone	11.5
Feltham	13.4
Ford	7.0
Forestbank	18.8
Foston Hall	*1.8*
Frankland	7.6
Full Sutton	6.0
Garth	10.9
Gartree	3.9
Glen Parva	13.7
Gloucester	13.5
Grendon	3.5
Guys Marsh	21.1
Haslar	0.0
Hatfield	14.6
Haverigg	23.4
Hewell Grange	10.4
Highdown	12.8
Highpoint	14.2
Hindley	13.8
Hollesley	9.9
Holloway	*13.2*
Holme House	11.8
Hull	8.0
Huntercombe	15.5
Kingston	6.4
Kirkham	18.6
Kirklevington	1.0
Lancaster	16.2
Lancaster Farms	3.9
Latchmere House	1.9
Leeds	15.3
Leicester	22.0
Lewes	31.6
Leyhill	13.8
Lincoln	9.7
Lindholme	11.9
Littlehey	7.5
Liverpool	12.4
Long Lartin	7.6
Low Newton	*17.6*
Lowdham Grange	7.9
Maidstone	4.1
Manchester	13.6
Moorland	3.7
Morton Hall	*2.1*
Mount	7.9
New Hall	*6.8*
North Sea Camp	14.4
Northallerton	11.5
Norwich	17.1
Nottingham	20.2
Onley	4.3
Parc	10.5
Parkhurst	6.4
Pentonville	20.7
Portland	7.3
Preston	16.5
Ranby	7.2
Reading	8.8
Risley	23.9
Rochester	3.7
Rye Hill	8.7
Send	*8.3*
Shepton Mallet	15.5
Shrewsbury	16.8
Spring Hill	7.0
Stafford	17.9
Standford Hill	10.3
Stocken	15.8
Stoke Heath	2.3
Styal	*13.6*
Sudbury	8.2
Swaleside	13.1
Swansea	16.1
Swinfen Hall	1.3
Thorn Cross	13.0
Usk/Prescoed	3.6
Verne	2.0
Wakefield	1.0
Wandsworth	8.6
Wayland	5.9
Wealstun	14.3
Weare	10.4
Wellingborough	9.7
Werrington	8.0
Wetherby	5.5
Whatton	1.9
Whitemoor	13.7
Winchester	20.9
Wolds	3.3
Woodhill	13.8

Random Mandatory Drug Testing Figures 2001–02

Establishment	*Percentage positive*
Wormwood Scrubs	17.0
Wymott	7.1
All Prisons	11.6

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much was spent in each of the past three years in prisons to deal with misuse of *(a)* illegal drugs and *(b)* alcohol; and what has been the cost of the monitoring of illegal drugs in prisons in each of the last three years. [90268]

Hilary Benn: The centrally-committed funding to deal with the misuse of illegal drugs in prisons for each of the last three years is:

	£ million
2000–01	26.3
2001–02	52
2002–03	61

Details of locally-committed drug funding, funding to address alcohol misuse and the costs of monitoring are not held centrally.

Teacher Vetting

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the backlog of the vetting of teachers by the Criminal Records Bureau is; and what the average time has been for a case to be dealt with by the Bureau. [89339]

Hilary Benn: The information is not available in the form requested as there are no Information Technology (IT) procedures at present to extract this data from Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) database. It is expected that this capacity will become available in subsequent system releases.

Since 11 March 2002 the Criminal Records Bureau has received 1,164,784 Disclosure applications and has issued over 938,981 Disclosures. Over the last six full weeks before Christmas the CRB has been averaging around 45,000 Disclosures per week, which is over double the weekly output issued by the police under the previous arrangements. Many of the total number of applications outstanding, currently 225,803, were returned to applicants to provide missing information.

On average Disclosure applications are taking five weeks to complete.

Thames Gateway

Jon Cruddas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the extra resources required to support the growth and development of new communities in the Thames Gateway area; what discussions he has had with other Government Departments in relation to supporting the growth and development of new communities in the Thames Gateway; and what resources he has allocated to support the growth and development of new communities in the Thames Gateway. [90425]

Beverley Hughes: The assessment of extra resources for the Thames Gateway and the decisions regarding policies for the support of new communities in the Thames Gateway are being progressed with the support of officials from the Government Office for London.

The Home Office is committed to supporting the effort to regenerate the Thames Gateway area. The Thames Gateway Strategic Partnership was established by the Government in October 2000. My noble Friend (Lord Rooker), Minister for Housing and Planning, chairs the Partnership. Its membership comprises six Government Ministers, including the Home Office. Our policies on reducing crime and the fear of crime, tackling drug abuse, and supporting strong and active communities will ensure that sustainable and viable communities are created.

In addition, the Home Office is working with colleagues in other Government Departments to ensure that sustainable and viable communities are created. In particular, officials from the Home Office's Active Community Unit have been liaising with officials from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) to take forward work arising from the ODPM's Communities Plan.

Youth Crime

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his Department's guidelines are to young offenders institutions in England and Wales regarding formal child protection procedures for juveniles in prison, what his estimate is of the number of young offenders institutions in England and Wales that implement formal child protection procedures; and if he will list the young offenders institutions in England and Wales that have formal child protection procedures for juveniles in their care. [90485]

Hilary Benn: In January 2002, Her Majesty's Prison Service published Prison Service Order 4950 which revised child protection protocols and policy; a copy can be found in the Library. It instructs governors as to the steps to be taken when instigating formal child protection procedures for juveniles held by the Prison Service.

In accordance with the Department of Health's 1999 guidance "Working Together", a child protection committee has been established within each young offender institution (YOI).

In consultation with the local area child protection committee, a local policy has been developed detailing arrangements for acting on allegations or concerns that a young person may have suffered or is at risk of suffering significant harm.

The 18 YOIs in England and Wales that implement formal child protection procedures are:

Male

Ashfield

Feltham

Lancaster Farms

Stoke Heath
Werrington
Brinsford
Hindley
Onley
Thorn Cross
Wetherby
Castington
Huntercombe
Pare
Warren Hill

Female

Bullwood Hall
New Hall
Brockhill
Eastwood Park

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Hereditary Peerages

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, what official record is maintained of holders of hereditary peerages of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom. [91081]

Ms Rosie Winterton: A record of all hereditary Peers of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom in possession of a Writ of Summons to the House prior to their exclusion pursuant to provisions of Section 1 of the House of Lords Act 1999 is held by the Crown Office in my Department.

The Crown Office also maintains a list of those Peers of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom who have formally established their succession to the Peerage since the enactment of the House of Lords Act 1999.

30-year Rule

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department for what reason the replies to HRH Prince Philip from Prime Minister Harold Wilson were not released by the Public Records Office under the 30-year rule at the same time as HRH Prince Philip's letters to Harold Wilson were made public. [89806]

Ms Rosie Winterton: Harold Wilson's letter to HRH Prince Philip dated 15 July 1967 discusses details of an audience with HRH Queen Elizabeth II, unlike the letter of 11 July 1967 from Prince Philip to which Mr. Wilson was responding. In accordance with recently approved guidelines on the release of records relating to the Sovereign and the Royal Household's records relating to Ministerial audiences with the Sovereign should be closed for 40 years or until the death of the Sovereign whichever is later.

7/8 Royal Enniskillen Fusiliers

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department for what reason the papers, including Courts Martial papers, relating to the members of the 7/8 Royal Enniskillen Fusiliers found guilty of Mutiny on the 15 April 1918 and sentenced to five years penal servitude, suspended, are not available for public inspection; and if he will make a statement. [89805]

Ms Rosie Winterton: Most records relating to mutiny are held in two PRO series: WO 213 Judge Advocate General's Office: Field General Courts Martial and Military Courts, Registers (1909–1963) and WO 71 Judge Advocate General's Office: Courts Martial Proceedings and Board of General Officers' Minutes (1668–1992).

Details of the charges made against individual members of the 7/8 Royal Enniskillen Fusiliers, and subsequent sentences, are contained in the register WO 213/21(folios 94–98). Individual Court Martial papers, if they have survived or have been selected for preservation, are found in WO 71. This series does not contain all Court Martial papers. Of the files for the period since 1914, only those relating to more serious offences, resulting in the imposition of a custodial sentence of five or more years for mutiny and insubordination, have been selected for permanent preservation. Given that members of the 7/8 Royal Enniskillen Fusiliers were handed down the lesser sentence of five years penal servitude suspended, it is unlikely that individual Court Martial papers have survived and are held by the Public Record Office.

Contractual Obligations

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, what the Government's position is on the European Commission's adoption of a Green Paper on the Conversion of the 1980 Rome Convention on the law applicable to contractual obligations into a Community instrument; what proposals the Government will be putting forward; what consultation the Government have had with *(a)* the Bar Council, *(b)* the Law Society and *(c)* equivalent bodies in Scotland and Northern Ireland; and if she will make a statement. [91749]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The European Commission's consultation paper on the 1980 Rome Convention on the law applicable to contractual obligations has not yet been published; this is expected in the next few weeks. Before taking a position on any issue raised in that paper the Government will consult the Bar Council, the Law Society and other interested individuals and organisations. Similar consultation will take place in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Departmental Running Costs

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the running costs of *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of its sponsored agencies were in (i) 1997 and (ii) the most recent year for which figures are available. [90708]

Ms Rosie Winterton: Detailed information on administration costs for my Department and its agencies, going back to 1998–99 and with projections to 2003–04, is set out in Table A4 of the 2002 departmental report (Cm 5408). Data for years before 1998–99 are not available on the same basis. Provisional outturn for gross and net administration costs limits were published in Public Expenditure 2001 plans to 2005–06, will be published in the 2003 departmental report in the spring.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Turner: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many full-time equivalent staff are employed in *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of the agencies it sponsors; and what the figures were for 1997. [90670]

Ms Rosie Winterton: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, on 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 697W.

Divorced Parents

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, what procedures are in place to give effect to court orders permitting divorced parents access to their children. [90995]

Ms Rosie Winterton: In 2001 there were 55,030 contact orders granted in England and Wales. Deliberate refusal to obey a contact order is a contempt of court and may be punishable by a fine or imprisonment. In cases that involve the care of children those remedies might not be in the interests of the children at the centre of the parents' dispute. In recognition of this my Department asked the Children Act Sub-Committee on Family Law (CASC) to consult on the issue. Their report, "Making Contact Work", was published on 8 February 2002 to which the Government responded on 6 August 2002. As part of that response, a stakeholder group has been established to look at the facilitation and enforcement of contact. The group comprises members from the judiciary, legal professionals, CAFCASS, other Government Departments and the voluntary sector. As well as considering how parents may be assisted to reach workable solutions, the group will be looking at alternative enforcement mechanisms. It is due to report in the summer.

Job Sharing

Mr. B[illegible]cow: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will make a statement on the extent of job sharing in the Department. [90869]

Ms Rosie Winterton: 2,407 staff currently work reduced hours in my Department, a large proportion of whom are engaged on a job-share or job-split arrangement (which are available to all grades, including the Senior Civil Service).

A number of other flexible working patterns are available under my Department's successful work-life balance package, launched in 2001, including flexi-time, homeworking and compressed and reduced hours options. The flexibility of the pattern is decided in conjunction with local management to suit an individual's need and the needs of their work.

When advertising vacancies, business areas are encouraged to welcome applications from people working different patterns. However, there are some instances where this is not possible due to the nature of the work.

Public Service Agreements

Mr. Flight: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, when he expects to publish his autumn departmental reports on public service agreement targets; and if he will make a statement. [91004]

Ms Rosie Winterton: I expect the autumn performance report for my Department to be published by the end of January or shortly thereafter.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many days were lost due to sickness absence in the Department in 2002. [90529]

Mr. Evans: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many working days have been lost due to illness in the Department in *(a)* 2002 and *(b)* each of the preceding five years. [90971]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The number of days lost to sickness absence is published annually in the "Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service" report published by the Cabinet Office, the most recent of which (for calendar year 2001) was announced by Ministerial Statement on 19 December 2002, and copies placed in the Libraries of the House. The 1999, 2000 and 2001 reports are available on the Cabinet Office website at: www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/civilservice/publications/sickness/index.htm.

The figures for 2002 will be announced in due course.

The Department is committed to managing sickness absence effectively and to meet the 2003 target for reducing sickness absence in our Service Delivery Agreement.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 21 January 2003

WALES

Buildings Maintenance

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what his estimate is of the costs of repair and renovation work to the buildings of the Welsh Office in each year from 1999–2000 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [89958]

Mr. Touhig: Repair and renovation costs are not separately recorded but account for most of the Department's capital expenditure which was: £8,000 in 1999–2000; £299,000 in 2000–01; £21,000 in 2001–02; and has been £5,000 in 2002–03 to date.

Entertainment

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what the estimate is of the total spending of his Department in all forms of entertainment in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92410]

Mr. Touhig: The Wales Office came into existence in July 1999. It spent some £21,000 on hospitality in 2000–01 and some £8,000 in 2001–02. In the current year to date it has spent some £6,000. Figures for 1999–2000 are not readily available.

Fraud and Theft

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much money has been lost by his Department and its agencies and non-departmental public bodies, through *(a)* fraud and *(b)* theft in each year since 1996–97. [92489]

Mr. Touhig: The Wales Office was created on 1 July 1999 and has no NDPBs.

There has been no reported theft or fraud against this office.

Ministers' Tenures

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many Welsh Office Ministers there have been in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [89962]

Peter Hain: From 1993 to 30 June 1999 the Welsh Office had three Ministers. Since 1 July 1999 the Wales Office has had two Ministers.

Press Releases

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many press releases were issued by his Department in each year from 1999–2000 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [89955]

Peter Hain: The figures for press releases issued by the Wales Office since 1999 are as follows:

	Number of press releases
1999–2000	30
2000–01	100
2001–02	86
2002–03	129

Publicity and Advertising

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body sponsored by his Department spent on (i) publicity and (ii) advertising in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92245]

Mr. Touhig: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on 15 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 749W.

Special Advisers/Press Officers

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many *(a)* special advisers and *(b)* press officers have been employed by his Department in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and at what cost in each year. [92488]

Mr. Touhig: The Wales Office came into being on 1 July 1999. It employs two special advisers and three press officers. Special advisers are paid in accordance with the national pay scales for special advisers. Costs of the press office are not separately recorded.

St. David's Day

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to introduce a bank holiday for Wales on St. David's Day. [90247]

Mr. Touhig: The Government have carefully considered the case for the designation of St. David's Day as a bank holiday in Wales, but does not currently believe that an economic case has been made for any additional bank holidays throughout the UK.

Theft and Fraud

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what his estimate is of the cost of theft and fraud to *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies in 2002. [89898]

Peter Hain: None.

University Research Funding

Mr. Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what the level of central Government funding for university research was for the current year in Wales, per head of population. [86465]

Mr. Touhig: Funding for university research in Wales is delivered largely by research councils and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW).

Research councils are sponsored by the Office of Science and Technology (OST) on a UK-wide basis. Figures are not yet available for the academic year 2002–03. The latest available figures are for 2000–01 when the total amount provided by the research councils to Welsh higher education institutes was £23,007,000.

HEFCW's budget is provided by the National Assembly for Wales out of the Welsh block voted by Parliament, but it is a matter for the National Assembly how much funding it allocates to HEFCW. HEFCW contributed £54.6 million in 2000–01 towards university research.

Using the latest population estimates for Wales provided by the Office for National Statistics of around 2,903,200 people, Central Government funding can be estimated at approximately £7.93 per head of population for 2000–01. If both central Government (research councils) and HEFCW funding are taken into account, this rises to £26.76.

In addition, Government Departments fund individual research projects. However, a total figure is not available.

TRANSPORT

Freight Facilities Grant

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much Freight Facilities Grant was paid in each year since 1997; and how much is planned to be paid in each year under the 10 year plan *(a)* at current prices and *(b)* at outturn prices, broken down by organisations in receipt of such grants. [91647]

Mr. Jamieson: The following table shows UK Freight Facilities Grants for the five years from 1997 and the next three years at current and outturn prices:

£ million

	Current	*Outturn*
1997–98	9.3	8.4
1998–99	10.3	9.6
1999–2000	12.7	12.1
2000–01	20.4	19.9
2001–02	59.5	[1]59.5
2002–03	56.5	[2]57.9
2003–04	63.9	[2]67
2004–05	62.6	[2]67.2
2005–06	61.8	[2]68

[1] 2001–02 and 2002–03 include some rephasing for change to resource accounting.

[2] Indicative budgets.

Note:

GDP deflator 2001–02 applied.

The FFG scheme is demand led and it is not therefore possible to say how much will be paid to individual organisations over the period of the 10 year plan.

Track Access Grant

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much track access grant aid was paid to freight operators, broken down by company, in each year since 1992 *(a)* at current prices and *(b)* at outturn prices. [91646]

Mr. Jamieson: The first track access grant to a freight operator was awarded in 1995 and paid the following year. The following table shows annual payments of track access grant. Details of awards to specific companies are commercially confidential.

	£ million
1996–97	12.2
1997–98	21.3
1998–99	19.3
1999–2000	17.2
2000–01	13.9
2001–02	19.9

DEFENCE

Armoured Vehicles

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* Warrior, *(b)* Challenger II, *(c)* Challenger I, *(d)* AS90, *(e)* FV430 series and *(f)* MLRS armoured vehicles have been written off in accidents in the past five years. [91035]

Mr. Ingram: Over the period 1 January 1998 to 31 December 2002, two AS90 self propelled artillery systems and one FV 430 Armoured Fighting Vehicle have been written off in accidents.

Civilian Victims (Compensation)

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what provisions exist for compensating *(a)* injured civilian victims and *(b)* the surviving families of civilians killed as a result of military action taken against another sovereign state; and what his policy is on compensating civilian victims of military action taken to enforce the no-fly zones over Iraq. [90235]

Mr. Hoon: Article 91 of the First Protocol to the Geneva Conventions 1949 provides that a party to an international armed conflict which violates the provisions of the Conventions or the Protocol "shall, if the case demands, be liable to pay compensation."

Coalition aircraft monitoring the no fly zones over Iraq respond in self-defence only to the sustained efforts of Iraq's defences to shoot them down. They do so, in accordance with international law, only against targets posing a threat to the safety of our forces. No liability to pay compensation arises.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what the *(a)* estimated gross expenditure, *(b)* authorised appropriations in aid, *(c)* supply grant, *(d)* gross expenditure, *(e)* appropriations in aid applied, *(f)* net expenditure, *(g)* amount to be surrendered to the consolidated fund and *(h)* extra receipts payable to the consolidated fund were in 2001–02, in cash terms, broken down by vote; [91462]

(2) what the *(a)* grant and *(b)* expenditure for the Ministry of Defence were in cash terms, broken down by top level budget holder, in 2001–02. [91461]

Mr. Ingram: In accordance with the Government Resource Accounting Act 2000, the Department's financial performance is reported to Parliament in the Consolidated Departmental Resource Accounts. The 2001–02 accounts were laid on 21 November 2002 (HC47). Copies are available in the Library of the House. The Department is not required to, and does not, account for cash under the headings upon which information is sought. Cash requirements are accounted for at departmental level, and details of estimate and outturn are included in Schedule 1 of the Resource Accounts.

Depleted Uranium

Hywel Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what use has been made of depleted uranium ammunition on live training exercises in training areas in Wales by *(a)* UK armed forces and *(b)* the armed forces of other countries since 1980. [91645]

Dr. Moonie: Depleted uranium ammunition has never been fired on any military training exercise in the United Kingdom.

Royal Navy Resources

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the *(a)* allocation and *(b)* cost of Royal Naval resources used to assist the UK community during (i) the foot-and-mouth crisis and (ii) the firefighters' strike. [91230]

Mr. Ingram: The aggregation of many of the Ministry of Defence's resources into central and tri-service budgetary organisations makes it impossible to provide a comprehensive picture of Royal Naval resources used on deployments such as those cited by the hon. Member. The number of personnel and amount of equipment used are, moreover, constantly changing in the course of a deployment lasting several months. It is estimated that around 180 RN personnel and their equipment were assisting the United Kingdom community at the height of the foot-and-mouth crisis. The bulk of the cost of RN resources will have fallen to the two distinct naval budget areas, those of the Commanders-in-Chief Fleet and Naval Home Command, which between them incurred additional expenditure of around £200K. MOD recovered these additional costs from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

An estimated 3,000 RN personnel and their equipment were deployed on a typical strike day during the firefighters' industrial action in November 2002. It is too early to estimate how much the military assistance has cost to date, because the costs incurred since November have yet to be fully captured through the Ministry of Defence's central cost reporting system. The additional costs for the two budget areas referred to in the first part of this statement are expected to be of the order of £800K for the period to 30 November. These costs will be recovered from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Gas Masks

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether defects have been found in S10 gas masks supplied to armed forces units; and what inspections are routinely made. [91041]

Mr. Ingram: There have been no defects reported in relation to the S10 Respirator supplied to the armed forces. Units are required to carry out routine inspections at regular intervals and prior to operations.

Helicopters

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the serviceability rate is of *(a)* Gazelle, *(b)* Lynx, *(c)* Sea King, *(d)* Chinook and *(e)* Puma helicopters (i) on operations, (ii) for training and exercises and (iii) overall. [91037]

Mr. Ingram: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Warships

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) to what extent HMS Glasgow will be able to fulfil the specialist functions of HMS Nottingham as developed in her 1999–2000 refit; [91280]

(2) when HMS Glasgow was placed in extended readiness; and when she is expected to be fully operational; [91221]

(3) what assessment he has made of the *(a)* air defence and *(b)* anti-terrorist maritime capabilities of HMS Glasgow in comparison with those of HMS Nottingham. [91281]

Mr. Ingram: While the Type 42 Destroyer, HMS Glasgow, will help ease the short term programming gap in the Fleet created by the unavailability of HMS Nottingham, she is not a direct replacement for that ship. Although both ships are designed to provide area air defence, either independently or as an integral component of larger joint or coalition maritime Task Groups, Glasgow does not have the enhanced air defence capability to take over HMS Nottingham's programme. However, there is no difference between the "anti-terrorism" capabilities provided by the two ships.

HMS Glasgow was placed at extended readiness from May 2002 (*Official Report* 2 May 2002, column 965W). Further to the answer given to the hon. Member on 27 November 2002 (*Official Report*, column 334W), Glasgow's return to service is delayed by the requirement to provide personnel to Operation Fresco.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether HMS Sovereign is fully operational; and if he will make a statement. [91033]

Mr. Ingram: HMS Sovereign has recently completed a long period of maintenance and is currently undertaking the training required, which will return her to a full operational state of readiness.

Oilfield Platforms (Terrorists)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of possible terrorist threats to UK oilfield platforms. [91232]

Mr. Blunkett: I have been asked to reply.

All terrorist threats to the UK and to UK interests overseas are monitored very closely. This is an ongoing process. In doing so, we bear in mind the need for vigilance and for a measured, proportionate response which does not generate unnecessary public alarm.

Pilots

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the requirement is for *(a)* Sea Harrier pilots and *(b)* Harrier GR7 pilots; and how many there are in each case. [91036]

Mr. Ingram: The position as at 15 January 2003 is set out in the table.

Aircraft	*Requirement*	*Strength*
Sea Harrier	[1]72	48
Harrier GR7	[2]69	[3]68

[1] The Sea Harrier pilot requirement includes 'cockpit' and career broadening appointments in the Royal Navy, plus a training margin. Both front line squadrons are fully manned and forecast to remain so for the foreseeable future.

[2] The Harrier GR7 requirement comprises wing commander, squadron leader and junior officer posts on front line squadrons, operational conversion units, operational evaluation units and wing appointments. In addition to these established flying posts, fast jet pilots are required for instructional duties within the RAF's flying training system, overseas exchange posts, the RAF Aerobatic Team and a number of ground posts shared by all serving in the General Duties Branch.

[3] Figure includes three Royal Navy officers flying GR7 aircraft. These officers are acting as pathfinders for the scheme under which Joint Force Harrier will gradually migrate to a fleet equipped with GR7/GR9 aircraft.

Radio Mast (Lagopatria)

Mr. Anthony Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made in erecting a radio mast in Lagopatria, north of Naples, to provide broadcasting services for the Armed Forces South British Services community. [91215]

Mr. Ingram: The Ministry of Defence is not currently seeking to erect a radio mast at Lagopatria (or any other location in the Naples area) to provide a British Forces Broadcasting Service (BFBS) radio channel for United Kingdom personnel serving at HQ Allied Forces, South. The provision of such a facility is not currently assessed to be a high priority against other welfare needs or against the size of the service population who might benefit. The erection of such a mast could, in any event, only proceed with the prior approval of the Italian authorities, for both its construction and the use of a viable radio frequency. The Italian authorities have previously declined to grant the use of such a frequency.

RAF (Contractors)

Mr. Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what procedures are in place for evaluating the financial stability of contractors working on behalf of the RAF. [88641]

Mr. Ingram: Works requirements are advertised in the Ministry of Defence Contracts Bulletin, and where appropriate, the Official Journal of the European Community. The adverts request that companies wishing to express an interest in tendering submit specific details to demonstrate their financial standing. This will normally be confirmation of the firms registration on Construction Line (a database jointly maintained by Department of Trade & Industry and Capita on behalf of all Government Departmens), details of a companies registration with an official list maintained by another Member State, or a statement of the firms overall turnover and turnover on construction works over the last three years.

Tender lists are thus drawn up using contractors of proven and established financial health, workload and performance.

The financial standing of contractors is regularly monitored and vetting is carried out where appropriate.

As a result of signs that the company might be in trouble the financial standing of Inframan Ltd was under review just prior to the company going into administration on 12 December 2002

RAF Leuchars

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on Inframan Ltd. and its continuing role at RAF Leuchars. [88598]

Mr. Ingram: Inframan Ltd. was placed into Administration on 12 December 2002. Grant Thornton were appointed as administrators of Inframan by the High Court of Justice.

With effect from 19 December 2002 Grant Thornton concluded a transaction with Steill Ltd., a subsidiary of Alfred McAlpine plc, for acquisition of the assets of Inframan Ltd.

It is intended that the existing contracts between Inframan Ltd. and the Ministry of Defence will shortly be transferred to the new owners.

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much is owed to sub-contractors in respect of work completed at RAF Leuchars. [88599]

Mr. Ingram: The Ministry of Defence does not hold the information requested.

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence why the main contractor at RAF Leuchars changed in 2002. [88600]

Mr. Ingram: Hyder Infrastructure Management Ltd. were appointed the main contractor at RAF Leuchars in April 2001 following a competitive tender process to support Commander Royal Engineers (Airfield Section) re-role. Hyder Infrastructure Management Ltd. changed their trading name briefly to Inframan Ltd. by Special Resolution as provided by Section 28(1) of the Companies Act 1985. As a consequence the contract was amended to reflect the contractor's new name and the change referred to was in name only.

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what procedures are in place for *(a)* reimbursing sub-contractors who are due monies from Inframan Ltd. and *(b)* allowing them to reclaim assets from RAF Leuchars for which they have not been paid. [88639]

Mr. Ingram: Sub-contractors who are owed money by Inframan Ltd. should present their claim to the administrators, Grant Thornton, who were appointed administrators of Inframan Ltd. on 12 December 2002.

Sub-contractors who wish to make a reservation of title claim in respect of stock supplied to Inframan Ltd. should equally present their claim to Grant Thornton.

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what sums have been paid to Inframan Ltd. in each month since their appointment as contractor to RAF Leuchars. [88640]

Mr. Ingram: The information requested is withheld in accordance with Exemption 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information as it is Commercial in Confidence.

SA80 Rifle

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the SA80; and if he will make a statement. [91413]

Mr. Ingram: The SA80 modification programme has significantly improved the reliability and performance of the weapon. Extensive trials were carried out across all climatic conditions before the modified weapon was introduced. More recent trials and demonstrations in Afghanistan and Oman have established beyond doubt that the weapon is reliable and accurate, and can be maintained in an operational environment.

Tomahawk

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which SSNs have been given Tomahawk capability; which further SSNs will be refitted with Tomahawk capability; and when these refits will take place. [91031]

Mr. Ingram: The following RN SSNs have been made Tomahawk capable:

HMS Splendid;
HMS Triumph;
HMS Trafalgar; and
HMS Turbulent.

Two more SSNs will be made Tomahawk capable this calendar year, with the remaining three receiving the capability by 2007. All Astute class SSNs will be made Tomahawk capable on build.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bio-waste

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the Government's position on forthcoming EU negotiations on a bio-waste directive. [89620]

Margaret Beckett: I cannot at this stage be precise as we have yet to see a Commission proposal for a bio-waste directive. A proposal is expected to come forward later this year. In general terms, we will seek to protect UK interests, while negotiating constructively for a positive outcome. We recognise that a well thought out and relevant bio-waste directive could play an important role in achieving our aim of a sustainable waste management system.

Chewing Gum

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she will meet the manufacturers of chewing gum to discuss the impact of their product on the environment; and if she will explore the potential for biodegradable chewing gum. [91348]

Alun Michael: At the suggestion of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Linda Gilroy), I met the Wrigley's company on 8 January to discuss the effect chewing gum has on the environment. The meeting was positive and we agreed to hold further discussions to explore measures that would help to minimise the irresponsible disposal of chewing gum.

Cod Fisheries

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on what evidential basis her Department stated that fisheries in cod related fisheries will be able to fish for 15 days per month, with reference to the terms of Annex XVII to regulation 2341/2002. [91772]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* Annex XVII to the Regulation provides in paragraph 6a for nine days at sea per month for fishing vessels carrying demersal trawls, seines or similar towed gear of mesh size equal to or greater than 100mm except beam trawls. Paragraphs 6b and 6c provide for the Commission to allocate additional days to Member States in certain circumstances. During the Council the Commission confirmed to me that on the basis of these paragraphs the UK will be allocated a further six days per month for vessels carrying the above gear types, bringing the total to 15.

Contracts

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs which companies her Department and its predecessors have had contracts with since 1 May 1997; what the period of those contracts was; and what areas of work they *(a)* are and *(b)* have been involved in. [91216]

Alun Michael: The information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many full-time equivalent staff are employed in *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of the agencies it sponsors; and what the equivalent figures were for 1997. [90675]

Alun Michael: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 16 January 2003, *Official Report* column 697W.

Drainage Boards

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what legal rights drainage boards have to carry out their duties. [91180]

Mr. Morley: Internal drainage boards have powers to exercise a general supervision of all matters relating to the drainage of their districts. These are set out in the Land Drainage Act 1991.

Farm Subsidies

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her most recent estimate is of the cost to the average British family of all subsidies paid to the farming industry and to rural areas in *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02. [90256]

Mr. Morley: Transfers to producers under agricultural policies take place through taxpayer expenditure and through higher prices to consumers. We estimate that the total average weekly cost, to a notional family of four, of all transfers under the CAP and UK national agricultural policies was between £11-£12 in 1999 and £9-£10 in 2000 (the latest year for which estimates are available).

Farm Values

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her latest calculation is of the change in the value of *(a)* farm land, *(b)* farm houses and *(c)* other farm buildings over the last 10 years. [90252]

Mr. Morley: Estimates are available only for the value of farm land and farm buildings combined. Estimates for the value of farm houses are not available

The overall value of farm "land and buildings" in the UK increased by £43 billion, or 85 per cent. (52 per cent. in real terms) between 1993 and 2000. Estimates for years prior to 1993 are not comparable.

Whilst estimates of the value of all farm land are not separately available, statistics are available on the average price of farm land sales. These show that the annual average price of agricultural land sold in England increased by £3,300 per hectare or 87 per cent. (55 per cent. in real terms) over the same period.

Farm Waste

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many farm waste grants have been awarded in nitrate vulnerable zones. [90962]

Mr. Morley: Fifty eight waste grants have been awarded in nitrate vulnerable zones, since the start of the scheme tin 1996 to 31 December 2002.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the average size of farm waste grants was in the last period for which figures are available. [90964]

Mr. Morley: The average size of farm waste grant paid, since the start of the scheme in 1996 to 31 December 2002, is £6,800.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many farm waste grants have been awarded in Lancashire in each of the last five years. [90726]

Mr. Morley: No applications for farm waste grants have been received in Lancashire in each of the last five years. The Farm Waste Grant Scheme only operates in designated Nitrate Vulnerable Zones (NVZs). NVZs were not designated in Lancashire until October 2002.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many farm waste grants have been awarded in each of the regions; and how much each region has received. [90750]

Mr. Morley: The number of farm waste grants awarded so far and the number each region has received, since the start of the scheme in 1996 to 31 December 2002, is:

	Number awarded	*Total grant awarded (£)*	*Applications received*	*Value of claims (£)*
South West	3	37,377	3	37,377
East	17	93,512	18	118,766
North West	4	35,230	6	44,592
York and Humberside	3	9,078	3	9,078
East Midlands	13	89,909	15	100,151
South East	11	76,036	12	110,036
West Midlands	7	53,218	8	72,129

Farmers (Compensation)

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much her Department and its predecessors spent on compensatory payments to farmers, broken down by *(a)* type and *(b)* region, in each year since 1997. [91217]

Alun Michael: The amounts of compensatory payments made since 1997 are as follows:

Scheme	*Scheme year payments (in £ million)*				
—	2001	2000	1999	1998	1997
AAPS[1]	87.2	883.0	1,130.4	985.9	1,055.7
SAPS[1]	59.4	105.4	143.0	167.7	117.6
BSPS[1]	121.2	114.7	142.7	127.0	135.7
ESP[1]	45.1	56.3	0	0	0
SPS	33.1	26.1	0	0	0
SCPS[1]	67.9	775	106.0	77.9	78.8
HLCA	Closed	Closed	40.7	25.8	38.4
HFA	39.0	42.6	0	0	0
ERDP[2]	90.8	85.8	64.2	55.4	44.5
DAIRY[3]	54.9	15.6	0	0	0

[1] Includes Agrimonetary compensation

[2] Relates to Financial years.

[3] Relates to calendar year payments.

The information is not available broken down by regions.

HFA applications are made in one year and paid in the Spring of the following year. Therefore the figure for 2001 is for applications made in 2000.

Fisheries (Aid)

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what discussions she has had with the Treasury regarding additional funding for aid to fishing communities since the agreement reached at the recent Fisheries Council; [91773]

(2) what discussions she has had with the Scottish Executive in respect of aid packages to fishing communities since the agreement reached at the Fisheries Council. [91771]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* In considering the need for funding for fishing communities I am discussing the issues both with other Whitehall Departments and the devolved administrations.

Flooding

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs whether the chairmen of flood defence committees have to declare other jobs they hold. [91170]

Mr. Morley: All Defra appointments to Regional Flood Defence Committees are made following the Code of Practice of the Office for the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA). On application for appointment, chairmen are asked to declare their present employment, other business interests, other public appointments and any other possible factors which may affect their suitability for appointment, including involvement in political activities. This information is updated regularly.

There are also requirements under paragraph 14 of Schedule 5 to the Environment Act 1995 regarding declarations of interest by members of regional and local flood defence committees.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on progress with the flood defence scheme for the Silkstream, Edgware. [91179]

Mr. Morley: Operational responsibility for flood management measures rests with the local operating authorities, normally the Environment Agency (EA) and local councils, who decide which projects to promote and their timing.

The EA is not seeking Defra grant for their proposed flood defence scheme for the Silkstream, Edgware, but do require our approval given the scale of public funding involved. Defra is considering the EA's proposed scheme against the normal technical, economic and environmental criteria. In the meantime the EA are working on the detailed design and negotiating with landowners. Subject to the necessary agreements, the EA plan to start work by the winter of 2003 and expect the construction phase to take two to three years to complete.

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many flood defence committees there are in England. [91509]

Mr. Morley: There are nine Regional Flood Defence Committees in England and one in Wales. There are statutory Local Flood Defence Committees in Anglian, Southern and Wessex Regions and in Wales. In the North West region there are three non-statutory advisory committees.

All committees are listed below:

Anglian Region

Local committees (5): Lincolnshire, Welland and Nene, Great Ouse, Norfolk and Suffolk, Essex.

Northumbrian Region

No local committees.

North West Region

Non statutory advisory committees (3): Cumberland, Lancashire, Mersey and Weaver.

Severn Trent Region

No local committees.

Southern Region

Local committees (3): Isle of Wight and Hampshire, Sussex, Kent.

South West Region

No local committees.

Thames Region

No local committees.

Wessex Region

Local committees (3): Bristol Avon, Somerset, Avon and Dorset.

Yorkshire Region

No local committees.

Wales

Local committees (6): Dee and Clywd, Gwynedd, South West Wales, Wye, Usk, Glamorgan.

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will advise insurance companies that premiums on flooding policies should relate directly to risk and not to the post code areas in which the property is situated. [91400]

Mr. Morley: *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* It is not for Government to advise insurance companies how they should calculate premiums. However, the Environment Agency are shortly to provide data to the Association of British Insurers which will enable them to develop a better understanding of the risk of flooding within a particular area.

Immunocapillary Electrophoresis

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) if she will make a statement on the research conducted by her Department and its non-departmental public bodies regarding the immunocapillary electrophoresis test; [90036]

(2) what assessment her Department has made of the correlation between the immunocapillary electro -phoresis test and other pre-clinical tests; and if she will make a statement. [90286]

(3) what plans her Department has to evaluate the Immunocapillary Electrophoresis (ICE) test in a large surveillance trial; [90840]

(4) what steps her Department is taking to *(a)* develop and *(b)* validate the Immunocapillary Electrophoresis test with the European Union; and if she will make a statement. [90841]

Mr. Roger Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, (1) how many sheep have been tested by her Department and its non-departmental public bodies using the immunocapillary electrophoresis test; and what proportion of sheep were identified as *(a)* scrapie-infected and *(b)* non-scrapie infected, [90035]

(2) if she will make a statement on her policy on the continuation of the application of the immunocapillary electrophoresis test. [90287]

(3) what assessment her Department has made of the use of the immunocapillary electrophoresis test for diagnostic purposes; and what steps she is taking to enable the test to be used throughout the United Kingdom. [90845]

Mr. Morley *[holding answers 15, 16 and 20 January 2003]*: DEFRA has commissioned the Veterinary Laboratories Agency to evaluate and further develop the ICE test (Immunocapillary Electrophoresis Test) with a view to its potential use in the pre-clinical diagnosis of BSE and scrapie. Work on this test has also been funded since September 2002 by the EU Commission with EU laboratories and the VLA under the Framework 5 Programme.

The technology has been transferred from the USA and the test is still in the development phase. It has not yet been applied to field samples on a larger scale commercial level. Technical issues have had to be resolved, further improvements are envisaged, and the implementation of field case testing has been delayed by Foot and Mouth Disease.

To date the ICE method has been used on sheep within a controlled scrapie-infected flock. The test has been shown to identify positive animals at certain stages of infection before clinical disease develops. Further work is being done to determine the exact age range in which positive animals can be identified. Scrapie-free animals give negative results with the test. The method therefore shows promise as a diagnostic tool but its use on a wide scale will be determined by the final characteristics of the test, in particular the optimum time for the test to be used to identify TSE positive sheep. Further validation will be required when the final test protocol is defined.

In the absence of other validated confirmatory pre-clinical tests, the results from ICE testing are being correlated with biopsy materials and eventual post-mortem confirmation of infection in the tested sheep. Facilities to expand the use of the test for field sampling are in place at the VLA and sample materials have been collected to use in a validated test. The preparatory stages for samples in this test are relatively complex and require several days to process; this may limit the number of samples that can be processed and the scale of use of the test. Currently the ICE method remains the only non-invasive live animal test that has been developed to the potential for identifying TSE-infected sheep or sheep flocks.

Internal Drainage Boards

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list the internal drainage boards in England and Wales, broken down by constituency. [91578]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 20 January 2003]*: The information is not available in the form requested. However, a list of drainage boards wholly or partly in England together with associated constituent councils has today been placed in the Libraries of the House. A map of internal drainage districts (Ref: PB 5455 Flood Defence and Land Drainage in England and Wales) is available from The Stationery Office. Flood defence is a fully devolved responsibility and the information relating to Boards in Wales should be sought from the National Assembly.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much *(a)* public and *(b)* other money internal drainage boards have received in each year since 1997; how much money internal drainage boards have spent in each year since 1997; and if she will make a statement. [91579]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 20 January 2003]*: Internal drainage boards' income and expenditure is as follows:

Internal drainage boards' income and expenditure

£

	Public	*Other*	*Total*
Income			
1999–2000	21,459,845	19,088,311	40,548,156
2000–01	21,439,538	20,221,600	41,661,138
2001–02	24,377,419	20,403,613	44,781,032
Expenditure			
1999–2000	40,721,041		
2000–01	41,983,118		
2001–02	43,305,755		

Notes:

1. The information for earlier years is not available other than at disproportionate cost. That for 2002–03 is not yet available; information is collected annually.

2. The funding referred to as 'public money' comprises of special levies paid by local authorities, Environment Agency contributions and Government grants.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the effectiveness of internal drainage boards in dealing with flood alleviation in England and Wales. [91580]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 20 January 2003]*: There are 223 internal drainage boards (IDBs) in England, of greatly varying size, whose role is to secure the effective land drainage of their area. I believe that they generally perform this role well.

The great majority of IDBs have produced policy statements setting out their approach to flood defence issues. IDBs have also generally played a full role in inspecting flood defences and watercourses, reporting the results to the Environment Agency as required under Defra's High Level Targets.

The institutional arrangements for flood and coastal defence are currently being considered in the Flood and Coastal Defence Funding Review. While I see a continuing role for internal drainage boards I shall wish to ensure that their activities are compatible with wider Government policies and that they are organised in a way well fitted to the 21st Century.

Sheep (EU Regulations)

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her estimate is of the annual cost to the farming industry of the introduction of the EU draft regulations on the double-tagging of sheep; and what proportion of that cost she plans to meet from her Departmental budget. [91420]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* A full regulatory impact assessment is being prepared and officials will be seeking advice from key stakeholders to ensure that costs are accurately reflected.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many days were lost due to sickness absence in the Department in 2002. [90548]

Alun Michael: Records are not yet available for the number of days lost due to sickness absence in 2002, but these will be announced in due course. Sickness absence figures for previous years are published in the Cabinet Office annual report "Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service", copies of which are placed in House Libraries.

The Department is committed to the effective management of sickness absence, and to meeting its Service Delivery Agreement target of reducing sickness absence to 6.9 days for 2003.

Sustainability

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what discussions she has had with industries dependent on unsustainable activities to encourage a transition to more sustainable ways of earning their living. [90622]

Mr. Meacher: Promoting sustainable business is a key objective of the UK Government's Sustainable Development Strategy 'A Better Quality of Life'. It has been highlighted as a priority in recent reports from the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit covering Resource Productivity, Energy and Waste. Encouraging sustainable consumption and production was also one of the key concerns at the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

Engaging with UK business forms an integral part of all of this work. Ministers and officials have frequent contact with business leaders through advisory bodies such as the Advisory Committee on Business and the Environment (ACBE), the Advisory Committee on Consumer Products and the Environment (ACCPE), the Trades Union Sustainable Development Advisory Committee (TUSDAC), and the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC).

We have been working closely with business in the development and introduction of a range of initiatives, including the Climate Change Levy and its associated negotiated agreements, the Emissions Trading Scheme, and the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP).

We also engage with business in the course of work on Government sponsored support programmes such as Envirowise (which offers advice on waste minimisation), ActionEnergy (which offers advice on energy efficiency) and the 'Pioneers Group' (which provides practical advice to sectoral bodies in drawing up sector-wide strategies on sustainable development).

This engagement will continue and expand as we take forward new initiatives, such as the implementation of the Government's Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food, in revising the UK Sustainable Development Strategy, and in responding to the recommendations of the Strategy Unit's report on waste.

Tallow

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much tallow produced under the over-thirty-months scheme has been sold *(a)* in the United Kingdom and *(b)* overseas in each year since the scheme began; for what purpose it has been sold; and how much revenue has been raised from sales (i) in the United Kingdom and (ii) overseas, in each year since the scheme began. [90843]

Alun Michael: In total over 213,000 tonnes of tallow from the over thirty month scheme (OTMS) have been sold for energy recovery. No OTMS tallow has been sold overseas. The OTMS began in 1996. Receipts for each financial year since together with details of the tonnage sold follow:

Financial Year	*Income (£)*	*Tonnes sold*
1996–97	[1]—	21,356
1997–98	[1]—	26,362
1998–99	333,397.00	17,099
1999–2000	1,454,308.00	31,223
2000–01	968,638.00	35,105
2001–02	857,855.28	31,518
2002–03	[2]1,670,546.44	[3]50,399

[1] Income for tallow sales not separately identifiable. Included under general receipts

[2] Invoice payments are outstanding

[3] Tonnes sold to date

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Peace Process (Middle-East)

13. **Mr. Clappison:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the prospects for peace and the cessation of terrorism in the middle-east. [91794]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has stated, urgent progress on the MEPP is essential. Our goal is to achieve an Israeli state free from terror, a viable Palestinian state based on 1967 boundaries. The Quartet is working on a roadmap to realise President Bush's goal of a final status agreement within three years. It represents best current chance of securing peace. I was pleased with the progress made at the London meeting, intended to support the Quartet's efforts, on Palestinian reform. We judge that this will have made a contribution towards both improving prospects for peace and clearing the way for a cessation of terror.

EU Enlargement

14. **Joyce Quin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports he has received on the level of public awareness in the UK of the forthcoming enlargement of the EU. [91797]

Mr. MacShane: The Eurobarometer survey of October 2002 suggests that 38 per cent. of the UK population are for enlargement, while 35 per cent. are against and 28 per cent. have no opinion. The Government accept the importance of informing public opinion on this matter and have recently stepped up its public information activities.

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with EU applicant countries on the Convention on the Future of Europe. [91681]

Mr. MacShane: My right hon. Friend, the Foreign Secretary and I have regular discussions with colleagues in EU accession countries on many issues including the Convention on the Future of Europe.

North Korea

16. **Paddy Tipping:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to seek a change of nuclear policy by the Government of North Korea. [91799]

Mr. Rammell: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made a statement to the press deploring North Korea's stated intention to withdraw from the non-proliferation treaty on 10 January and has made representations to the North Korean Government through the Embassy in Pyongyang, in addition to holding regular discussions with key international partners on this issue.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has initiated with his counterparts in the UN Security Council concerning the withdrawal of North Korea from the Non-Proliferation Treaty; and if he will make a statement. [91564]

Mr. Rammell: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has held bilateral discussions on this issue with a number of UN Security Council (UNSC) colleagues. We also expect the UN Security Council to discuss it.

The Foreign Secretary issued a press statement 10 January expressing his deep concern about North Korea's recent actions. We subsequently delivered a similar message to the North Korean Government through our Embassy in Pyongyang. We also protested to the DPRK chargé d'affairs in London.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to normalise relations with North Korea since establishing diplomatic relations with it. [91565]

Mr. Rammell: Diplomatic relations between the UK and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea were established in December 2000, and the British Embassy in Pyongyang opened on 30 July 2001. This established a channel of communication which has allowed us to address the North Korean authorities directly on issues of international concern, such as non-proliferation and human rights.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether North Korea possesses nuclear weapons; and if he will make a statement. [91566]

Mr. Rammell: We have no hard evidence that the North Koreans have produced nuclear weapons, but we assess that they have sufficient fissile material for one or two nuclear weapons, and the technical capability to produce them. In October 2002, North Korean Government officials admitted to the visiting US Assistant Secretary of State, James Kelly, that North Korea had been pursuing a secret uranium enrichment programme. If North Korea begins to re-process the spent fuel rods at Yongbyon, it is possible that they could be used to produce nuclear warheads within a matter of months.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the countries to which missile technology has been exported by North Korea; and if he will make a statement. [91865]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: North Korea is the world's biggest supplier of ballistic missiles and related technology to countries of concern. Missiles are North Korea's most significant export and, by channelling profits back into the programme, an almost self-sustaining missile industry has been developed, supporting the requirements of both the domestic programme and the export market. North Korea has provided No Dong missile technology to Iran and Pakistan, enabling them to acquire their own versions. SCUD technology is also available for export, and has been sold to Iran, Syria, Egypt, Libya, UAE and Yemen. Over the last 15 years North Korea has exported at least 400 missiles

Israel/Palestine

18. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has initiated at the United Nations for a new resolution in relation to Israel and Palestine. [91801]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Our immediate priority is the implementation of those resolutions already passed; most recently, Security Council Resolution 1435 of September 2002, which called for a complete cessation of violence, withdrawal of Israeli forces from Palestinian cities and action by the Palestinian Authority to bring those responsible for acts of terror to justice. The UK played a leading role in the adoption of this resolution. There are no plans for a further resolution in the near future, but we remain committed to further Security Council action whenever this might be useful.

Iraq

19. **Mr. Francois:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to ensure long-term stability in Iraq; and if he will make a statement. [91802]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary explained in his written statement of 7 January, our priority is to secure Iraqi compliance with UN Security Council resolutions, including on giving up weapons of mass destruction. We are working to ensure that Iraq becomes, in the Foreign Secretary's words, "a stable, united and law abiding state, within its present borders, co-operating with the international community, no longer posing a threat to its neighbours or to international security, abiding by all its international obligations and providing effective and representative government for its own people."

21. **Mr. Lyons:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the action the UK Government will take should the UN decide not to take military action against Iraq. [91804]

Mr. Rammell: In the event that there is a material breach, the preference of the British Government is for a second resolution. So far, the UN Security Council has, as Kofi Annan has said, "faced up to its responsibilities". We believe it will continue to do so. But we must reserve our position in the event that it does not.

Mr. Lyons: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reason the report from Iraq on weapons of mass destruction was not presented in its entirety to the UN. [91514]

Mr. Rammell: Under relevant non-proliferation conventions, China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States of America are obliged to prevent the dissemination of information relating to the production of biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons.

The President of the UN Security Council therefore decided that the full Iraqi declaration should only be given to these members of the Security Council, who also have the expertise to assess the risks of proliferation. His decision followed consultations with all members of the Security Council.

The other members received the main body of the Declaration excluding a number of sensitive passages and words that were omitted by UNMOVIC and the IAEA who, after consulting the Security Council members with expertise to assess the risks of proliferation, judged them to contain information that might be of use to potential WMD proliferators.

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the preliminary findings of UN weapons inspectors about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. [91791]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We maintain regular contact with UNMOVIC and the IAEA about the progress of inspections. Dr. Blix and Dr. El Baradei will be reporting to the UN Security Council on 27 January 2003 Their report is expected to cover in some detail their initial findings and their impressions on the level of co-operation received. We will then be in a position to assess their findings.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the work of the weapons inspectors in Iraq. [91800]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We maintain regular contact with UNMOVIC and the IAEA about the progress of inspections. Dr. Blix and Dr. El Baradei will be reporting to the UN Security Council on 27 January. We look forward to receiving their report.

Dr. Blix had a meeting with my right hon. Friend The Prime Minister on Friday at which he told the Prime Minister that, while the inspectors had encountered no direct obstruction in carrying out their task, the onus was on Iraq to be more proactive in their cooperation.

African Great Lakes

20. **Ann McKechin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in the African Great Lakes region. [91803]

Mr. Rammell: The situation in the Great Lakes is dominated by the conflicts in DRC and Burundi. Progress has been made in both countries recently, but there are still outstanding issues to be addressed before peace is fully achieved.

Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on UK adherence to the Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty; and if he will make a statement. [92339]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABMT) is no longer in force between the US and Russia, and the UK was never a party to it.

Chechnya

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received on the forced repatriation of Chechen internally displaced persons from their displacement camps in Ingushetia; and if he will make a statement. [91766]

Mr. MacShane: The UK has played a prominent role in international efforts to press the Russian Government to halt the closure of internally displaced persons camps in the North Caucasus. Bilaterally, we have informed the Russian Government that the suspension of food, water and energy supplies to the camps constituted, in our view, a forced closure and reminded Russia of her obligations under the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees. The UK has also initiated and helped draft a number of EU demarches, calling for the closure of the camps to be stopped. We were therefore encouraged by President Putin's statement last month that the closures should be halted. However, we will continue to monitor the situation closely and take further action if necessary.

Chernobyl

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what contribution the UK has made to the cost of sealing the nuclear reactors at Chernobyl; and if he will make a statement. [91870]

Mr. MacShane: The United Kingdom has pledged £25 million to the Chernobyl shelter project. Some of these funds were disbursed prior to 2001, while £16.6 million have been allocated from 2001 to 2004. The project is due to be completed in 2008.

Cyprus (Missing People)

Mr. Lyons: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the new Turkish Government on what has happened to the people missing since the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. [91526]

Mr. MacShane *[holding answer 20 January 2003]*: We share the concerns of both the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities over the missing persons following the events of 1974. However, this is a humanitarian issue on which the UN Committee on Missing Persons, established in 1983, leads. We support the actions of the Committee and urge full co-operation with it.

Such humanitarian concerns are among the many reasons why we urge both sides in Cyprus to achieve a settlement, based on the UN Secretary-General's proposals of 10 December, by the UN deadline of 28 February. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I reiterated Her Majesty's Government's support for an early settlement when we met Turkish Ministers at the Copenhagen European Council in December. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence did likewise during his visit to Ankara on 8 January.

Departmental Running Costs

Mr. Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the running costs of *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of its sponsored agencies were in (i) 1997 and (ii) the most recent year for which figures are available. [90712]

Mr. Rammell: Detailed information on administration costs for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its agency going back to 1998–99 and with projections to 2003–04, is set out in Table 2 of the 2002 departmental report (Cm 5413). Data for years before 1998–99 are not available on the same basis. Provisional outturn for gross and net administration costs limits were published in Public Expenditure 2001–02 Provisional Outturn (Cm 5574), Tables 4 and 5. Updated information, with plans to 2005–06, will be published in the 2003 departmental report in the spring.

EU Diplomatic Service

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on the recommendation of Working Group VII of the European Convention for an EU diplomatic service working under the authority of the proposed European External Representative; and if he will make a statement. [91545]

Mr. MacShane: We believe that it remains for EU member states to organise their respective bilateral Diplomatic Services at the national level, although co-ordination and co-location of diplomatic missions with EU partners may be appropriate. The External Action Working Group report makes clear that any EU Diplomatic Service would work alongside those of member states, not replace them.

The recommendation in the Working Group report is not that member states' bilateral embassies should work under the authority of the High Representative, but that the Commission's delegations should be re-badged as EU embassies/delegations, staffed by officials of the Commission, Council Secretariat and seconded national diplomats. These officials would work formally under the authority of the High Representative on Common Foreign and Security Policy issues, and under the authority of the Commission for other aspects of external action.

Europe (Constitution)

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the evidential basis was for the statement contained in a letter by Neil Sharp of his Office's European Union Department to the Democracy Movement that a constitution for Europe would not fundamentally change the relationship between the EU and its citizens, nor alter the position of the nation states as the fundamental basis of the European Union. [89128]

Mr. MacShane *[holding answer 9 January 2003]:* The Praesidium of the European Convention issued its preliminary draft Constitutional Treaty on 28 October. This can be accessed through their website at: http://european-convention.eu.int/. It contains, as does the current EC Treaty, provision for union citizenship additional to nationality of the member states (Article 5), and makes clear (in Article 1) that the member states are the fundamental basis of the union. The Government would not agree to any constitution which changed this.

Gibraltar

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had in the past month with the Spanish Foreign Minister regarding Gibraltar; and if he will make a statement. [90289]

Mr. MacShane: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary spoke with the Spanish Foreign Minister in the margins of the European Summit in Copenhagen and he had a further telephone conversation with her on 18 December. Neither discussion concentrated on Gibraltar.

Greece (Violence against UK Tourists)

Angela Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many *(a)* murders and *(b)* other serious crimes of violence were committed against UK nationals whilst on holiday in Greece in each of the last five years. [91817]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The number of murders and other serious crimes of violence (including rape) committed against UK nationals in Greece, of which consular staff were notified, from 1998–2002, are as follows:

Murders and serious crimes of violence committed against UK nationals in Greece notified to consular staff

	Murders	*Serious crimes of violence*
1998	2	23
1999	0	36
2000	2	36
2001	0	51
2002	0	57

Guantanamo Bay

Ross Cranston: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with *(a)* NGOs and *(b)* Amnesty International on Guantanamo Bay; and if he will make a statement. [91089]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary (and officials) have written to Amnesty International on the issues raised about Guantanamo Bay. The Foreign Secretary has not had discussions with other NGOs on the subject.

We continue to encourage the US to move forward with the process of resolving the position of the detainees. The Foreign Secretary discussed Guantanamo Bay most recently with the US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, on 5 January.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his US counterpart on the position under international law of those detained at Guantanamo Bay. [91868]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has had regular discussions about the detention of British nationals at Guantanamo Bay with the US Secretary of State, most recently on 5 January. Whatever their status, the detainees are entitled to humane treatment, and if prosecuted, a fair trial. We have encouraged the US to move forward with the process of determining the detainees' future, and shall continue to do so.

Honduras (Child Murders)

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will raise the issue of child murders in Honduras at the March meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva. [90220]

Mr. Rammell: We are deeply concerned by child murders in Honduras and we regularly raise our views.

We are discussing with EU partners what action to take on Honduras at the forthcoming session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (CHR). The UK, as part of the EU, will continue to support the CHR resolution on the Rights of the Child.

Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the initiatives taken by the United Kingdom since May 1997 in respect of furtherance of the aims of Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. [91963]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The UK has a very good record in fulfilling its NPT obligations. In furtherance of the aims of Article VI of The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the UK has, since May 1997:

withdrawn and dismantled the RAF's freefall WE 177 nuclear bomb, so that Trident is now our only nuclear weapons system;

reduced our operationally available stockpile to fewer than 200 warheads, which is a reduction of more than 70 per cent. in the potential explosive power of our nuclear forces since the end of the Cold War;

dismantled the UK's last Chevaline warhead in April 2002;

reduced the readiness of our nuclear forces. Only a single Trident submarine at a time is now on deterrent patrol, carrying 48 warheads. The submarine on patrol is normally on several days 'notice to fire' and its missiles are de-targeted;

placed fissile material no longer required for defence purposes under international safeguards, and all enrichment and reprocessing facilities in the UK are now liable to international inspection;

been more transparent about our nuclear and fissile material stockpiles and begun a national historical accounting study for fissile material produced;

published an initial summary report on the verification of the reduction and elimination of nuclear weapons. The Atomic Weapons Establishment Aldermaston is undertaking work on this issue;

ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and promoted its early entry into force;

ratified the relevant protocols to the Treaty of Raratonga (South Pacific Nuclear Weapon Free Zone) and signed and ratified the relevant protocols to the Treaty of Pelindaba (African Nuclear Weapon Free Zone);

supported Nuclear Weapon Free Zones in central Asia, south east Asia, and the middle east, and is in negotiations with the relevant states for the first two of these; and continued to press for negotiations to begin at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva of a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty.

Plutonium

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to his answer of 8 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 266W, on plutonium disposition, what proportion of the funds committed by the United Kingdom to the disposition of Russian plutonium is earmarked to convert the plutonium into MOX nuclear fuel. [92060]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The United Kingdom has committed £70 milion over ten years to help Russia dispose of plutonium, as it agreed to under the 2000 US/Russia agreement. That agreement saw both Russia and the US commit to dispose of 34 tonnes of plutonium each. The Russian 34 tonnes will be disposed of as MOX. The UK, unlike some other contributors, has not earmarked its funds for a particular purpose. We believe this programme to be an important part of our wider non-proliferation policy, as it will ensure that a substantial quantity of fissile material cannot fall into terrorist or criminal hands.

Public Service Agreement Targets

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects to publish his autumn departmental reports on public service agreement targets; and if he will make a statement. [91006]

Mr. Rammell: We hope to publish the report in the next few weeks.

Religious Tolerance

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with governments of other countries on protecting those who convert from Islam to other faiths, from *(a)* persecution and *(b)* arrest and punishment. [90730]

Mr. Rammell: We condemn all instances where individuals are persecuted because of their faith or belief. Ministers and officials take every opportunity, including with our EU partners, to urge states to pursue laws and practices which foster tolerance and mutual respect and to protect religious minorities against discrimination, intimidation and attacks. The UK co-sponsored a resolution at the UN General Assembly in November, 2002 in New York, to work to eliminate all forms of religious intolerance. We regularly raise specific cases of religious persecution with the Governments concerned.

Russian Federation

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to his answer of 16 January 2003, ref 91205, when the Russian Federation has had its attention drawn to the need to put in place a legal framework satisfactory to donor countries. [92615]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The UK has been engaged in both multilateral and bilateral negotiations with Russia on such a legal framework for some time, but these negotiations are yet to be concluded. Throughout the negotiating process, UK officials have taken every opportunity, both in the negotiations themselves and at appropriate international meetings, to resolve difficulties and to stress the importance of a legal framework. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister raised the matter in discussions with the Russian President Putin in Moscow in October 2002. We hope the remaining legal obstacles can be overcome in the near future, and work can begin on this important programme.

Zimbabwe

Tony Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with African leaders on the situation in Zimbabwe. [91798]

Mr. Rammell: We are in regular contact with African leaders about Zimbabwe. The crisis there is of concern to the entire region. Zimbabwe was discussed at two recent ministerial meetings attended by Baroness Amos: the EU-Southern African Development Community meeting in Maputo and the EU-Africa meeting in Ouagadougou, both in November 2002.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many British subjects he estimates reside in Zimbabwe; and how many have left in the last 12 months. [91263]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There are 26,000 British nationals registered with our high commission in Harare. We believe that in total there are approximately 35,000 British Nationals in Zimbabwe. We do not have precise numbers for those that have left Zimbabwe. However, based on contact with the British community and our consular warden network, we estimate that 2,000 British nationals may have left Zimbabwe in the past 12 months.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on which occasions banned representatives of the Zimbabwe Government have visited *(a)* the UK and *(b)* the EU in the last 12 months, and under what authority. [91267]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Members of the Zimbabwe Government have been refused entry to the UK in line with the EU's travel ban.

The EU Common Position of 18 February 2002 states that member states may grant exemptions from the travel ban where travel is justified on the grounds of attending meetings of international bodies. For this reason, the following Zimbabwean Government officials have visited the EU in the last six months.

Aeneas Chigwedere, Minister of Education, Culture and Sports was in Paris for a UNESCO meeting on 9 and 10 January. Two junior ZANU(PF) Ministers, Christopher Kuruneri, Deputy Minister for Finance and Paul Mangwana, Minister of State for State Enterprises were in Brussels for an EU/ACP meeting in November 2002. This meeting broke down when the European Parliament refused to grant the Zimbabweans access to the building. ZANU (PF)'s Trade Minister, Samuel Mumbengegwi was in Brussels for an EU/ACP meeting in September. Police Commissioner, Augustine Chihuri, was in Lyon for an Interpol meeting in August.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

Mr. Flight: To ask the Solicitor General when she expects the CPS to publish its autumn departmental reports on public service agreement targets; and if she will make a statement. [91008]

The Solicitor-General: I expect the autumn performance report of the Crown Prosecution Service to be published by the end of January, or shortly thereafter.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Appointments

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, who have been members of the Broadband Fixed Wireless Access Consultative Group since its inception; what *(a)* expenses and *(b)* salary each received; and if she will make a statement. [91664]

Mr. Timms: The purpose of the Broadband Fixed Wireless Access Consultative Group is to advise the Radiocommunications Agency on a wide range of issues relating to the award of Broadband Fixed Wireless Access licences. There are over 200 members, representing telecommunications operators, manufacturers and others with an interest in the development of broadband fixed wireless access. It also has representatives from the Agency and its advisers and from other Government organisations. Members' salaries and expenses are met by themselves or their employers.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry who have been members of the Aerospace Committee since its inception; what *(a)* expenses and *(b)* salary each received; and if she will make a statement. [91660]

Alan Johnson: The members of the Aerospace Committee since its inception are listed in the following table.

Aerospace Committee members are unpaid, although travel expenses may be reimbursed.

Mr. Larry Brooke, a member from March 1999 to December 2000, claimed travel expenses totalling £26.10.

No other travel expenses have been requested or paid.

Aerospace Committee membership list—1999 to date

Name	*Position*	*Company/Institution*	*Date*
Mr. Colin Green	(Chairman) Director	Rolls-Royce plc	From March 1999
Dr. David Anderson	Managing Director	Future Systems Technology QinetiQ	From April 2002
Mr. Norman Barber	Chairman	Smiths Industries plc	Until May 2000
Mr. Martin Broadhurst	Managing Director	Marshall of Cambridge Aerospace Ltd.	From March 1999
Mr. Larry Brooke	National Secretary	MSF	Until December 2000
Mr. Ken Brundle	Vice President and General Manager	Shorts Brothers plc	Until May 2000
Mr. Robin Clark	Director	Cobham plc	From March 1999
Mr. Graham Cole	Director of Government Affairs	GKN plc	From March 2001
Mr. Allan Cook	Deputy Chief Executive	Cobham plc	Until January 2001
Prof. Bill Dawes	Francis Mond Prof. of Aeronautical Engineering	Cambridge University	From March 1999
Dr. John Ferrie	Group Managing Director Aerospace	Smiths Group plc	From March 2001
Mr. Simon Frost OBE	Chief Executive	Claverham Ltd.	From March 1999
Mr. Chris Geoghegan	Chief Operating Officer	BAE Systems	From July 2002
Mr. Ken Maciver	Consultant—formerly Executive Vice President	TRW Aeronautics—Lucas Aerospace	From March 1999
Mr. David Marshall	Director General	Society of British Aerospace Companies	From March 1999
Mr. John McGowan	Director of Strategic Planning	GKN Westland Ltd.	Until December 2000
Ms Eva Persson	Business Development Director	Rolls-Royce plc	From March 1999
Prof. Ian Poll	Head of the College of Aeronautics	Cranfield University, MK43 0AL	From March 1999
Mr. John Quigley	National Officer (Shipbuilding and Aerospace)	AMICUS	From March 2001
Mr. Mike Rouse	Group Managing Director	Military Aircraft and Support Systems, British Aerospace plc	Until January 2002
Mr. Michael Ryan	General Manager, Aerospace Operations	Bombardier Aerospace, Shorts Brothers plc	From September 2000
Major General Alan Sharman	Director General	Defence Manufacturers Association	From March 1999
Mr. John Sharman	Executive Director	Spectrum Capital Ltd.	From March 1999
Mr. Mike Stacey	Chairman	Meggitt plc	Until March 2001
Mr. Tom Williams	Managing Director and General Manager	Airbus UK	From May 2001
Mr. Richard Wood	Managing Director	Weston Aerospace	From March 1999

British Energy

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the extent is of foreign ownership of British *(a)* gas and oil exploration, *(b)* electricity generation, *(c)* oil supply, *(d)* gas supply, *(e)* electricity supply and *(f)* other energy industries. [89569]

Mr. Wilson: The information is as follows:

(a) Gas and oil exploration is carried out by a range of private companies, most of which operate on a global basis. It would not be meaningful to measure offshore activity in this way, and we do not attempt to do so.

(b) Based on 2001 volumes of generation and current company ownership, around 55 per cent. of UK electricity generation is foreign owned.

(c) The international nature of the oil market makes this difficult to calculate. Based on 2001 figures, around two-thirds of the oil products produced by oil refineries located in the UK were produced by refineries in foreign ownership (Shell has been treated as British). However, not all of this production is consumed within the UK, and the UK also imports refined products. It is not possible to determine how much of the traded oil products came from foreign-owned oil refineries.

(d) Based on 2001 gas supply figures and current company ownership, around 25 per cent of downstream gas supply is the responsibility of non-UK companies.

(e) Based on 2001 volumes of supply and current company ownership, around 65 per cent. of UK supply is foreign owned.

(f) Information provided by The Coal Authority, based on their principal licensees only, shows that in terms of coal production in 2001, the entire UK coal industry is under UK control.

British Hardware and Housewares Manufacturers Association

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions she has had with the British Hardware and Housewares Manufacturers Association. [91842]

Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has not had any recent discussions with the British Hardware and Housewares Manufacturers Association. However, officials in the Department maintain contact with the Association, and regularly discuss a wide range of issues of concern to the sector.

Debt

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on the progress of the National Debtline. [90847]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The National Debtline aims to deliver free specialist debt advice and a debt repayment planning service to consumers in financial difficulty. I launched the pilot project on 14 March 2002. It was funded with £1 million from the Invest to Save Budget, and £50,000 each from the DTI, Scottish Executive and the Lord Chancellor's Department. The credit industry contributed a further £850,000.

As of 14 January 2003, the National Debtline had given advice to 22,648 clients (from telephone, e-mail and face-to-face services). Of these, 19,582 clients were from England, 1,853 from Scotland and 984 from Wales.

My officials are currently carrying out an evaluation of the National Debtline, which will establish:

the strength of the business case for national, independent, free, telephone money advice services; and

the best balance between a single national contact centre and smaller centres around the country.

Motor Industry

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations she has received about skills shortages in the retail motor industry. [92652]

Alan Johnson: I receive regular representations about skills shortages in a wide range of sectors, including the retail motor industry. I was therefore pleased that a development contract has been granted for the Automotive Skills Council, which is designed to address critical skills issues in this sector.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on the effect of the Government's Supply of New Cars Order 2000. [92651]

Alan Johnson: Responsibility for monitoring the Supply of New Cars Order 2000 and investigating allegations of anti-competitive behaviour lies with the Director General of Fair Trading.

One of the main provisions of the Order is designed to ensure that manufacturers do not unjustifiably discriminate between discounts for fleet customers and dealers. The OFT's most recent investigation was published on 29 January 2002. The OFT found that in that particular case, the anti-discrimination rules had not been broken. The OFT will continue to monitor compliance with the Order and investigate any complaints.

Nuclear Industry

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what the value is of British Energy's Decommissioning Fund; and what the value was in each year since 1993; [91926]

(2) how much British Energy has paid into the Decommissioning Fund in each year since 1995. [91922]

Mr. Wilson: The Nuclear Decommissioning Fund was established in 1996 when British Energy was privatised. The value of, and British Energy's annual contribution to, the Fund are reported annually in the company's report and accounts. On 28 November 2002, British Energy announced a restructuring proposal intended to achieve the long-term viability of the company, including new and enhanced arrangements to fund decommissioning and other back-end nuclear liabilities. The proposal is currently being considered by the company's creditors. A copy of the company's announcement was placed in the Libraries of the House.

Post Offices

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry pursuant to the answer of 7 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 152W, on post offices, if she will list the post office closures which were put out to consultation on *(a)* 29 November and *(b)* 16 December 2002. [91273]

Mr. Timms: Proposals put out to consultation for post office closures under the urban network reinvention are an operational matter for Post Office Ltd. and I have asked the chief executive to reply direct to the hon. Member.

Sub-Post Offices

Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment she has made of the effect of Automated Credit Transfer on sub-post office revenue. [91999]

Mr. Timms: The current value to Post Office Ltd. of encashment business from the Department for Work and Pensions is some £400 million a year. The migration of benefit payment to Automated Credit Transfer (ACT) begins this year and the Post Office's strategy is to respond to that challenge with a range of banking and other services. How the migration of benefit payments affects the revenue of sub-post offices will depend on a number of factors, not least how benefit recipients and other post office customers respond to change. But the contract for the Post Office card account is potentially worth £1 billion to Post Office Ltd. over its 10-year lifetime.

Zimbabwe (Trading Links)

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the United Kingdom companies who had trading links with Zimbabwe in 2002. [92058]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* Trade Partners UK does not hold comprehensive information on UK companies trading with, or investing in, Zimbabwe.

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations she has made to United Kingdom companies to end trading links with Zimbabwe. [92059]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* I have not made any representations to UK companies to end trading links with Zimbabwe. Her Majesty's Government do not favour economic sanctions. These would harm the people of Zimbabwe and the region at a time of humanitarian crisis, while having little impact on the ZANU (PF) leadership.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Departmental Running Costs

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the running costs of *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of its sponsored agencies were in (i) 1997 and (ii) the most recent year for which figures are available. [90716]

Dr. Howells: Detailed information on administration costs for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Royal Parks Agency, going back to 1998–99 and with projections to 2003–04, is set out in the table on page 106 of the 2002 departmental report (Cm 5423). Data for years before 1998–99 are not readily available on the same basis. Provisional outturn for gross and net administration costs limits were published in Public Expenditure 2001–02 Provisional Outturn (Cm 5574), Tables 4 and 5. Updated information, with plans to 2005–06, will be published in the 2003 departmental report in the spring.

Entertainment Licences

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate she has made of the number of events that took place in places of public religious worship in 2002, which under the new proposals would require an entertainment licence; and if she will make a statement. [92332]

Dr. Howells: The Department has made no estimate of the number of events that currently take place in places of public religious worship.

However, as I stated in the House of Commons on 16 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 517, the Government have made a commitment to reconsider their position on the licensing of churches and will announce their conclusions as soon as possible.

External Consultancies

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much *(a)* her Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body spent on external consultancy in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (planned); and if she will make a statement. [92256]

Dr. Howells: The information is as follows:

(a) Contracts awarded to consultants on behalf of DCMS during the relevant periods are as follows:

	£
1995–96	164,000
1996–97	309,000
1997–98	728,000
1998–99	424,000
1999–2000	227,000
2000–01	358,000
2001–02	693,000
2002–03	323,820

This includes the Royal Parks Agency.

(b) As DCMS is responsible for over 60 non-departmental public bodies, this information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Licensed Premises

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport whether her Department will *(a)* control and *(b)* set the level of licence fee for licensed premises; and whether local licensing authorities will be allowed to vary those licence fees. [91392]

Dr. Howells: Under the Licensing Bill the Secretary of State will make regulations prescribing that applications and notices made under the Bill must be accompanied by fees and that annual fees must be paid in respect of premises licences and club premises certificates. Regulations will also be made prescribing the amount of those fees.

Licence fees will be set at a level which will enable licensing authorities to recover the full costs of exercising the licensing functions of administration, inspection and enforcement. Local authorities, as licensing authorities, will not be permitted to vary those fees.

Publicity and Advertising

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much *(a)* her Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body sponsored by her Department spent on (i) publicity and (ii) advertising in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if she will make a statement. [92255]

Dr. Howells: The Department's spend on publicity in each year between 1995–96 and 2002–03 (estimated) is detailed in the table . During this period the Department has incurred no expenditure on advertising.

Publicity and advertising expenditure by the Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies is a matter for each individual body and information is not held centrally.

Year	*Publicity spend (£)*
1995–96	348,000
1996–97	609,531
1997–98	440,781
1998–99	388,100
1999–2000	613,630
2000–01	537,983
2001–02	318,141
2002–03	[1]440,000

[1] Estimated.

Wembley Stadium

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on progress being made on the Wembley Stadium project; and when the Wembley Stadium project is expected to be complete. [91980]

Mr. Caborn: Demolition of the old Wembley Stadium is currently at an advanced stage. All work is on schedule, with much of the foundation work for the new building already complete. Wembley National Stadium Limited are confident that the new stadium will be open in time to stage the 2006 FA Cup Final.

TREASURY

Economic Activity Rates

Hywel Williams: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the rates of economic activity were in each of the last three years in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* each region, broken down by (i) age and (ii) sex. [91635]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Hywel Williams, dated 21 January2003:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question about economic activity rates. (91635)

The attached tables give the information requested based on data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). Table 1 shows estimates for the United Kingdom which have been reweighted to reflect the results of the 2001 Census. Comparable estimates for countries and regions within the UK are not yet available. This is because the revised population estimates for regions consistent with the 2001 Census, which are needed to produce the LFS estimates, will not be available until February 2003.

LFS estimates for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the regions of England are available based on population estimates which have not yet been reweighted to reflect the Census results. These LFS estimates are shown in Tables 2–4.

Table 1: Economic activity rates[1] by age and sex; adjusted to reflect the 2001 Census population data; United Kingdom; 1999–2000 to 2001–02

Percentage

	December 1999 to November 2000	*December 2000 to November 2001*	*December 2001 to November 2002*
All persons			
All aged 16 and over	62.9	62.8	62.9
16–59/64[2]	78.7	78.5	78.5
16–17	57.9	55.7	54.3
18–24	75.5	75.4	75.5
25–34	84.2	83.9	83.7
35–49	85.0	84.7	84.8
50–59/64[2]	69.7	70.2	70.6
60/65 +	8.2	8.3	8.7
Men			
All aged 16 and over	71.2	70.9	70.8
16–64	84.2	84.1	83.9
16–17	57.5	56.2	53.7
18–24	80.4	80.6	80.5
25–34	93.6	93.2	92.9
35–49	92.3	91.7	91.9
50–64	72.4	73.2	73.2
65 +	7.7	7.4	7.9
Women			
All aged 16 and over	55.2	55.2	55.5
16–59	72.9	72.7	72.9
16–17	58.4	55.2	55.0
18–24	70.6	70.2	70.6

Table 1: Economic activity rates[1] by age and sex; adjusted to reflect the 2001 Census population data; United Kingdom; 1999–2000 to 2001–02

Percentage

	December 1999 to November 2000	*December 2000 to November 2001*	*December 2001 to November 2002*
25–34	75.2	74.9	74.9
35–49	77.8	77.9	78.0
50–59	66.0	66.2	67.2
60+	8.5	8.7	9.1

[1] Total economically active as a percentage of all persons in the relevant age group.

[2] Economic activity rates are usually given for the working age population. This is defined as men aged 16 to 64 and women aged 16 to 59. The age breakdowns in this table reflect that definition.

Source:

ONS Labour Force Survey

Table 2: Economic activity rates[1] by region, age and sex; not adjusted to reflect the 2001 Census population data; United Kingdom; December 1999 to November 2000

Percentage

Government office region	*All aged 16 and over*	*16–59/64*[2]	*16–17*	*18–24*	*25–34*	*35–49*	*50–64 to 50–59*[2]	*60–65*[2]
All persons								
North East	58.9	74.7	61.6	73.0	81.6	82.4	60.1	5.4
North West including Merseyside	61.4	76.9	55.6	74.7	84.1	84.2	64.2	6.5
Yorkshire and Humberside	62.8	78.8	55.6	76.1	85.1	84.6	69.9	7.1
East Midlands	64.2	80.7	63.1	74.2	85.3	87.4	73.1	7.2
West Midlands	62.5	78.3	58.3	75.8	82.9	84.7	69.7	7.9
Eastern	65.6	81.9	63.5	80.0	85.3	87.1	74.9	9.7
London	65.1	76.9	43.7	70.6	83.5	81.4	70.0	10.2
South East	67.1	83.3	69.0	78.6	87.3	88.5	76.6	10.6
South West	64.1	82.6	64.4	79.6	87.3	88.7	74.4	8.9
Wales	58.0	74.3	58.5	73.3	82.5	82.1	60.3	6.7
Scotland	62.9	78.4	59.5	78.3	84.5	85.4	65.2	6.9
Northern Ireland	58.7	71.1	27.3	69.9	81.0	77.7	60.4	7.7
Men								
North East	67.2	80.1	60.4	80.5	91.3	90.4	61.0	3.7
North West including Merseyside	70.1	82.6	58.1	82.5	93.5	90.6	67.0	5.4
Yorkshire and Humberside	71.0	83.8	55.0	80.0	94.2	91.4	71.7	5.9
East Midlands	72.7	86.2	61.6	80.5	94.3	93.2	76.9	7.2
West Midlands	70.9	83.8	54.4	80.8	92.8	92.2	71.9	6.8
Eastern	74.1	87.7	65.2	84.6	93.9	94.5	78.2	8.9
London	74.1	83.5	45.0	72.9	92.7	90.6	73.3	9.8
South East	75.7	88.8	66.3	83.1	95.9	95.7	79.6	10.8
South West	72.1	87.3	65.8	82.5	95.8	94.8	76.7	8.3
Wales	65.9	79.4	54.7	79.5	90.8	89.6	62.5	5.6
Scotland	70.9	82.8	59.5	82.1	92.1	90.8	68.1	6.8
Northern Ireland	68.9	78.5	30.7	76.9	91.0	87.6	64.5	10.8
Women								
North East	51.1	68.7	62.9	65.4	71.6	74.4	58.8	6.3
North West including Merseyside	53.0	70.6	52.9	66.6	74.1	77.8	60.5	7.1
Yorkshire and Humberside	54.9	73.2	56.3	72.0	75.4	77.6	67.3	7.8
East Midlands	56.0	74.6	64.5	67.2	76.0	81.5	67.8	7.3
West Midlands	54.4	72.1	62.2	70.5	72.5	77.1	66.7	8.5
Eastern	57.4	75.5	61.8	75.2	76.4	79.6	70.4	10.3
London	56.3	69.6	42.3	68.2	73.5	71.7	65.7	10.4
South East	58.8	77.3	71.8	73.9	78.4	81.2	72.5	10.5
South West	56.5	77.4	63.0	76.5	78.3	82.6	71.2	9.2
Wales	50.5	68.8	62.1	66.7	73.8	74.5	57.3	7.4
Scotland	55.6	73.8	59.4	74.4	76.8	80.1	61.3	7.0
Northern Ireland	49.3	63.2	23.8	62.8	70.8	68.2	55.0	6.1

[1] Total economically active as a percentage of all persons in the relevant age group.

[2] Economic activity rates are usually given for the working age population. This is defined as men aged 16 to 64 and women aged 16 to 59. The age breakdowns in this table reflect that definition.

Source:

ONS Labour Force Survey

Table 3: Economic activity rates[1] by region, age and sex; not adjusted to reflect the 2001 Census population data; United Kingdom; December 2000 to November 2001

Percentage

Government office region	*All aged 16 and over*	*16–59/64*[2]	*16–17*	*18–24*	*25–34*	*35–49*	*50–64 to 50–59*[2]	*60/65*[2]
All persons								
North East	58.5	74.2	53.6	75.4	80.2	80.9	61.8	4.8
North West including Merseyside	61.3	76.7	56.5	72.2	83.5	84.3	65.3	6.8
Yorkshire and Humberside	62.2	78.0	56.5	73.3	83.7	84.9	69.0	6.6
East Midlands	63.8	80.0	59.5	76.2	83.6	86.7	72.7	7.1
West Midlands	62.8	78.6	56.2	76.8	83.3	84.8	70.6	7.7
Eastern	66.3	82.7	59.9	81.2	87.1	88.0	75.3	9.9
London	64.8	76.3	37.9	70.5	82.3	81.2	70.6	10.0
South East	67.0	83.1	65.4	78.1	87.0	88.2	77.3	11.0
South West	63.9	82.3	66.0	78.9	86.8	88.9	73.6	8.9
Wales	57.5	73.3	53.8	74.5	81.3	80.2	60.3	7.7
Scotland	63.0	78.6	58.3	78.2	85.2	84.0	68.0	6.5
Northern Ireland	59.5	72.1	32.0	71.4	82.5	79.4	58.8	7.9
Men								
North East	66.6	79.5	57.1	81.4	89.9	88.6	62.3	[3]—
North West including Merseyside	69.3	81.6	56.9	78.4	92.5	89.5	67.6	5.8
Yorkshire and Humberside	70.3	83.0	59.4	78.9	92.3	90.5	71.5	5.6
East Midlands	72.0	85.3	58.3	81.6	93.3	92.9	75.3	7.4
West Midlands	72.1	85.2	57.4	83.9	93.6	92.4	74.1	7.2
Eastern	74.5	88.5	60.3	86.9	95.2	94.5	79.6	8.5
London	73.8	83.3	39.4	74.0	92.0	90.5	73.9	8.7
South East	75.4	88.7	63.7	81.9	96.1	95.5	80.3	10.6
South West	71.5	86.6	65.4	80.6	94.9	94.2	76.9	8.3
Wales	65.2	78.3	52.8	81.1	91.0	86.0	62.3	6.5
Scotland	70.8	83.1	57.6	83.4	91.6	89.9	70.9	5.2
Northern Ireland	69.9	79.9	38.2	79.9	91.9	88.9	64.7	9.2
Women								
North East	50.8	68.4	49.8	69.0	70.3	73.3	61.1	5.8
North West including Merseyside	53.7	71.3	56.0	65.8	73.9	79.0	62.0	7.4
Yorkshire and Humberside	54.3	72.4	53.1	67.6	74.6	79.1	65.5	7.2
East Midlands	55.8	74.2	60.8	70.5	73.6	80.4	69.3	6.9
West Midlands	53.7	71.3	55.1	69.0	72.3	77.0	65.8	7.9
Eastern	58.3	76.5	59.3	75.4	78.7	81.4	69.5	10.8
London	55.8	68.6	36.3	66.9	71.7	71.3	66.3	10.8
South East	58.8	76.9	67.2	74.1	77.8	80.7	73.2	11.2
South West	56.7	77.5	66.7	77.0	78.2	83.7	69.2	9.3
Wales	50.2	67.8	54.8	67.3	71.1	74.3	57.6	8.4
Scotland	55.7	73.9	59.1	73.0	78.7	78.1	64.2	7.2
Northern Ireland	49.9	63.7	25.5	62.8	72.9	70.2	50.9	7.1

[1] Total economically active as a percentage of all persons in the relevant age group.

[2] Economic activity rates are usually given for the working age population. This is defined as men aged 16 to 64 and women aged 16 to 59. The age breakdowns in this table reflect that definition.

[3] Sample size too small for reliable estimate

Source:

ONS Labour Force Survey

Table 4: Economic activity rates[1] by region, age and sex; not adjusted to reflect the 2001 Census population data; United Kingdom; December 2001 to November 2002

Percentage

Government office region	All aged 16 and over	16–59/64[2]	16–17	18–24	25–34	35–49	50–64 to 50–59[2]	60/65[2]
All persons								
North East	58.3	73.9	48.7	73.2	79.4	82.8	60.7	4.5
North West including Merseyside	61.4	76.7	50.4	75.0	83.5	84.0	65.7	6.9
Yorkshire and Humberside	62.3	77.9	57.5	73.5	83.5	84.5	68.9	7.3
East Midlands	64.3	80.4	60.9	74.7	82.8	88.0	73.7	8.1
West Midlands	63.3	79.1	53.2	76.6	83.9	85.1	71.8	8.7
Eastern	65.8	82.3	59.3	80.0	84.8	88.2	76.7	9.8
London	64.7	76.0	34.8	69.6	83.5	80.3	70.3	10.6
South East	67.2	83.2	65.3	80.6	86.8	88.1	77.2	11.6
South West	64.3	82.5	65.6	82.0	87.1	88.5	73.7	9.6
Wales	57.8	74.0	53.6	69.0	81.1	82.9	62.9	6.8
Scotland	63.1	78.8	61.5	78.7	84.3	84.7	67.7	6.6
Northern Ireland	59.7	71.9	27.5	68.3	83.5	78.3	62.0	9.7

Table 4: Economic activity rates[1] by region, age and sex; not adjusted to reflect the 2001 Census population data; United Kingdom; December 2001 to November 2002

Percentage

Government office region	All aged 16 and over	16–59/64[2]	16–17	18–24	25–34	35–49	50–64 to 50–59[2]	60/65[2]
Men								
North East	65.3	77.8	49.3	79.6	87.0	88.7	60.2	3.4
North West including Merseyside	69.0	81.3	47.8	79.8	91.8	90.4	67.7	5.5
Yorkshire and Humberside	70.8	83.5	58.6	79.0	93.0	91.0	72.2	6.4
East Midlands	72.1	85.4	60.9	78.5	91.8	94.1	76.7	7.4
West Midlands	71.9	84.7	55.3	80.9	93.5	92.3	74.6	8.5
Eastern	74.1	88.1	59.2	84.8	94.5	94.9	80.0	8.5
London	73.6	82.8	35.1	75.2	92.3	89.2	73.6	9.9
South East	75.6	88.8	62.5	84.3	95.4	95.9	80.0	11.3
South West	71.5	86.7	63.6	84.1	96.3	93.6	75.9	8.1
Wales	65.9	79.3	56.6	77.2	90.5	88.6	65.2	6.5
Scotland	70.3	82.6	58.4	82.9	90.5	91.0	68.5	5.6
Northern Ireland	69.3	78.9	28.8	76.0	93.0	86.9	67.0	12.0
Women								
North East	51.6	69.6	48.1	66.3	71.7	76.8	61.4	5.2
North West including Merseyside	54.0	71.5	53.0	70.1	74.7	77.6	63.0	7.7
Yorkshire and Humberside	54.0	71.5	56.4	67.6	73.4	77.8	64.5	7.9
East Midlands	56.7	74.8	60.9	70.6	73.5	81.8	69.6	8.5
West Midlands	55.0	72.7	50.9	72.0	73.7	77.8	68.0	8.8
Eastern	57.9	76.0	59.5	75.2	74.8	81.3	72.1	10.6
London	56.0	68.5	34.5	64.0	73.8	71.0	65.9	11.0
South East	59.2	77.2	68.1	76.8	78.1	79.9	73.4	11.8
South West	57.4	77.9	67.7	79.7	77.3	83.4	70.8	10.6
Wales	50.1	68.1	50.5	60.3	71.1	77.3	59.7	7.0
Scotland	56.4	74.8	64.8	74.4	78.0	78.6	66.6	7.1
Northern Ireland	50.7	64.4	26.1	60.5	73.8	70.1	55.5	8.4

[1] Total economically active as a percentage of all persons in the relevant age group.

[2] Economic activity rates are usually given for the working age population. This is defined as men aged 16 to 64 and women aged 16 to 59. The age breakdowns in this table reflect that definition.

Source:

ONS Labour Force Survey

Landfill Tax Credit Scheme

Gregory Barker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many projects are likely to be affected by the ending of the waste management and recycling element of the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme in April 2003; which projects they are; and what representations he has received from the waste management industry about the proposal to end the waste management and recycling element of the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme. [91487]

John Healey: The Government estimates that approximately 300 projects are likely to be affected by the ending of the waste management and recycling element of the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme in April 2003. It is not possible to identify affected projects precisely given the information available about the scheme. However, information on the scheme and projects is available at www.ltcs.org.uk/database/default.asp. The Government receives representations from industry about a range of issues but the Treasury has not received any significant number from the waste management industry about the proposal to end the waste management and recycling element of the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme.

Gregory Barker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what assessment he has made of the likely impact on the match funding which will be lost when the waste management and recycling element of the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme ends in April 2003; [91498]

(2) what assessment he made of the likely impact on the match funding available which would be lost before taking the decision to end the waste management and recycling element of the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme in April 2003. [91486]

John Healey: The impact of the changes to the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme on match funding was one of the factors which the Government took into account in deciding to make the changes announced in the 2002 Pre-Budget Report. No clear information is available on the quantities of match funding obtained by projects, nor the source of such match funding. However, a study by Glasgow Caledonian University for Entrust, the Scheme's regulator, has estimated that on average waste management and recycling projects have levered in approximately 34 per cent. funding in addition to Landfill Tax Credit Scheme funding. The Government recognises that the change from a tax credit scheme to public spending may reduce the availability of match funding but decided that the benefits of converting funding on waste management and recycling from tax credits to public spending outweigh any loss in match funding.

Gregory Barker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the impact of the ending of the waste management and recycling element of the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme on the match funding available *(a)* from the European Social Fund and *(b)* from other public funds. [91499]

John Healey: The impact of the changes to the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme on match funding was one of the factors which the Government took into account in deciding to make the changes announced in the 2002 Pre-Budget Report. No clear information is available on the quantities of match funding obtained by projects. Information is also not available on the quantities of match funding from the European Social Fund or from other public funds. The lack of transparency in the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme was criticised by the Public Accounts Committee's report on the scheme in July 2002, and both the PAC and the National Audit Office have criticised the lack of information on the scheme. These factors were taken into account by the Government in its decision to make the changes announced in the 2002 Pre-Budget Report.

Gregory Barker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he received from industry relating to the likely impact on the ability to source match funding for recycling projects of the changes to the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme from April. [91500]

John Healey: The Government receives representations from industry about a range of issues. The Treasury has not received any significant number of representations from industry about the likely impact of the changes to the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme in April on the ability to source match funding for recycling projects.

Gregory Barker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the total amount is of *(a)* European and *(b)* other match funding which will be lost when the waste management and recycling element of the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme ends in April. [91501]

John Healey: No precise figures are held on the quantity of match funding obtained by projects funded through the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme. However, a study by Glasgow Caledonian University for Entrust, the Scheme's regulator, has estimated that on average waste management and recycling projects have levered in approximately 34 per cent. funding in addition to Landfill Tax Credit Scheme funding.

Gregory Barker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many responses were received to the Treasury consultation on the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme which *(a)* supported and *(b)* opposed the proposal to end the waste management and recycling scheme from April 2003. [91485]

John Healey: 676 responses were received to the consultation on the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme. 45 per cent. of these were from organisations which had benefited directly from funding through the scheme and a further 30 per cent. were from local authorities. Of the total responses, 82 per cent. were in favour of retaining the scheme as a tax credit scheme. However, 62 per cent. also supported giving greater priority to funding for sustainable waste management.

The Government took the responses to the consultation into account in making its decisions on the future of the scheme, together with other information includinguding criticisms of the scheme by the Public Accounts Committee, the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, and the National Audit Office.

The summary of responses to the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme consultation was published 4 September 2002 and is available on the DEFRA website.

Capital Modernisation Fund Applications

Ann McKechin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his Department's assessment of the application by Citizens Advice Scotland to the Treasury's Capital Modernisation Fund in 2001 for funding of an electronic case recording system; and for what reasons the application was declined. [91458]

Mr. Boateng: The devolved administrations automatically receive a share of allocations made from the Capital Modernisation Fund for devolved matters, calculated according to the Barnett formula. Partial consequentials were awarded to the Scottish Executive in respect of an allocation made to the Department of Trade and Industry, on behalf of the National Citizens' Advice Bureaux in England and Wales, because the Department's responsibilities span both devolved and reserved matters.

Where it is not possible to fund a project fully because there are other higher priorities for funding, it is open to the Department and the devolved administration to consider whether they can fund the project from within the resources already allocated to them.

Ann McKechin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his Department's assessment of the application by the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux to the Treasury's Capital Modernisation Fund in 2001 for funding of an electronic case recording system in England and Wales; and for what reasons the application was successful. [91459]

Mr. Boateng: The Department of Trade and Industry was allocated £20 million in 2001 to provide electronic access from Citizens' Advice Bureaux. The application was successful because it was considered that it met the criteria for the Capital Modernisation Fund, when judged against the other applications received for funding at that time.

Data Protection (Inland Revenue)

Norman Lamb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many breaches of the Data Protection Act there have been in respect of tax information supplied by taxpayers to the Inland Revenue; how many taxpayers are affected; whether an investigation has taken place in respect of such breaches; how many Inland Revenue staff have been involved in such breaches; and what reports he has received as to which agencies such information was sold. [92361]

Mr. Boateng: There are only two known instances of Inland Revenue staff selling information about taxpayers. Two Inland Revenue employees did so in 1994 to a debt collection agency, and one employee sold information in 1996 to a solicitor. All three were dismissed from the Department and jailed. In relation to the Data Protection Act, there will also from time to time be technical and unintended breaches of the Act in an organisation as large as the Inland Revenue.

The Inland Revenue take very seriously both their general duty of confidentiality and the particular need to comply with the requirements of the Data Protection Act.

Financial Services Authority

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to increase the powers and responsibilities of the Financial Services Authority; and if he will make a statement. [92563]

Ruth Kelly: The powers and responsibilities of the Financial Services Authority are set out in the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 and secondary legislation under it. The Government keeps the position under review to ensure that the regulation of financial services continues to strike the right balance between the interests of firms and consuMerseyside. Whenever the Government plans changes to the scope of regulation this is generally subject to full public consultation.

Great George Street

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his latest estimate is of the value of the land and buildings at Great George Street, London SW1, on the basis of *(a)* existing use and *(b)* the best valuation for alternative use; and if he will make a statement. [92220]

Ruth Kelly: A valuation of the land and buildings-based on existing use value, that is, their value as general office accommodation-was includinguded in HM Treasury's Resource Accounts for 2000–01 (January 2002, HC 573). The 2001–02 accounts will be published shortly. No other estimate of value has been made.

Infant Mortality

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the infant mortality, broken down by category, for each social class in each year since 1997. [91986]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Paul Marsden dated 21 January 2003:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question asking to list the infant mortality, broken down by category, for each social class for each year since 1997. (91986)

The table below provides infant deaths by social class based on father's occupation in England and Wales for the years 1997–2001. Father's occupation is only collected for births that occur inside marriage and those outside marriage that are jointly registered by both parents.

Infant mortality by age at death and social class based on father's occupation[1,2] 1997–2001, England and Wales

	Numbers										*Rates[3]*
		year of death									
Social Class	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*		*2001*
Neonatal deaths											
I	153	134	135	125	116	3.5	3.0	2.9	2	.7	2.6
II	472	504	489	444	405	3.0	3.2	3.0	2	.8	2.5
IIIN	240	204	209	230	203	4.1	3.6	3.8	4	.4	3.9
HIM	738	670	656	611	587	4.1	3.8	3.9	3	.8	3.7
IV	378	370	386	343	348	4.2	4.1	4.6	4	.1	4.4
V	151	146	166	147	124	4.8	4.8	5.8	5	.5	4.7
Other	172	177	178	203	135	5.7	6.0	5.8	6	.8	4.4
All births (excl. sole registered births)	2304	2205	2219	2103	1932	3.9	3.8	3.9	3	.8	3.5
Postneonatal deaths											
I	37	55	52	42	51	0.9	1.2	1.1	0	.9	1.2
II	199	188	162	156	188	1.3	1.2	1.0	1	.0	1.2
IIIN	90	75	88	68	47	1.6	1.3	1.6	1	.3	0.9
HIM	291	256	274	239	252	1.6	1.5	1.6	1	.5	1.6
IV	231	172	171	169	163	2.6	1.9	2.0	2	.0	2.1
V	80	90	79	66	71	2.5	2.9	2.8	2	.5	2.7
Other	145	137	138	130	121	[illegible]	4.7	4.5	4	.4	4.0
All births (excl. sole registered births)	1073	973	964	870	906	1.8	1.7	1.7	1	.6	1.6
Infant deaths											
I	190	189	187	167	167	4.4	4.2	4.1	3	.6	3.8
II	671	692	651	600	593	4.3	4.4	4.0	3	.8	3.7
IIIN	330	279	297	298	250	5.7	4.9	5.4	5	.6	4.8
HIM	1029	926	930	850	839	5.7	5.3	5.5	5	.3	5.4
IV	609	542	557	512	511	6.8	6.0	6.6	6	.1	6.4
V	231	236	245	213	195	7.3	7.7	8.6	7	.9	7.4
Other	317	314	316	333	256	10.6	10.7	10.3	11	.2	8.4
All births (excl. sole registered births)	3377	3178	3183	2973	2838	5.7	5.4	5.5	5	.3	5.1

[1] Numbers of infant deaths by social class are based on father's occupation at death registration

[2] Numbers of live births by social class, used in calculating rates, are based on father's occupation at birth registration

[3] Rate per 1000 live births

Press Releases

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many press releases have been issued by his Department in each *(a)* year and *(b)* quarter from 1995–96 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92435]

Ruth Kelly: The information, which does not includingude Budget, PBR and Spending Review press releases, is set out in the table below.

	Jan to Mar	*Apr to June*	*July to Sept*	*Oct to Dec*	*Total*
1995	51	36	39	52	178
1996	57	47	39	39	182
1997	36	35	44	53	168
1998	41	66	51	60	218
1999	57	51	49	59	216
2000	44	37	25	45	151
2001	40	34	29	46	149
2002	30	32	38	38	138

Staff Relocation

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimates he has made of the cost savings from re-locating HM Treasury Staff out of central London premises; and if he will make a statement. [92514]

Ruth Kelly: No such estimate has been made. Since August 2002 all Treasury staff have been located in the refurbished 1 Horse Guards Road.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Departmental Running Costs

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the running costs of *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of its sponsored agencies were in (i) 1997 and (ii) the most recent year for which figures are available. [90714]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on administration costs for the Department for Education and Skills and the Office for Standards in Education showing outturn from 1998–99 and plans to 2003–04, is set out in Annex E of the 2002 Departmental Report (Cm 5402). Data for years before 1998–99 are not available on the same basis. Provisional outturn for gross and net administration costs limits were published in Public Expenditure 2001–02 Provisional Outturn (Cm 5574), Tables 4 and 5. Updated information, with plans to 2005–06, will be published in the 2003 Departmental Report later in the Spring.

Electronic Registration (Secondary Schools)

Jim Dowd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will make a statement on the progress of the tender for electronic registration systems in secondary schools. [91149]

Mr. Ivan Lewis *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* The £11.25 million Capital Modernisation Funding project to provide electronic registration systems in over 500 secondary schools with high truancy rates is a key initiative in the continuing drive to tackle truancy. There is no tender involved as schools are allocated funding through the Standards Fund and are free to contract with any suitable supplier.

Since the first round of funding was released last May, schools have been working together with local education authorities to purchase and implement suitable systems in schools subject to the approval of the Department for Education and Skills. Currently a third of the targeted schools have had their proposals to implement systems agreed and we expect the remainder to be approved by August.

Employment Tribunals

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many 16 to 17-year-olds took their employer to an employment tribunal to enforce their right to reasonable paid time off to achieve a first Level 2 qualification in *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02. [90922]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: We are not aware of any such cases since the legislation was introduced.

Entry to Employment Programme

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the budget profile is for the Entry to Employment programme for *(a)* 2002–03 and *(b)* 2003–04; and how many participants are expected to enter the programme in each year. [90919]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Entry to Employment (E2E) will become part of the Learning Gateway which provides a client-centred approach to support young people who need additional help to enter mainstream learning opportunities. E2E will be implemented nationally from August this year. Expenditure on the current 11 E2E pathfinders in 2002–03 will be £19.8 million. The budget for the programme in 2003–04 is likely to be £142 million. Over 47,000 young people are expected to join the programme in 2003–04.

Language Assistants

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many language assistants are employed in maintained primary schools. [92327]

Mr. Miliband: As at January 2002, there were 29.5 full-time equivalent foreign language assistants and 1,193.1 minority ethnic pupils' bilingual assistants in maintained primary schools.

Level 2 Qualifications

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many 16 to 17-year-olds exercised their right to reasonable time off to achieve a first Level 2 qualification in *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02. [90921]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: This information is not collected centrally.

Modern Apprenticeships

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what proportion of Modern Apprentices in each profession receive the minimum training allowance; and what is the average *(a)* wage and *(b)* training allowance received by Modern Apprentices in each profession. [91331]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: In 2001–02, 2 per cent. of starts on Advanced Modern Apprenticeships, and 15 per cent. of starts on Foundation Modern Apprenticeships, were by people who received a training allowance. These trainees receive at least the minimum training allowance of £40 per week, but some will receive more than this. However, we are not able to give the proportion that are on the minimum allowance, or break this down by sector. The majority of Modern Apprentices are employed and are paid a wage by their employer. The rate of pay for a Modern Apprentice is agreed by the employer and the individual apprentice.

National Skills Task Force

Dr. Vincent Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills who the members of the National Skills Task Force have been since its inception; what *(a)* expenses and *(b)* salary each received; and if he will make a statement. [91658]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The Skills Task Force was established as an Executive NDPB by the previous Secretary of State for Education and Skills to advise him on the extent and nature of skills shortages and skills gaps and assist him on the development of a national skills agenda.

The Skills Task Force operated from April 1998 to June 2000 under the chairmanship of Chris Humphries, currently Director-General of City and Guilds, and represented the private sector, trade unions, FE and HE, local authorities, and National Training Organisations. A list of members follows.

As an Executive NDPB, Task Force members were not paid a salary, only reimbursed for their travelling costs to attend monthly meetings.

On 27 June 2000, the Task Force's fourth and final report, "*Skills for all*: proposals for a National Skills Agenda", was published. The report set out their recommendations drawn from their work programme over the last two years.

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment provided a final response to the work of the Skills Task Force in the pamphlet, "Opportunity and Skills in the Knowledge-Driven Economy", launched alongside the "Opportunity for All in a World of Change" White Paper on 13 February 2001.

Following these reports, much work has been taken forward that will be reflected in the Government's Skills Strategy which will be published in June 2003. This will be a major cross government strategy drawing together policies for meeting the skill needs of the economy and showing how this will raise productivity.

Skills Task Force members

Name	*Organisation*	*Position*
Chris Humphries CBE	British Chambers of Commerce (BCC), London Tel. 0207 565 2042	Director General Chairman of Skill Task Force
Llew Aviss	Llew Aviss Associates Tel. 01792 208 558	Managing Director
Rita Britton	Pollyanna (Barnsley) Ltd. Tel 01226 291 665	Director
Tony Dubbins	Graphical, Paper & Media Union, Bedford Tel. 01234 351 521	General Secretary
Eric Drewery	ABB Ltd., London Tel. 0207 753 2024	Chief Executive Officer
John Edmonds	GMB, London Tel. 0208 947 3131	General Secretary
Denise Hall	BT plc, London Tel. 0207 469 2601	Head of Government Health and Education Services
Sir Ken Jackson	AEEU, Kent Tel. 0208 315 8224	General Secretary
Dr. DeAnne Julius	Bank of England, London Tel. 0207 601 3788	Member Monetary Policy Committee
Eddie MacIntyre CBE	Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies Tel. 0121 604 1000 (ext. 234)	Principal
Ashwin Mistry OBE	Brett & Randall Insurance Brokers, Leicester Tel. 0116 222 8222	Managing Director Board Member Leicestershire TEC
Terry Morgan	British Aerospace Centre, Hampshire Tel: 01252 373 232	Director of Personnel
John V. Palmer	Works from home Tel. 01785 84[illegible] 664	Chairman—Steel Industry's NTO Chair of Steel Training Ltd.
Peter Rainbird CBE	Rainbird Group, Essex Tel. 0127 721 5325	Chairman/Chief Executive Chairman, Essex TEC
Iain Roxburgh	Coventry City Council Tel. 02476 831 076	Chief Executive and Town Clerk
Sharon Studer	3 COM Europe Ltd., Hemel Hempstead Tel. 01442 438 017	Vice President
Julia Tinsley	Pitman Training Centre, Sheffield Tel. 0114 272 8392	Director

Skills Task Force members

Name	*Organisation*	*Position*
Adair Turner	Confederation of British Industry, London Tel. 0207 867 3203	Director-General
Prof. Leslie Wagner CBE	Leeds Metropolitan University Tel. 0113 283 3100	Vice Chancellor
Anne Weinstock CBE	Rathbone CI, Manchester (on secondment to DfEE, Millennium Volunteers Unit, Sheffield) Tel. 0114 259 3595	Chief Executive

On-line Learning

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what plans he has to monitor standards of on-line learning programmes; and if he will make a statement. [91064]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Department's provision of on-line learning is covered by the same quality assurance and inspection arrangements as conventional provision such as schools, colleges and adult and community provision, The Ofsted and adult learning inspection framework and others, are developing to cover the increasingly wide range of provision and variety of providers. Work is also well advanced in establishing standards for the creation of on-line learning resources, covering both technical and pedagogical aspects.

Thames Gateway

Jon Cruddas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assessment he has made of the extra resources required to support the growth and development of new communities in the Thames Gateway area; what discussions he has had with other Government Departments in relation to supporting the growth and development of new communities in the Thames Gateway; and what resources he has allocated to support the growth and development of new communities in the Thames Gateway. [90427]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: My noble Friend Lord Rooker chairs the Thames Gateway Strategic Partnership, whose membership comprises ministers from five Government Departments (ODPM, DfT, DFES, DTI and DoH) three Regional Development Agencies, three Regional Assemblies and three sub-regional partnerships (East London, North Kent and South Essex).

The Partnership is now looking at new means of accelerating the regeneration and development of the Gateway. Thames Gateway development and regeneration is being supported by investment from various Government funding streams (for example housing and transport) and through regional public agencies (for example the RDAs).

We are working with the Partnership to determine the additional demands on primary and secondary education arising through housing and economic growth in the Gateway. The Minister for Lifelong Learning and Higher Education, Margaret Hodge, chairs a Thames Gateway Further and Higher Education working group which is working with universities, colleges, the Learning & Skills Councils and Higher Education Funding Council for England to scope the likely pattern of future demand for post-compulsory education and training.

Training

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many 16 to 18-year-olds were in employment and receiving *(a)* employer funded training and *(b)* employer funded training for apprenticeships not funded by the Learning and Skills Council in (i) 2000–01 and (ii) 2001–02. [90923]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The information is as follows:

(a) The number and percentage of 16 to 18-year-olds in Employer Funded Training (EFT) at end 2000 and end 2001 are set out in the table. The figures for end 2001 are provisional. The percentages are taken from the annual statistical first release, "Participation in Education, Training and Employment by 16–18-Year-Olds in England".

	End 2000	*End 2001*
Number (in thousands)	97	99
16–18 year old population (percentage)	5	5
16–18 year olds in employment (percentage)	9	9

(b) No further breakdown is available for employer funded training.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many 16 to 18-year-olds were in employment but not receiving *(a)* training provided by their employer and *(b)* training provided by their employer linked to a qualification in (i) 2000–01 and (ii) 2001–02. [90924]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The number and percentage of 16 to 18-year-olds in employment (including both full-time and part-time), but not in employer funded training (EFT) at end 2000 and end 2001 are set out in the table. These could be in full-time education, Government supported training (GST) or in other education and training, though not employer funded. A breakdown is shown. It is important to note that many of these young people will be in part-time, rather than full-time, employment.

The figures for end 2001 are provisional. They are taken from the annual statistical first release, "Participation in Education, Training and Employment by 16–18-Year-Olds in England".

	Number (in thousands)	Percentage of population	Percentage of those in employment
End 2000			
In employment and not in EFT	951	52	91
In employment	1,047	58	100
EFT	97	5	9
Full-time education	475	26	45
GST	157	9	15
Other education and training	44	2	4
Not in any education or training	275	15	26
End 2001			
In employment and not in EFT	954	51	91
In employment	1,053	57	100
EFT	99	5	9
Full-time education	471	25	45
GST	145	8	14
Other education and training	57	3	5
Not in any education or training	282	15	27

Detailed information on employer funded training, such as whether the training is linked to a qualification is not available on a consistent basis.

Youth Development

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the latest estimate is of the proportion of 16 to 18-year-olds not in education, employment or training. [90926]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The provisional figure for end 2001 was 173 thousand 16 to 18-year-olds not in education, training or employment. This is 9 per cent. of the cohort population.

The latest estimate of the number and percentage of 16 to 18-year-olds not in education, training or employment (NEET) was published in the annual statistical first release, "SFR 16/2002: Participation in Education, Training and Employment by 16–18 Year Olds in England: 2000 and 2001".

PRIVY COUNCIL

Paper Supplies

Sue Doughty: To ask the President of the Council who the suppliers are of his Department's *(a)* paper and *(b)* paper products. [91910]

Mr. Robin Cook: The vast majority of the paper and paper products used in my department is supplied by Banner Business Supplies Limited. My department follows Government guidance on the use of recycled paper, in the interest of fostering sustainable development.

CABINET OFFICE

Delivery Unit

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office from which vote the delivery unit will be funded. [91167]

Mr. Alexander: Funding for the delivery unit is included in the Cabinet Office Estimates.

Departmental Costs

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what the running costs of *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of its sponsored agencies were in *(i)* 1997 and (ii) the most recent year for which figures are available. [90717]

Mr. Alexander: Detailed information on administration costs for Cabinet Office, and its agencies the Centre for Management and Policy Studies and the Government Car and Despatch Agency, going back to 1998–99 and with projections to 2003–04, is set out in Table 5 on page 94 of the 2002 departmental report (Cm 5429). Data for years before 1998–99 are not available on the same basis. Provisional outturn for gross and net administration costs limits were published in Public Expenditure 2001–02 Provisional Outturn (Cm 5574), Tables 4 and 5. Updated information, with plans to 2005–06, will be published in the 2003 departmental report in the spring.

Value for Money

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what level of output would constitute a failure to achieve the value for money target as defined in the technical note to the 2002 Spending Review Public Service Agreement on value for money; and if he will make a statement. [91960]

Mr. Alexander: The Public Service Agreement value for money target commits the Cabinet Office to deliver a 2.5 per cent saving year-on- year, on administrative resource, over the 2002 Spending Review period.

It also requires the Cabinet Office to find the 2.5 per cent efficiency saving without any reduction in it's published outputs or outcomes.

The Cabinet Office's aim is to achieve all of its published targets within its agreed expenditure limits. Therefore no specific level of output has been set as the determinant of failure.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Firearms

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what discussions he has had with the Home Secretary about extending to Northern Ireland the new penalties proposed for illegal possession of firearms in England and Wales. [91304]

Jane Kennedy: I am aware of the Home Secretary's proposal for a mandatory 5-year sentence for the illegal possession or distribution of firearms. Northern Ireland's firearms legislation is undergoing a major review and a Proposal for a Draft Firearms Order is currently the subject of consultation. I will consider the question of mandatory minimum sentences as part of that review.

Former RUC Officers (Employment)

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, how many former RUC officers who retired on severance pay have re-entered employment. [89439]

Jane Kennedy: To date, 252 have secured full time employment.

Housing Benefit

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on proposals to link antisocial behaviour to housing benefit penalties in Northern Ireland. [91302]

Mr. Browne: There are at present no proposals in Northern Ireland to link antisocial behaviour to housing benefit penalties. The proposed Housing (NI) Order contains a range of other measures to deal with antisocial behaviour in social housing.

Pensioner Poverty

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the extent of pensioner poverty in Northern Ireland. [91301]

Mr. Browne: There is no single measure of pensioner poverty. Poverty is a complex issue with various elements which affect many aspects of people's lives, including their income, living standards, health, housing and quality of environment.

A report was commissioned by Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) as part of the research and evaluation strategy for the Government's New Targeting Social Need (New TSN) initiative. This report was published in May 2002. The primary aim of the report was to assess the potential of establishing a baseline of poverty. The report utilised data from the Continuous Household Survey and estimated that there were 81,000 individual pensioners living in households in the bottom 30 per cent. of gross household incomes.

Ensuring that pensioners have a decent income is a key measure in combating pensioner poverty. At present, no pensioner has to live on less than £98.15 a week under the minimum income guarantee (£149.80 for couples). From April 2003 these rates will increase to £102.10 for single pensioners and £155.80 for couples.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Pension Tax Credit

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many and what proportion of pensioners in the Twickenham constituency will benefit from the introduction of the pension tax credit in October; and if he will make a statement. [91669]

Mr. McCartney: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer I gave him on 9 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 333W.

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will publish in the *Official Report* the notes accompanying the combined pension forecast on page 45 of the pensions Green Paper (Cm. 5677). [89647]

Mr. McCartney: The explanatory notes that accompany the example of a combined pension forecast are as follows:

Flexiplan-Explanatory Notes

Plan Pay

Plan pay is your total pay-including any overtime and bonus.

Your investment over the year

You choose how much to invest from 2 per cent to 15 per cent of plan pay in 1 per cent steps. Emap matches your investment for up to 5 per cent of plan pay (7 per cent for members with 10 or more years' service).

Balance at 6 October 2002

The balance shown is not guaranteed and may fluctuate up or down. The balance excludes funds fron earlier periods of flexiplan membership.

Protected Rights

If you joined flexi plan before 1 January 1997, part of your flexiplan account (called 'protected rights') replaces some of the state earnings-Related Pension and must be taken as a pension which cannot start to be paid before age 60. The protected rights balance is shown separately as well as being included in the total balance on your statement.

Illustration Assumptions

The pension illustration overleaf is based on certain assumptions, which are that Contributions to Flexiplan continue at the current rate;

the pension bought is guaranteed for five years, has an attaching 50 per cent partner's pension and increases in line with price inflation up to 5 per cent a year (up to 3 per cent a year on any protected rights):

the average annual rate of inflation over the period to retirement is 3 per cent, investment returns over the same period will exceed your salary increases by2.5 per cent a year, and the cost of the pension at retirement is calculatedassuming future investments yields 3 per cent ahead of inflation; and

for members who are a long way from retirement, the cost of the pension iscalculated using the assumptions described above and for members who areclose to retirement, the cost is in line with current market prices.

Future Events

The assumptions used relate to the future. As this is uncertain, your actual Flexiplan benefits could differ significantly from this illustration. For example, you may leave Emap before reaching retirement, in which case your contributions would stop, oryou may simply alter the level of contributions to Flexiplan. The financial assumptions about the future (see note five) all have "a significant effect on the level of the pension illustration. The investment return achieved by your account before retirement is very important, particularly for younger members. For example an average return of just 1 per cent per annum ahead or behind the illustration assumption could increase or decrease the resulting pension percentage by as muchas a quarter. It is important for older members nearing retirement, where volatility of returns becomes an important issue. This is when your account is switched graduallyinto special "retirement units" to provide more certainty of pension level.

Lump Sum Death Benefit

The person to whom the lump sum death benefit is payable is at discretion of the Trustees so that inheritance tax does not have to be paid. It is therefore important that you complete a nomination form to let the trustees know to whom you would like the benefit to be paid. If you have not completed a form or would like to make a change, please contact the Benefits helpdesk.

Inland Revenue Maximum Benefits

Flexiplan is approved by the Inland Revenue which means that all contributions and investment income are free to tax. This also means that the benefits provided underFlexiplan and contributions paid into your account are subject to Inland Revenue limits. Where practicable these limits have been taken into account in preparing thisstatement. However, if you have benefits retained in a pension arrangement of aprevious employer, it may be necessary to restrict the amount quoted.

Updates

Regular updates of the projections are important, so an illustration of your Flexiplan benefits will be prepared for you at least once a year, even if you leave Emap. If you would like any further details please contact the Benefits Helpdesk.

Data Protection

Empa plc and the trustees hold this and other information about you in order that your benefits can be administered correctly. this information is also used to identify you when you make enquiries. This information is disclosed to the Trustee's advisers and administrators as necessary. Emap plc and the Trustees are required to keep information about you as up-to-date as possible. If the information about you given in this statement is incorrect or incomplete, please contact the Benefits Helpdesk on 01733 311399. You may also contact the Benefits Helpdesk if you would like more information about this or a copy of the information held about you (there is a fee payable for this service).

Every effort has been made to ensure that accuracy of this statement. Nevertheless, it is not binding on the Trustees if an error or omission is subsequently discovered.

Annual Report

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how much producing his Department's latest Annual Report cost; how many copies were printed; how many copies of it were sold at its cover price; to whom copies of the report have been provided free of charge; and how many copies were provided free of charge. [90892]

Mr. McCartney: The Department for Work and Pensions published its first Departmental Report in May 2002. The cost of production incurred by the Department was £94,940. The costs of printing and publishing are met by the publisher, The Stationery Office Limited, and do not fall to government.

2,450 copies of the report were produced of which 2,010 were for the Department's use. Distribution details are set out in the following table..

The production and sale of remaining copies of the report are matters for the publisher.

Distribution of the Department for Work and Pensions Departmental Report

Recipients	*Number of copies distributed free of charge*
Social Security Advisory Committee	15
Work and Pensions Select Committee	16
Chair of the Treasury Select Committee	1
Opposition spokesmen	6
Departmental managers	1,745
Laying in the House and House Libraries	27
House of Lords	50
Vote Office	150
Total	2,010

Benefit Payments

Mr. Steve Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many respondents have opted for payment *(a)* by credit transfer into an existing bank or building society account, *(b)* by credit transfer into a new basic bank account and *(c)* by means of a Post Office Card Account, broken down by social security benefit for which letters have been sent to recipients asking them to specify how they wish to receive payments following the switch to ACT; and if he will make a statement. [92185]

Malcolm Wicks: As at 10 January 103,023 customers have responded and opted for payment into a bank or building society account.

This is made up of 72,458 Child Benefit customers and 30,565 Veterans Agency customers.

We do not distinguish between existing or basic bank accounts.

The total number of customers requesting Post Office card accounts is 26,297. This is made up of 8,854 Child Benefit customers and 17,443 Veterans Agency customers.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many CSA cases from the Wansbeck constituency are being dealt with by the Child Support Agency and how many new cases were received in each of the last five years. [88153]

Malcolm Wicks: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Doug Smith. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Mike Isaac to Mr. Dennis Murphy, dated January 2003:

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in replying to your recent parliamentary question about the Child Support Agency promised a substantive reply from the Chief Executive. He is unavailable at this time so I am replying on his behalf.

You ask how many cases from your constituency are being dealt with by the Child Support Agency; and how many new cases were received in each of the last five years.

I'm afraid I do not have precise numbers.

We have however estimated that around 4,800 cases are currently being dealt with where the applicant resides in the Wansbeck Constituency. In each of the years 31st March 1998 to 1999 we received around 500 cases, each of the years 31st March 2000 to 2001 we received around 200 cases and in the year to 31st March 2002 we received less than 100 cases.

External Consultants

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the total cost to his Department was of the use of external consultants in 2002. [90514]

Mr. McCartney: The total cost to DWP of the use of external consultants in the 2001–02 financial year was £169.494 million.

Job Sharing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on the extent of job sharing in his Department. [90858].

Mr. McCartney: Nine people are currently employed in this department on a 'formal' job share basis as at 30 November 2002. However, over 30,000 people work part-time, including some who are employed on an Informal' job share basis.

Our Equal Opportunities statement actively promotes and supports the use of flexible working patterns to enable those working for us to balance home and work responsibilities. Jobsharing is just one of the alternative and flexible working patterns that employees are welcome to take up. The flexibility of the jobshare is decided in conjunction with local management to suit an individuals need and the needs of their work. The Department operates Flexible Working Hours (FWH) Schemes wherever practicable. The framework gives managers discretion and freedom to develop FWH schemes to suit their individual business and staff needs.

All vacancies are open to people with different working patterns, unless real operational needs preclude it.

Pension Credit

Sir Archy Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what assessment he has made of the impact of the pension credit on the mean benefit income of single pensioners and couples in *(a)* 2004–05 and *(b)* 2005–06, by quintile. [90372]

Mr. McCartney: The table provides our current assessment of the impact of pension credit in 2004–05 on the mean weekly benefit income of single adults of state pension age or over, and couples where the man is aged 65 or over. This chart includes pension credit direct effects only, and excludes any related increases in housing benefit or council tax benefit. Cases have been placed in overall population quintiles. Due to the uncertainties inherent in the predictions the results have been rounded to the nearest 50p.

£

Quintile	*Bottom*	*Second*	*Third*	*Fourth*	*Top*	*Average*
Average weekly pension credit gain	6.50	7.00	3.50	1.50	0.50	4.50

The distributional impact of our policies is assessed by the Department, when it is appropriate and robust to do so, by using simulation modelling based on the family resources survey. At present the simulations are based on the 2000–01 survey sample and the departmental analysts do not regard projected distributional results for 2005–06 to be robust, nor results for 2004–05 analysed by family type. All projections of distributional consequences for 2004–05 are subject to a variety of assumptions and should be treated with caution.

Pensioners' Incomes Series

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will recalculate table 14 of the Pensioners' Incomes Series excluding all those with earnings. [90824]

Mr. McCartney: The information requested is in the table.

Components of mean gross income of pensioner units, excluding those with earnings, by quintile of the net income distribution, 1994–05 and 2000–01

Results based upon data from the FRS

Incomes in £ per week, 2000–01 prices

	Quintiles of the income distribution					
	Bottom fifth	*Next fifth*	*Middle fifth*	*Next fifth*	*Top fifth*	*Overall mean*
1994–95 Means						
Pensioner couples						
Gross income	143	183	227	307	552	264
Of which:						
Benefit income	125	145	155	154	139	143
Occupational pension	11	27	56	122	283	87
Investment income	7	11	15	31	126	33
Earnings	*	*	*	*	*	*
Other income	*	1	*	*	5	1
Single pensioners						
Gross income	80	104	123	151	275	144
Of which:						
Benefit income	72	87	105	111	115	97
Occupational pension	3	11	13	30	105	31
Investment income	5	6	5	10	52	15
Earnings	*	*	*	*	*	*
Other income	*	*	*	1	4	1

Components of mean gross income of pensioner units, excluding those with earnings, by quintile of the net income distribution, 1994–05 and 2000–01

Results based upon data from the FRS — *Incomes in £ per week, 2000–01 prices*

	Quintiles of the income distribution					
	Bottom fifth	*Next fifth*	*Middle fifth*	*Next fifth*	*Top fifth*	*Overall mean*
2001–02 Means						
Pensioner couples						
Gross income	157	211	267	360	634	302
Of which:						
Benefit income	134	161	173	168	156	158
Occupational pension	15	36	73	154	334	106
Investment income	8	14	19	37	141	37
Earnings	*	*	*	*	*	*
Other income	*	*	1	1	3	1
Single pensioners						
Gross income	88	124	148	188	318	169
Of which:						
Benefit income	80	103	118	128	141	113
Occupational pension	4	15	22	45	119	39
Investment income	4	5	6	13	55	16
Earnings	*	*	*	*	*	*
Other income	*	1	1	2	3	1

Notes:

1. These figures show very little difference in the first four quintiles to those published in the Pensioners' Incomes Series, which include pensioner units with earnings. Gross and investment income for pensioners without earnings in quintile five and the overall mean are slightly lower than for those with earnings, and these pensioners also contribute a higher proportion of their gross income to benefits.
2. The estimates are from the Family Resources Survey 1994–05 and 2000–01, which is the latest year for which results are available. The survey covers Great Britain and does not include people living in residential care or nursing homes.
3. As with data from any survey, these estimates should not be treated as exact as they are subject to sampling error. In particular, great care should be taken when comparing groups with similar incomes, or looking at changes in income over a short time period, since random sampling fluctuations mean that estimates should be regarded as a broad indication of trends only.
4. Incomes are in £ per week and are at 2000–01 prices.
5. Estimates have been rounded to the nearest £1. Estimates of less than £0.50 are labelled '*'.
6. The distribution of income is based on net unequivalised income (unequivalised income refers to the actual cash amount directly received by pensioner units), and has been calculated separately for singles and couples, i.e. estimates for pensioner couples show income for each quintile of the pensioner couples' income distribution.
7. Single pensioners are defined as single (non-cohabiting) people over state pension age (65 and over for men, 60 and over for women). Pensioner couples are defined as couples (married or cohabiting) where the man is over state pension age.

Pensions

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what would be the weekly savings required to provide the retirement incomes shown in Figure 3.1 of the pensions Green Paper (Cm 5677) if the rate of return on savings exceeded earnings growth by 1.5 per cent. and 2.5 per cent. respectively. [89645]

Mr. McCartney: Figure 3.1 of the Green Paper Simplicity, security and choice: working and saving for retirement (Cm 5677) is reproduced in the following two tables under the alternative assumptions about the rate of return on saving. Each of the two tables shows the required level of weekly saving in order to generate a given target income in retirement. The level of saving is in net terms, i.e. before the addition of tax relief at the basic rate, while the target income is in gross terms, i.e. before the deduction of any tax liability. Apart from the revisions to the assumption about the rate of return all other relevant assumptions are as set out in Annex 5 of the Green Paper.

Table 1: Rate of return above earnings growth of 1.5 per cent

	Age start saving (£)		
Target weekly income (£)	*20 years*	*30 years*	*40 years*
50	10	15	25
100	25	35	45
200	50	65	95
300	75	100	140

Table 2: Rate of return above earnings growth of 2.5 per cent.

	Age start saving (£)		
Target weekly income (£)	*20 years*	*30 years*	*40 years*
50	10	15	20
100	20	25	40
200	40	55	80
300	60	80	120

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will estimate the cost of *(a)* an increase of £5 in the rate of the basic state pension and *(b)* the introduction of age additions of (i) £5 for pensioners aged 75 to 79 and (ii) £10 for pensioners aged 80 years or over, on the basis that the age additions for those aged 75 to 79 or 80 years and over are paid in full, regardless of contribution record; and if he will make a statement. [90172]

Mr. McCartney: We estimate that it would cost around £2.6 billion in 2003–04 to increase the maximum rate payable of the basic State pension by £5 per week and all other payments proportionately.

If weekly age additions of £5 were introduced for pensioners aged 75–79 and £10 for pensioners aged 80 years and over, we estimate that this would cost around £1.8 billion in 2003–04.

Notes:

1. Estimates are in cash terms for Great Britain and are rounded to the nearest £100 million.

2. Costs are gross, i.e. no account has been taken of offsetting savings in income related benefits.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions pursuant to his answer of 9 January 2003, ref 88793, on pensions, if a UK citizen moves from a country where UK pensions are not uprated back to the UK and thence to another EU member state, whether they will be entitled to an annually uprated basic pension, and if this payment will be at the same rate as if they lived in the UK. [91299]

Mr. McCartney: If a UK citizen who is entitled to receive a UK State Pension moves back to the UK from a country where UK pensions are not uprated and then moves to another EU member state, they will be entitled to an annually uprated State Pension in the EU member state that is paid at the same rate as if they lived in the UK.

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the estimated retirement income from the state in 2050 is, as a percentage of their earnings, for employees at the income levels shown in Figure 1.7 of the pensions Green Paper (Cm 5677), assuming that the state second pension remains earnings-related and that they are not contracted out; and what would be the corresponding figures if the basic state pension were increased in line with average earnings in 2004 and subsequent years. [89644]

Mr. McCartney: The figures in Table 1 show the projected replacement rate provided by the state for individuals retiring in 2050. These figures correspond directly with those behind Figure 2.7 in the Green Paper Simplicity, security and choice: working and saving for retirement (Cm 5677).

Retirement income from the state includes the basic state pension, state second pension and pension credit. The hypothetical individuals are assumed to be contracted in to state second pension in all years. A full list of modelling assumptions is set out in Annex 5 of the Green Paper.

Table 1: Retirement income from the State for those retiring in 2050, expressed as a percentage of earnings before retirement, assuming that the policy regime remains unchanged

Weekly earnings (£)	*Replacement rates (per cent.)*
100	139
200	69
300	48
400	37
500	30
600	25

Note:

All figures rounded to nearest 1 per cent.

Source:

Department for Work and Pensions calculations.

The projections in Table 2 have been made on exactly the same basis as those in Table 1 but for the uprating of the basic state pension by earnings as opposed to prices.

Table 2: Retirement income from the state for those retiring in 2050 as a percentage of earnings before retirement, assuming that the basic state pension is increased with earnings from 2004

Weekly earnings (£)	*Replacement rates (per cent.)*
100	142
200	71
300	49
400	38
500	31
600	26

Note:

All figures rounded to nearest 1 per cent.

Source:

Department for Work and Pensions calculations.

In both sets of projections the start point of the savings credit element of pension credit is set at the value of the full basic state pension. For the projections in Table 2 this start point is of higher value because the basic state pension has been assumed to increase in line with earnings and not prices.

All figures are rounded to the nearest 1 per cent.; this degree of accuracy has been used in this question to indicate that the projections in Table 2 are slightly higher than those in Table 1 for all hypothetical individuals.

Pensions Green Paper

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the basis was for the calculation made on page 102 of the Green Paper "Simplicity, Security and Choice: Working and Saving for Retirement", that a £20,000 lump sum could be taken instead of a state pension. [90818]

Mr. McCartney: The figure of £20,000 is in broad terms the amount of State pension that a hypothetical person with a State pension entitlement of £100 per week would forgo due to deferring for a five-year period, net of income tax applied at the standard rate of 22 per cent.

The example was for illustrative purposes only, and should not be regarded as a statement of policy. The detail of policy on the calculation and tax treatment of the lump sum will be decided following the consultation.

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will set out the assumptions made for the estimate, given in the Green Paper "Simplicity, Security and Choice: Working and Saving for Retirement", that UK state spending on pensions will continue broadly at its current level of around five per cent. [90822]

Mr. McCartney: The assumptions can be found on page 148 of the green paper 'Simplicity Security and Choice: Working and Saving for Retirement.' (Cm 5677)

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many of those with liquid financial assets of more than £10,000 are members of an occupational or private pension scheme. [90821]

Mr. McCartney: In 2001–02, there were around 6.4 million people of working age in Great Britain in a benefit unit with total capital assets of more than 10,000. Of these, around 3.8m were also contributing to some form of private pension.

Notes:

1. All figures are estimates and are taken from the Family Resources Survey (FRS). 2001–02 is the latest year for which data is available.

2. No provision has been made for any debts that might be simultaneously held by individuals.

3. Some people with capital assets of more than 10,000 will be members of, but not contributing to, a private pension. These might be people who are retired, who are in between jobs or whose circumstances may have recently changed. These people are not included in the 3.8 million estimate given above.

4. The estimates are based on sample counts that have been adjusted for non-response using multi-purpose grossing factors that control for tenure, Council Tax Band and a number of demographic variables. Estimates are subject to sampling error and to variability in non-response.

5. Questions on assets are a sensitive part of the FRS questionnaire and have relatively low level of response. Evidence suggests some under reporting of. capital by respondents.

Ringwood Jobcentre

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) what consultations have been carried out on the proposal to withdraw Social Fund services from the Ringwood Jobcentre; and what alternative arrangements are proposed for those living in Three Legged Cross and Kenwood. [90721]

(2) what enhanced services will be provided at Ringwood Jobcentre when Jobcentre Plus is introduced. [90754]

Malcolm Wicks: We are progressively extending the new integrated Jobcentre Plus office network across the country over the next four years. These offices are delivering a single, integrated service to people of working age claiming benefits, with a clear focus on work. They provide an active and responsive service to help people find jobs, and give advice on the full range of help and support available to them.

Full details of the services available in these new offices are described in the Jobcentre Plus Business Plan 2002–03, a copy of which is available in the Library.

Plans are currently being drawn up to roll out the new integrated Jobcentre Plus service in Hampshire District, which includes Ringwood Jobcentre. The future provision of Social Fund services in the District forms part of the plans. Partners and stakeholders were consulted about these plans in June and September 2002. Their comments are being taken into consideration in reaching final decisions, which will be announced in due course.

Wholetime Equivalent Staff

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the distribution of his Department's wholetime equivalent staff was, including the staff in agencies and other bodies reporting to him, in each Government office region and nation of the UK *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the most recent available period. [90469]

Mr. McCartney: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 15 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 609W.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Cheverton Down

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister whether he asked for an Environmental Impact Assessment to be provided for the application for a wind energy development at Cheverton Down, Isle of Wight, which was referred to him for call in; and if he will make a statement. [90989]

Mr. McNulty: Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) was not required for the wind energy development at Cheverton Down. Responsibility for determining the planning application, and therefore for deciding whether EIA would be required, rested with the local planning authority, the Isle of Wight council. The council originally granted planning permission in 1995, and in 2002, determined an application to vary one of the conditions attached to the permission. A request by local residents that my right. hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister should call in that application for his own determination was declined.

Fire Officers (Herefordshire)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many fire officers are employed in Herefordshire. [91747]

Mr. Leslie: On 31 March 2002, the number of fire officers employed in Herefordshire was 352 whole-time, 355 retained and 25 fire control.

Greenfield Sites

Helen Jones: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what steps he intends to take to ensure that the guidance in PPG3 is complied with following the decision of the Court of Appeal in the case of Rowlinson *v*. Warrington borough council. [92328]

Mr. McNulty: It is normally for local planning authorities to determine planning applications made to them. In doing so they are required to take account of all considerations which may be material, including the guidance in Planning Policy Guidance Note 3: 'Housing'. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will continue to monitor their performance.

Helen Jones: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what steps he intends to take to protect greenfield sites in areas where a council's committed land supply meets or exceeds regional planning guidance requirements, following the Court of Appeal decision in the case of Rowlinson *v.* Warrington Borough Council. [92329]

Mr. McNulty: Planning Policy Guidance Note 3, "Housing", introduced a series of tough new measures designed to meet the country's future housing needs in the most sustainable way possible, including a sequential approach which gives priority to re-using brownfield sites in urban areas in preference to developing greenfield sites. Local planning authorities should revise their plans to take account of the guidance in PPG3 and Regional Planning Guidance, and they should seek to do so as quickly as possible.

In considering planning applications for housing development in the interim, before development plans can be reviewed, local authorities should have regard to the policy contained in PPG3 as material considerations which may supersede the policies in their plan.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is not convinced that it is necessary to issue further advice in the light of the decision in Rowlinson *v.* Warrington Borough Council, which was determined on the facts of the case.

Helen Jones: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what steps he intends to take to protect greenfield sites in North Warrington, following the recent decision in the case of Rowlinson *v.* Warrington Borough Council. [92331]

Mr. McNulty: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister expects the local authority concerned to implement Planning Policy Guidance Note 3, "Housing".

Housing Corporation

Bob Russell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how much funding has been allocated to the Housing Corporation for the current financial year for new dwellings; how much will be given for the next financial year; and what figure the Corporation has stated it needs to meet requests made by registered social housing landlords for new dwellings. [91140]

Mr. McNulty: In 2002–03, the Housing Corporation have allocated £820 million to new-build schemes through their approved development programme (ADP).

The amount for new-build schemes for the 2003–04 ADP has not yet been determined.

The ADP is run on the basis of competitive bids, and commonly attracts bids from registered social landlords amounting to three times the available funds from the Housing Corporation.

Housing Transfers

Matthew Green: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) what the total value of payments made to local authorities was in each year since 1997 regarding overhanging debt payments for authorities transferring housing stock; [90986]

(2) what total payment has been made to date to local authorities to pay off debt left after housing transfers. [90985]

Mr. McNulty: Payments are made directly to the Public Works Loans Commissioners to repay local authority "overhanging debt" after housing transfer. Since the arrangements to repay overhanging debt were put in place in 1999, payments totalling £132.68 million have been made in 2000, payments totalling £143.49 million in 2001 and payments totalling £256.733 million in 2002; a total of £532.9 million.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the average cash reserves were for shire county councils in each of the last 10 years. [92065]

Mr. Leslie: The average cash reserves for shire county councils were as shown in the table.

Average cash reserves[1] for shire county councils[2] at the beginning of the financial year

	£ million
1992–93	20.8
1993–94	32.6
1994–95	45.9
1995–96	47.0
1996–97	38.9
1997–98	37.7
1998–99	30.5
1999–2000	32.0
2000–01	34.7
2001–02[3]	39.8

[1] Cash reserves include schools' reserves, other earmarked reserves and unallocated reserves.

[2] County councils underwent reorganisations between 1995–96 and 1997–98, resulting in the creation of Unitary authorities. Both the number of county councils and the average geographical area for which remaining county councils were responsible therefore reduced during this period.

[3] Provisional.

Source:

RS forms 1992–93 to 2000–01.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the cash reserves of *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham borough council and *(b)* Shropshire county council were in each of the last 10 years. [92066]

Mr. Leslie: The cash reserves of Shrewsbury and Atcham borough council and Shropshire county council were as shown in the following table:

Cash reserves[1] in Shrewsbury and Atcham and Shropshire at the beginning of the financial year

£000

	Shrewsbury and Atcham	Shropshire
1992–93	6,288	9,911
1993–94	4,323	12,357
1994–95	4,131	22,078
1995–96	5,255	14,812
1996–97	5,787	10,198
1997–98	5,969	8,852
1998–99	6,516	4,745

Cash reserves[1] in Shrewsbury and Atcham and Shropshire at the beginning of the financial year

£000

	Shrewsbury and Atcham	*Shropshire*
1999–2000	6,936	7,944
2000–01	6,367	8,490
2001–02	5,042	4,562

[1] Cash reserves include schools' reserves, other earmarked reserves and unallocated reserves.

Source:

RS forms 1992–93 to 2001–02

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what representations he has received from North Tyneside council regarding the level of the council's financial settlement for 2003–04. [91857]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister received one representation from the Tyneside council regarding the provisional local government finance settlement 2003–04. The representation by email was received after the deadline for the close of consultation.

Public Amenities (Charitable Trusts)

Bob Russell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what advice he gives local authorities in respect of handing over control of public amenities to charitable trusts which have exemptions for tax and business rates; and if he will make a statement. [91146]

Mr. Raynsford: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has not provided any advice to local authorities on the transfer of public amenities to charitable trusts.

Regeneration Funding

Adam Price: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how much regeneration funding was received by each of the English regions in each year between 1974–75 and 2001–02; and what the estimated figures are for *(a)* 2002–03, *(b)* 2003–04, *(c)* 2004–05; and *(d)* 2005–06, (i) in cash terms and (ii) at constant 2001–02 prices. [89823]

Mr. McNulty: Expenditure by English region for urban regeneration is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. Table 1 shows total cash outturn expenditure from 1992–93 to 2000–01. Comparative figures are not available before 1992–93. Expenditure on neighbourhood renewal programmes by English region is given in Table 2.

Following the introduction of resource accounting and budgeting systems, outturn figures from 2001–02, and plans, are compiled on a resource basis. Resource plans for 2003–04 to 2005–06 will be published shortly.

Table 1: Urban regeneration outturn and plans

£ million

Outturn	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*Plans 2002–03*
Cash	1,195	1,420	1,215	1,039	1,154	1,239	1,223	1,182	1,333	-	-
Resource	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1,452	1,658
At constant 2001–02 prices	955	1,162	1,008	887	1,016	1,125	1,140	1,129	1,302	1,452	1,658

Table 2: Neighbourhood renewal outturn and plans by English region

£ thousand

Region	*1998–99 cash outturn*	*1999–2000 cash outturn*	*2000–01 cash outturn*	*2001–02 resource outturn*	*2002–03 resource plans*
North East	14	756	3,128	14,242	74,080
North West	39	932	5,852	13,527	122,880
Yorkshire and Humberside	63	774	2,871	14,047	78,330
East Midlands	11	460	1,532	7,855	39,950
West Midlands	65	640	6,632	10,244	63,920
Eastern	24	173	695	3,435	21,270
South East	18	370	1,723	6,171	18,480
South West	10	204	1,091	3,001	19,420
London	17	246	10,771	26,108	118,170
Totals	261	4,555	34,295	98,631	556,500
At constant 2001–02 prices	243	4,350	33,502	98,631	556,500

Sefton Council

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how much funding Sefton Council has received from the Community Empowerment Fund; what organisations manage the fund; what projects have been developed; and which communities benefit. [89486]

Mrs. Roche: The Community Empowerment Fund for Sefton totals £435,432.00 for the three-year period up to 2004.

The fund is managed by the Sefton Community Empowerment Fund Steering Group on behalf of the Sefton Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) who are the lead organisation and accountable body.

The Community Empowerment Fund is being used to develop the initiatives and mechanisms needed to support the Sefton Voluntary and Community Sector Network which supports the full engagement of communities in local decision making and service planning. These include the creation of a Network Development Team; support for the North Sefton Community Development Project; the mapping of the particular needs of groups who have historically been marginalised including black and racial minorities, lesbian, gay and bisexual, faith communities and the disabled community.

Social Exclusion Unit

Mr. Beith: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what assessment the Social Exclusion Unit has made of the impact of debt on poor families. [91421]

Mrs. Roche: The Social Exclusion Unit has not made any specific assessment of the impact of debt on poor families. It has, however in previous reports, highlighted the effects debt can have on particular disadvantaged groups. In a recent report, "Reducing Re-offending by Ex-prisoners", the SEU assessed the impact of debt on a prisoner's chances of re-offending.

Also, "Access to Financial Services", a report of Policy Action Team 14, published in November 1999, found that many people in low income households and on tight budgets can ill afford the burden of servicing loans, and that there is a need for practical alternatives to expensive credit.

Urban Regeneration

Helen Jones: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the implications for urban regeneration in the north-west of the recent decision in the case of Rowlinson *v.* Warrington Borough Council. [92330]

Mr. McNulty: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has no plans to make a statement in this regard. The judgment in Rowlinson *v.* Warrington was made in the light of the facts in that case; The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is not convinced that they are of wider or general application.

HEALTH

Bursary Scheme

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the introduction of the bursary scheme for students taking the Diploma in Social Work. [90576]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 14 January 2003]:* The bursary for social work students commences in September 2003 and will be payable to new and existing students who ordinarily reside in England, who are undertaking the new degree in social work or the diploma in social work and who are not funded through training by their employer.

The bursary is non means-tested and is being introduced to encourage more students to enter training. It will be paid at the rate of £3,400 for students residing in London during their studies, £3,000 for those living outside London or £2,600 for those who continue to reside in the parental home. This includes £500 per year towards travelling costs incurred during practice placements. The student's assessed liability for tuition fees will also be met.

Students are still entitled to apply for a student loan and if they have special needs may also be entitled to allowances from the local education authority (LEA). A means tested bursary scheme already exists for social work students who hold a first degree who are not entitled to student loans and LEA allowances. The General Social Care Council administers this.

Alzheimer's Awareness Week

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps his Department is taking to support Alzheimer's Awareness Week in July. [91151]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* The Alzheimer's Society has achieved great success over the years in raising awareness of Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia.

This has been very important in helping people with dementia and their carers receive the care and support that they need. Raising awareness is important for delivering on the standard set out for mental health in the older people's national service framework.

While currently the Department has no particular plans around this year's awareness week, we fully support its overall aim.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many and what percentage of children had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in each year since 1997. [92063]

Jacqui Smith: Information on numbers of children diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is not collected centrally.

Care Homes

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many representations he has received on the member failures of care homes to pass on 'free' nursing care contributions to residents from *(a)* Members of Parliament by party group and *(b)* members of the public. [82965]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 25 November 2002]:* Of the in excess of 20,073 letters received by the Department from hon. Members and the in excess of 31,278 received from the public in the last 12 months; 332 and 301 covered issues relating to free nursing care, including fee levels, the process of assessment, banding levels for registered nursing care contributions, policy justification, the mechanisms of payment and the costs of equipment, broken down by party group as follows:

Labour	165
Conservatives	126
Liberal Democrats	36

Cruse Bereavement Care

Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what financial support his Department has provided for Cruse Bereavement Care; and what assessment he has made of their contribution to the alleviation of mental ill health. [92043]

Jacqui Smith: The Department has provided Cruse Bereavement Care with funding over a number of years under the Section 64 General Scheme of the Health Services and Public Health Act 1968. Details of current projects and funding are:

Projects	*Funding*
Quality care in bereavement	£180,000 over 3 years from 1999[1]
Bereavement care—improving access	£176,000 over 3 years from 2000
Promoting bereavement awareness	£90,000 over 3 years from 2001
Service delivery plan to meet client need	£150,000 over 3 years from 2002

[1] Project completion now 2003

The Government recognise that to deliver a modern, dependable health and social care service, the voluntary sector has a crucial role to play in helping service users cope with their mental health problems. We appreciate and value the very good work being done by voluntary organisations such as Cruse.

Drug and Alcohol Treatment Programmes

Linda Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what funding his Department has provided to support research into *(a)* drug treatment programmes and *(b)* alcohol harm reduction programmes in each of the last five years. [90633]

Ms Blears: Details of the amount spent by the Department on research into drug treatment over the last five years are shown in the table.

Year	*Amount (£)*
1998	176,502
1999	201,333
2000	527,803
2001	866,982
2002	[1]379,065

[1] *Estimate*

Details of the amount spent on research on average, into alcohol harm reduction in each of the last five years are shown in the table.

Year	*Amount (£)*
1998–99	Nil
1999–2000	40,000
2000–01	68,000
2001–02	71,410
2002–03	73,770

Linda Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what funding his Department has provided to support *(a)* alcohol abuse treatment programmes and *(b)* drug treatment programmes in each of the last five years. [90634]

Ms Blears: All funding for alcohol treatment services and all funding for drug treatment services until 2001–02 was drawn from the mainstream budgets of the national health service and local authorities. The amounts spent on treatment services from these budgets was substantial, although the method of funding means that it is not possible to give figures on expenditure.

In 2001–02, in addition to the funding from NHS and local authority mainstream budgets, the Government put into place a pooled drug treatment budget which meant resources were specifically made available for drug treatment. In 2001–02, the pooled drug treatment budget was 143.85 million and in 2002–03, the budget was 195.7 million.

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with the Department of Work and Pensions to ensure that ex-heroin misusers can re-enter their employment following treatment. [88965]

Ms Blears: The national treatment agency, which was set up by Government in April 2001 to increase the quality and availability of drug treatment services, has recently published the models of care (MOC) guidance, which is in effect a national service framework for drug treatment services. The MOC proposes a whole-systems approach, which includes a role for education, training, employment and housing as key elements of care.

As the target audience includes employers discussions took place between officials from the Department of Health and the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that the guidance contained in the MOC is in line with guidance issued by the other government departments.

Funding has also been specifically allocated for the re-integration of substance misusers into employment. The Department for Work and Pensions allocated £40 million in 2001, spread over three years, to help drug users find employment in 31 pathfinder areas in England and Wales. In practice most drug treatment programmes should include help and advice on re-entering employment, where appropriate.

Food Supplements Directive

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will lay before Parliament the Statutory Instrument to implement the provisions of the Foods Supplements Directive. [91070]

Ms Blears: The Food Standards Agency expects The Food Supplements (England) Regulations 2003 to be laid before Parliament in June 2003.

Free Nursing Care

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the Government [illegible] ensure the criteria for free nursing care apply to all patients suffering from dementia and Alzheimers; and if he will make a statement. [91552]

Jacqui Smith: People with dementia who are assessed as needing care in a care home that provides nursing care, will receive an appropriate level of national health service funding to their care consistent with the level of nursing input, on the same basis as residents with other conditions.

Draft supplementary guidance on NHS funded nursing care was issued for consultation on 20 December 2002. This makes specific reference to the importance of NHS nurses considering the mental health needs of patients as well as their physical health needs.

Healthy Start Scheme

Dr. Ian Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of mothers on income support are projected to *(a)* breastfeed and *(b)* bottlefeed in each of the next five years. [91075]

Jacqui Smith: We do not collect information by this specific category of mother. The five-yearly national infant feeding survey provides historic data on the incidence of breastfeeding among women from social class V and those mothers without a partner. The latest survey shows a significant increase in the incidence of breastfeeding in mothers from social class V in England and Wales from 50 per cent. in 1995 to 59 per cent. in 2000.

The Department has set a national health service priorities and planning framework target to increase the initiation of breastfeeding by two percentage points per year over the next three years, particularly focussing on disadvantaged groups.

Health Protection Agency

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether it is his policy to proceed with the transfer of envisaged functions to the HPA on 1 April. [90065]

Ms Blears: Yes. We expect to lay statutory instruments before Parliament shortly to establish a special health authority from 1 April 2003.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what action he has taken to address Point 4 in the summary of the report to the steering group of the HPA in relation to the potential impact of a deliberate release of biological materials over the next few months; [90069]

(2) what assessment he has made of the risks associated with the transfer of *(a)* the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research, *(b)* the CIRS, *(c)* the Central Public Health Laboratory, and *(d)* the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre to the new Health Protection Agency; and how these risks are to be minimised; [90081]

(3) what assessment he has made of the level of acceptable risk as outlined in the statements made in point 4 in the summary of the report to the Steering Group of the HPA; [90071]

(4) what actions he has taken following the submission of the report to the HPA Steering Group on HPA Business Continuity Risk Assessment; [90084]

(5) what assessment he has made of the risks associated with the establishment of regional field services in the new Health Protection Agency; and how these risks are to be minimised; [90082]

(6) what steps he has taken to reduce the impact on decision-making within the various organisations being amalgamated into the HPA prior to 1 April highlighted in the Report to the Steering Group. [90122]

Ms Blears: One of the steering group's key roles is to provide a forum for the various organisations forming the Health Protection Agency (HPA) to raise and resolve issues which may impact on decision making in the interim period. This will continue.

As part of its normal business, the group reviewed a report on business continuity risks in relation to the proposed establishment of the HPA. This report included input from the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research, the Chemical Incidents Response Service and other chemical providers, the Central Public Health Laboratory, the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre and from a number of regions in relation to the establishment of field services.

Having reviewed the papers, the steering group endorsed a number of actions. The key decision was the appointment of interim directors to provide leadership and business continuity in key service delivery functions. These interim arrangements have since been announced. I refer the hon. Member to my reply to him of 20 January.

As regards the deliberate release of biological materials, the Department, in conjunction with other agencies, is developing plans, which take account of the planned establishment of the HPA from 1 April.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will bring forward legislation to create the Health Protection Agency as an executive non-departmental public body. [90088]

Ms Blears: We aim to establish the Health Protection Agency as a non-Departmental public body, when Parliamentary time allows.

Infant Deafness

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many units operating a newborn screening unit for deafness at birth *(a)* there are now and *(b)* are planned to open in 2003; where they are located; and if he will make a statement. [91667]

Jacqui Smith: Twenty-three sites are currently providing newborn hearing screening. We expect to bring on a further 16 sites by the end of May 2003, with approximately 30 additional sites during the remainder of the financial year 2003–04.

First and second phase sites, by health authority (HA) area, are as follows.

First Phase

Avon HA

Barnsley HA

Bath HA

Bradford HA

Calderdale and Huddersfield HA

Camden and Islington HA

Dewsbury HA

Tower Hamlets HA

East Sussex HA

Manchester HA

Milton Keynes HA

North Cheshire HA

North Derbyshire HA

North Staffordshire HA

Northumberland HA
Nottingham HA
Oxfordshire HA
Sheffield HA
Shropshire HA
Southampton and Winchester HA
Stockport HA
Swindon HA
Waltham Forest HA
Second Phase
Barnet, Enfield and Haringey HA
Bedfordshire HA
Bury, Rochdale and Oldham HA
Cambridgeshire HA
Croydon HA
Doncaster and Bassetlaw HA
Dudley HA
Gloucestershire HA
North Hants HA
Redbridge HA
Salford HA
Trafford HA
South Wiltshire HA
Bolton HA
East Riding and Hull HA
Portsmouth and Isle of Wight HA

Sites are listed by former Health Authority areas, as these were the boundaries in existence when the selection process started.

Mental Health

Mr. Nigel Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many mixed sex acute mental health wards there are in *(a)* Lancashire, *(b)* the North of England and *(c)* England. [90963]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is not available in this format, as compliance is measured on a trust by trust basis and not at individual ward level.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the impact on the Government's policy on those suffering from *(a)* dementia and *(b)* Alzheimers of the Health Service Ombudsman's ruling on the Malcolm Pointon case and the Squires case. [91553]

Jacqui Smith: The Health Service Ombudsman's report of this case has not yet been published. We will comment on the report once it is published by the Ombudsman's office.

Non-NHS Hospitals

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the non-NHS hospitals in *(a)* the Isle of Wight, *(b)* Sussex, *(c)* Hampshire, *(d)* Dorset and *(e)* Wiltshire which are accredited to provide *(a)* cancer services, *(b)* coronary care services and *(c)* orthopaedic services to NHS patients. [90682]

Ms Blears: The Department does not have a list of accredited private and non-National Health Service hospitals. Contracts for these private sector services are negotiated locally and as such the information requested is not collected centrally.

Information has been provided by the relevant Strategic Health Authorities and is shown in the table.

Cancer Care	*Coronary Care*	*Orthopaedics*
King Edward VII, Midhurst	King Edward VII, Midhurst	Esperance Hospital, Eastbourne
Prospect Hospice, Swindon	Winterbourne Hospital, Dorchester	Horder Centre Crowborough
Winterbourne Hospital, Dorchester	Harbour Hospital, Poole	BUPA Hastings
	Nuffield (Derwent Suite) Bournemouth	King Edward VII, Midhurst
	New Hall Hospital, Salisbury	Nuffield Hospital, Ashdown
	BUPA, Southampton	Nuffield Hospital, Chichester
	Wessex Nuffield Hospital, Eastleigh	BUPA Gatwick
	Sarum Road Hospital, Winchester	BMI, Goring Hall
		CAPIO, North Downs
		BMI, Runnymede
		Woking, Nuffield
		Nuffield, Guildford
		Ridgeway Hospital, Swindon
		Harbour Hospital, Poole
		Nuffield Hospital, Bournemouth
		Winterbourne Hospital, Dorchester
		BUPA, Portsmouth
		Sarum Road Hospital, Winchester
		The Hampshire Clinic, Basingstoke
		The Orchard Hospital, Isle of Wight

Public Health Laboratory Service

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what channels of co-ordination will remain between the PHLS laboratories that will transfer to the NHS. [90075]

Ms Blears: The transferring laboratories are expected to become part of existing or developing national health service pathology laboratory networks and to have access to appropriate channels of co-ordination, both with NHS laboratories and with those in the proposed Health Protection Agency.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the change in cost to the NHS of procurement for former PHLS laboratories of microbiology equipment and consumables following the end of central procurement on 1 April. [90076]

Ms Blears: In order to maintain the current benefits and economies of scale that have been achieved through national Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) contracts, these contracts will be continued during 2003–04.

During the next few months, the PHLS will be working closely with the National Health Service Purchasing and Supply Agency, in consultation with NHS trusts, to review these contracts and produce recommendations to the Department of Health on future supply options.

This will ensure that the savings achieved by the PHLS central procurement are not lost as a result of the transfer of public health laboratories to the NHS.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the risk that the achievements of the modernisation and reform programme within the PHLS laboratory network will be affected following their transfer to local NHS trusts; and what action has been taken to minimise these risks. [90097]

Ms Blears: The transfer of Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) laboratories to national health service trusts is intended to contribute to raising the standards of microbiology in the NHS as a whole and to build on the standards they have reached. PHLS staff and management have been closely involved at each stage of the process to ensure that any risks inherent in the transfers are identified and managed.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if it is his policy to privatise the residual PHLS organisation after 1 April. [90137]

Ms Blears: The Public Health Service Laboratory Service Board is an executive non-departmental public body, created by primary legislation. Until changes are made to primary legislation, it will continue in being with responsibility for production of media for microbiology laboratories.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment he has made of the risk that the IT systems supporting the work of those public health laboratories transferring to NHS trusts will collapse; and what action has been taken to minimise these risks; [90096]

(2) what steps he is taking to unbundle the IT networks that link the PHLS laboratories that will be transferred to the NHS. [90074]

Ms Blears: All the existing information technology systems will remain in place for the time being and no networks will be unbundled unless the regional public health microbiologist and the national health service trust*(s)* are satisfied that this is in the interests of both the NHS and of public health. NHS trusts will only introduce alternative systems after the risks have been assessed

Many of these networks also connect these laboratories with the central and regional laboratories that are intended to be transferred to the Health Protection Agency and they will need to be retained in order to support continuing public health functions.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the risk that those public health laboratories transferring to NHS trusts will reduce their commitment to public health work for CCDCs, local authorities and the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre; and what action has been taken to minimise these risks. [90092]

Ms Blears: The transferring laboratories will maintain the current level of commitment to reporting and other public health work. The following actions are being taken to support the commitment to public health.

The laboratories are being transferred with the same level of funding, which will be maintained for at least the first two years and it is expected that these developments will strengthen the public health microbiology outputs of the national health service.

Each laboratory that transfers to a NHS trust will have a public health microbiologist, who will work with consultants in communicable disease control, local authorities, the communicable disease surveillance centre and other public health agencies. Service level agreements are being prepared to maintain this work.

In due course the inspector of microbiology will ensure that standards of microbiological practice are maintained throughout laboratories in the NHS and the Health Protection Agency, including appropriate attention to public health activities.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the risk that those public health laboratories transferring to NHS trusts will lose the surge capacity necessary to deal with outbreaks; and what action has been taken to minimise these risks. [90094]

Ms Blears: We do not anticipate any of the laboratories losing their surge capacity, as the appropriate level of funding and staffing will be transferred with the laboratories.

The new role of regional public health microbiologist will enhance the capacity to co-ordinate surge capacity within public health regions, and interim appointments are now being made to these posts.

The chief executive of the national health service has written to the chief executives of the receiving NHS trusts emphasising the need for the transfer process to be as smooth and efficient as possible. Maintenance of the existing functional arrangements such as the provision of surge capacity is clearly an important part of the transfer process.

Primary Care Trust Chairmen

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what salary is paid to each Primary Care Trust chairman in England. [91551]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested has been placed in the Library.

Prostate Cancer

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will introduce the public education programme about prostate cancer announced in the NHS Prostate Cancer Programme in September 2000. [91777]

Ms Blears: The national health service prostate cancer programme stated that an education programme for the public, patients and professionals on the risks associated with individual testing for prostate cancer will be introduced. This has been achieved through the prostate cancer risk management programme, which sent out evidence-based primary care resource packs to all general practitioners in England from 23 September 2002 to aid them in counselling men who are worried about prostate cancer.

This ensures that men make an informed choice about whether or not to have a prostate specific antigen (PSA) test, based on an information leaflet developed specifically for men about the advantages and disadvantages of having a PSA test.

The Department is funding a Section 64 grant to the prostate cancer charity to increase further information about prostate cancer. This is supporting the creation, review, provision and dissemination of a range of awareness material, supported by £135,000 over three years.

Recruitment

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 2 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 608W, on recruitment, how many nursing agencies have been removed from the list of approved agencies which have failed to comply with the code of practice in the recruitment of overseas nurses since it was established; and if he will list them. [86807]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 10 December 2002]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) on 14 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 535W.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Data Protection

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, what guidance is given to Government Departments in dealing with information on individual files that has been accepted as inaccurate under the Data Protection Act 1998. [92187]

Yvette Cooper: General guidance on compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998 is issued by the Information Commissioner. The Commissioner's booklet, "The Data Protection Act: Legal Guidance", contains a section on complying with the requirement in the 1998 Act's fourth data protection principle that personal data must be accurate and, where necessary, kept up to date.

Judicial Competence

Mr. John Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if the Lord Chancellor will make it his policy *(a)* to introduce rules relating to the conduct and competence of judges in the small claims court and *(b)* to introduce independent assessors (i) to monitor the observance of such rules and (ii) to permit assessment to inform future appointment by way of promotion or otherwise. [91393]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The Lord Chancellor has no plans to introduce either rules relating specifically to the conduct and competence of judges in small claims cases, or independent assessors to monitor the observance of such rules. The decisions of judges in those cases are, of course, subject to the possibility of appeal (as are the decisions of judges in other jurisdictions). Where there is no complaint about a judicial decision, but it is alleged that a judge has failed to meet the high standard of conduct expected of all judges, the Lord Chancellor, as head of the judiciary, is able to consider a complaint about the judge's conduct.

Small claims cases are generally dealt with by full-time District judges or part-time Deputy District judges. The Lord Chancellor would usually expect candidates for appointment as District judges to have gained experience of sitting as a part-time Deputy. Deputy District judges are observed, and appraised, in their work by full-time judges, enabling both their performance, and suitability for promotion to full-time office, to be assessed.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Annual Report

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much producing his Department's latest annual report cost; how many copies were printed; how many copies of it were sold at its cover price; to whom copies of the report have been provided free of charge; and how many copies were provided free of charge. [90884]

Mr. Blunkett: The last annual report for my Department was published on 13 June 2002 and was also made available on the Home Office Internet website in HTML format from September 2002. The cover price was £14.75. The cost to my Department of producing the report was as follows (all figures include VAT):

Cost of producing report

	£
Design and editing	35,724.82
Design for Internet version	2,600.00
Printing and purchase of 1,200 copies	[1]16,567.98
Total cost	54,892.80

[1] This figure includes 20 per cent. discount on cover price of 1,100 copies and 60 per cent. discount on remaining 100 copies.

Under the terms of their contract with my Department TSO Ltd. use their commercial judgment to decide the total size of the print-run and bear all the remaining cost of printing the copies over and above the number required by the Department for distribution.

Information on the total number of copies printed and sold at cover price is not therefore available to the Department.

The Department distributed 200 copies to Parliament members of the Home Affairs Select Committee, Members of the Cabinet and Leaders of the Opposition Parties. Some 400 copies were distributed across the Department to directors, heads of unit and frontline staff. About 400 copies have also been distributed to the press, other Government Departments, agencies, and non-governmental organisations and other bodies with an interest in the Department's work.

Asylum Department

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many staff were employed in the Asylum Department of the Home Office in each year since 1997; and what the rate of absenteeism was in each year. [90848]

Beverley Hughes: Records are available for the years from 2000. The number of full-time equivalent staff employed in Asylum Group was 422 in April 2000, 1,129 in April 2001 and 1,065 in April 2002.

Data is not recorded in terms of absenteeism. Sickness absence for the Home Office is recorded and published by the Cabinet Office.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his performance against the target of 30,000 deportations a year of failed asylum applicants; and what plans he has to amend that target. [91246]

Beverley Hughes: The 2002–03 target of 30,000 removals per year was based on the public service agreement (PSA) to enforce the immigration laws more effectively by removing a greater proportion of failed asylum seekers. Latest information on performance against this target will be published in the "Asylum Statistics Q4 2001 United Kingdom" on 28 February.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has always made it clear that, the target for 30,000 removals set for 2002–03 was aspirational and hugely ambitious. In order to reach and exceed 30,000 removals per year, we needed to remove about 2,500 people per month. This target was not attainable.

The PSA in 2003–04 remains the same, ie to enforce the immigration laws more effectively by removing a greater proportion of failed asylum seekers. The proportion is measured by comparing the total number of refused asylum seekers (including dependants) removed from the UK with the total number of refused asylum seekers (including dependants) who have either exhausted all appeal rights or not appealed within 15 working days of the despatch of the refusal decision or meet the criteria for non-suspensive appeals.

Burglary Sentences

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many defendants have, pursuant to section 111 of the Powers of Criminal Courts (Sentencing) Act 2000, been given the mandatory sentence imposed by that section in relation to three separate occasions of offences of domestic burglary. [91011]

Hilary Benn: Information reported to the Home Office shows that six persons were sentenced under section 111 of the Criminal Courts (Sentencing) Act 2000 (previously section 4 of the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997) in England and Wales for a third offence of burglary by the end of 2001.

An offender has to have committed an offence, been apprehended, prosecuted and convicted, on three separate occasions since 1 December 1999 to be subject to the mandatory sentence. Given that a custodial sentence for the first or second offence since December 1999 is likely in many cases it will take some time before significant numbers of offenders who qualify for the mandatory sentence appear before the courts.

Information for 2002 is due for publication in the late autumn of 2003.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letter to him dated 11 November from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Miss H. Abdi. [92287]

Mr. Blunkett: I wrote to my right hon. Friend on 20 January 2003.

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letter to him dated 4 November from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mr. Ali Mohamad Oshmand. [92288]

Mr. Blunkett: I wrote to my right hon. Friend on 15 January 2003.

Criminal Records Bureau

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 10 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 232W, if he will ask his noble Friend the Lord Falconer of Thoroton to raise at his next weekly meeting with the chief executive of the Criminal Records Bureau the cases of constituents from Colchester who have been waiting months for their applications to be processed; and if he will make a statement on the operational performance of the Criminal Records Bureau measured against targets. [88908]

Hilary Benn: I will ask my noble friend Lord Falconer of Thoroton to raise with the chief executive of the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB), the issue of cases of constituents from Colchester.

The CRB has a set of published customer service standards in relation to its response times for disclosure applications:

Timeliness of service 90 per cent. of enhanced disclosures issued within three weeks;

95 per cent. of standard disclosures issued within one week.

The CRB has so far been unable to meet these service standards.

However, the Bureau's Service Improvement Plan is steadily delivering improved results. Over the last six full weeks before Christmas the CRB has been averaging around 45,000 disclosures per week, which is over double the weekly output issued by the police under the previous arrangements and compares to a weekly average of 24,000 in August and an average intake of 40,000 applications per week.

The average turnaround time for disclosure applications is now about five weeks but it is recognised that there are a significant number of older outstanding applications which have taken much longer than this to process.

A factor that is contributing to the bureau's inability to meet its service standards is that a small number of police forces have been unable to keep pace with the increase in the volume of applications. As some 90 per cent. of applications received by the bureau are for enhanced disclosures requiring a local police check, the capacity of the police to carry out their local searches has a significant impact on the overall process. To deal with this situation the police are recruiting and training additional staff. While this is well advanced the problem will persist for a while.

The CRB is working with the police to address the situation. Pending the recruitment and training by the police of new permanent staff, the CRB has offered to provide staff to assist those small numbers of forces that have the greater need to improve capacity, and this assistance has been taken up in some cases. These additional local checks are not needed for standard disclosures whose processing times are therefore steadily falling.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the *(a)* planned and *(b)* actual time taken was for each stage in commissioning the Criminal Records Bureau. [89988]

Hilary Benn: The table reflects the planned and actual time taken to complete each of the various stages in the implementation of the Registration and the High Level Disclosure Services by the Criminal Records Bureau. (CRB).

Stage	*(a) Planned time*	*(b) Actual time*
Implementation of Registration Service (manual)	March 2001	May 2001
Implementation of Registration Service (automated)	March 2001	July 2001
Implementation of High Level Disclosure Service—System available for Service Testing	April 2001	November 2001
Implementation of High Level Disclosure Service—Service Commencement	August 2001	March 2002

Part of the reason for the delay in the service commencement was the decision to insert a two month model office and pre-go live pilot phase.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps the Criminal Records Bureau is taking to review the Disclosure Application Form *(a)* to simplify it and *(b)* to make it easier to read and complete. [90113]

Hilary Benn: The Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) reviews its services continuously and uses market research and analysis of errors and complaints to shape its services.

The guidance notes that accompany the Disclosure Application Form have just been reviewed and some fundamental changes have been made to simplify the process of completion. The notes are now in a graphical format and rely less on text; this has shortened the notes from 25 pages to six. It is envisaged that the improved guidance notes will make the Disclosure Application Form easier to complete. The new guidance notes will be issued in February.

We have also recently taken a decision to no longer ask applicants to complete all sections of the Disclosure Application form. The relevant sections are E and F, which include details of applicants' bank account numbers, marital status. The Registered Bodies are being kept fully informed of the changes being made, and the CRB is providing ongoing guidance and advice to them to ensure they fully understand their role of ensuring that Disclosure Applications Forms are correctly completed before onward transmission to the CRB.

An independent team, led by Patrick Carter, have taken a fundamental look at the strategy and operations of the CRB and its private-sector partner, Capita, and recently submitted their conclusions and recommendations to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. Depending on decisions taken on these recommendations changes made in application processes and related business processes may affect the Disclosure Application Form. However, there is no project under way at present in relation to the layout of the form pending the outcome of these deliberations.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he would set out for each month since the Criminal Records Bureau commenced operating, how many *(a)* standard and *(b)* enhanced disclosures were (i) requested and (ii) supplied. [90116]

Hilary Benn: The Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) cannot provide information about the number of standard and enhanced disclosures requested because this decision rests with the registered body, depending upon the position applied for.

The following is a breakdown of the number of standard and enhanced disclosures that have been supplied, since the CRB commenced operating:

	Total applications received	*Standard disclosures issued*	*Enhanced disclosures issued*	*Total disclosures issued*
B/F	9	7	14	21
March	2,765	15	6	21
April	39,713	409	2,389	2,798
May	87,865	2,070	17,376	19,446
June	90,204	4,315	30,585	34,900
July	159,393	12,828	76,258	89,086

	Total applications received	Standard disclosures issued	Enhanced disclosures issued	Total disclosures issued
August	144,030	14,116	96,295	110,411
September	204,868	16,497	116,238	132,735
October	227,340	22,620	159,226	181,846
November	187,463	23,257	159,200	182,457
December	151,784	22,347	148,706	171,053
Total	1,295,434	118,481	806,293	924,774

Many of the outstanding applications at any time will be the subject of requests to applicants for registered bodies for future information—for example, out of the number shown for end of December, 98,960 were back with customers for this reason. Others will have been recently received—for example, within the December total, 59,960 had been in the CRB less than three weeks and were hence not overdue.

Unfortunately, it has not been possible to provide a breakdown between the different levels of disclosure because there are no IT procedures at present to extract this data from the CRB database. It is expected that this functionality will become available in subsequent system releases. As a general rule of thumb, 13 per cent. of all applications received are standard.

The Criminal Records Bureau has neither received nor processed List 99 applications. There was a process initiated during summer 2002 where a manual off-line check was conducted on persons who were applying to work within the education sector. The CRB examined its systems and issued letters to employers in advance of the issue of disclosures to individuals. This exercise was conducted to assist education authorities with their recruitment and it was completed at the end of July. There were no service standards involved and therefore no question of these checks being outstanding at any time.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the *(a)* date and *(b)* purpose of each (i) past and (ii) planned system released from the Criminal Records Bureau's computer system. [90275]

Hilary Benn: The table reflects the time taken to complete each of the various stages in the implementation of the Registration and the High Level Disclosure Services by the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) and the purpose of each computer system release.

Stage	*Implementation date*	*Purpose of stage*
Implementation of Registration Service (manual)	May 2001	To commence the registration of organisations using a manual process in preparation for the implementation of the Disclosure Service
Implementation of Registration Service (automated)	July 2001	To continue registering organisation using an automated process
Implementation of High Level Disclosure Service—System available for Service Testing	November 2001	System and service testing to ensure that the Disclosure Service was robust before live operation
Implementation of High Level Disclosure Service—Service Commencement	March 2002	Disclosure Service 'go live'. Commenced issuing Standard and Enhanced Disclosures

There have been numerous minor releases to deliver enhanced performance since March 2002. Information regarding future system releases cannot be given at present because the CRB is now considering the recommendations of the Home Office independent review before planning the timing of possible future system releases.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for disclosures by the Criminal Records Bureau were cleared by *(a)* three weeks and *(b)* six weeks in each month since April 2002. [90276]

Hilary Benn: The following is a breakdown of the number of Disclosures cleared by the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) in three weeks and six weeks for each month, since April 2002, up to the end of December 2002:

Total disclosures issued

	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
Standards	409	2,070	4,315	12,828	14,116	16,497	22,620	23,257	22,347
Enhanced	2,389	17,376	30,585	76,258	96,295	116,238	159,226	159,200	148,706
Total	2,798	19,446	34,900	89,086	110,411	132,735	181,846	182,457	171,053

Analysis of numbers cleared in three to six weeks

	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
Standards									
% cleared in three weeks	65.1	40.9	12.4	90.4	69.4	61.9	90.2	82.4	86.0
Number cleared	266	847	535	11,597	9,865	10,163	20,405	19,164	19,218
% cleared in six weeks	99.7	96.3	75.0	93.4	95.6	90.7	96.0	93.5	92.5
Number cleared	408	1,993	3,236	11,981	13,589	14,891	21,717	21,745	20,671

Analysis of numbers cleared in three to six weeks

	April	*May*	*June*	*July*	*August*	*September*	*October*	*November*	*December*
Enhanced									
% cleared in three weeks	62.3	34.5	22.6	74.0	46.8	40.9	52.3	49.2	56.2
Number cleared	1,488	5,995	6,912	56,431	52,044	54,041	95,107	89,769	96,132
% cleared in six weeks	99.8	94.7	76.9	89.1	87.3	76.2	79.2	74.8	72.5
Number cleared	2,384	16,455	23,520	67,946	97,082	100,682	144,024	136,478	124,013
Total									
Number cleared three weeks	1,754	6,842	7,447	68,028	61,909	64,204	115,512	108,933	115,350
Number cleared six weeks	2,792	18,448	26,756	79,927	110,671	115,573	165,741	158,223	144,684

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many claims have been made to the Criminal Records Bureau for loss of earnings caused by delays in processing disclosure applications; how many have been agreed; what is *(a)* the highest and *(b)* the lowest compensation paid; what is the total compensation paid to date; and if he will make a statement. [90364]

Hilary Benn: 212 disclosure applicants claim to have lost earnings because the bureau delayed sending disclosures to them. These claims also involved elements of delay, inconvenience, and embarrassment. Of these claims, 166 are resolved and 46 await assessment. The highest sum paid out is £2,400.00 and the lowest is £15.00. The total sum paid out by the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) for these claims is £28,900.

Criminal Records Bureau (Capita Contract)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment his Department has *(a)* made and *(b)* commissioned of the (i) viability and (ii) adaptability of the computer system provided under contract by Capita to support the current and future work of the Criminal Records Bureau; and if he will place a copy of the assessment in the Library. [90117]

Hilary Benn: In August 2002 French Thornton Partnership Ltd. were commissioned to conduct an independent review of the Criminal Records Bureau core systems. The review focused on the following three areas:

integrity of the architecture and quality of build;

capacity planning and sizing models; and

future proofing and suitability of the system.

A report was produced on 16 September 2002, and action is being taken or has been taken on the recommendations. A copy of this cannot be placed in the Library as the content is classified Commercial In Confidence.

Criminal Records Checks

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been waiting for their Criminal Records Bureau applications to be processed for *(a)* three and *(b)* six weeks. [91177]

Hilary Benn: The number of applications outstanding that are over three weeks old is 191,448 and the number of applications outstanding over six weeks is 155,413.

In order to process a disclosure application the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) requires a correctly completed application form. The bureau has identified 81,440 disclosure applications, of those outstanding over six weeks, where either the registered body and /or applicant has either incorrectly completed the application or not filled in the mandatory parts of the form. Until the CRB receives this information, it cannot complete the disclosure process.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many outstanding *(a)* standard and *(b)* enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (i) disclosure and (ii) list 99 applications there were in each of the last nine months. [91201]

Hilary Benn: The following table represents the total number of disclosure applications that have been recorded as being outstanding work in progress at the end of each month over the last nine months:

Month	*Number of outstanding disclosures*
April	40,223
May	94,873
June	148,310
July	179,347
August	192,443
September	236,433
October	258,376
November	277,462
December	251,334

Many of the outstanding applications at any time will be the subject of requests to applicants for registered bodies for future information—for example, out of the number shown for end of December, 98,960 were back with customers for this reason. Others will have been recently received—for example, within the December total, 59,960 had been in the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) less than three weeks and were hence not overdue.

Unfortunately, it has not been possible to provide a breakdown between the different levels of Disclosure because there are no IT procedures at present to extract this data from the CRB database. It is expected that this functionality will become available in subsequent system releases. As a general rule of thumb, 13 per cent. of all applications received are Standard.

The Criminal Records Bureau has neither received nor processed List 99 applications. There was a process initiated during summer 2002 where a manual off-line check was conducted on persons who were applying to work within the education sector. The CRB examined its systems and issued letters to employers in advance of the issue of Disclosures to individuals. This exercise was conducted to assist education authorities with their recruitment and it was completed at the end of July.

There were no service standards involved and therefore no question of these checks being outstanding at any time.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the service level agreements that have been agreed regarding the speed of processing between his Department and Capita in respect of the Criminal Records Bureau. [91204]

Hilary Benn: The following appropriate extracts from the Contract between Capita and the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB), inclusive of necessary definitions of processing Service Levels are listed. The times allowed are for the Capita part of the process—the overall CRB service standards also allow time for the Agency and Police elements of the process leading to the overall published CRB service standards.

Table 4A: Registration Services Elapsed Time Service Levels

Service Element	*Service Measure*	*Service Level*
(Ala) Registration routine enquiry (including postal correspondence)	percentage of instances performed within three days elapsed time	99.0
(Alb) Registration routine enquiry (internet)	percentage of instances performed within 1 day elapsed time	99.0
(A2) New registration	percentage of instances performed within five days elapsed time	95.0
(A3) Registration changes (including additional or replacement counter-signatory)	percentage of instances performed within three days elapsed time	98.0

Table 4B: Certificate Services Elapsed Time Service Levels

Service Element	*Service Measure*	*Service Level*
(Bl) Invalid application for CCC or HLC.	Percentage of instances performed within two days elapsed time	98.0
(B2) Valid application for CCC: up to despatch of certificate.	Percentage of instances performed within three days elapsed time	98.0
(B3) Telephone Application for HLC: up to issue of application form for signature and counter-signature.	Percentage of instances performed within one day elapsed time	99.0
(B4) Valid application for CRC: up to despatch of certificate.	Percentage of instances Performed within three days elapsed time	98.0
(B5) Valid application for ECRC: up to despatch of Certificate.	Percentage of instances performed within four days elapsed time	98.0
(B6a) Certificate enquiries: postal; fax	Percentage of instances performed within three days elapsed time	99.0
(B6b) Certificate enquiries: internet	Percentage of instances performed within one day elapsed time	99.0
(B7) Certificate services complaints	Percentage of instances performed within two days elapsed time	99.0
(B8) Certificate disputes	Percentage of instances performed within one day elapsed time	100.0
(B9) Replacement Certificates	Percentage of instances performed within three days elapsed time	99.0

Definitions

Elapsed time—The aggregate of the elapsed times of the Activities (or Business Processes) (for which responsibility is assigned, in Schedule 2 or otherwise, to the Contractor) performed in the provision of a Service Element, such elapsed times *(a)* being measured from the Service Start Point to the Service end Point and recorded on a 24 hours clock, seven days a week. Elapsed time measures expressed as a number of days shall be construed as meaning that number of days multiplied by 24 hours. For the avoidance of doubt, Elapsed time shall exclude the duration of cheque clearance processing.

Criminal Record Certificates (CRC)—Standard Disclosure

Enhanced Criminal Record Certificate (ECRC)—Enhanced Disclosure.

Higher Level Certificate (HLC)—Standard and Enhanced Disclosures.

Disclosure Applications (Proof of Identity)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Criminal Records Bureau made of the adequacy of advice about what proofs of identity can be used in disclosure applications. [90115]

Hilary Benn: Decisions about the arrangements for checking the identity of disclosure applicants are a matter for the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). In formulating their policy, the Bureau took account of the experience of a number of other organisations, most notably the United Kingdom Passport Service, (UKPS) who have a long and notable record of achievement in this area. The CRB also wished, in line with the Modernising Government agenda, to place less reliance on paper documentation and greater reliance on electronic access to private and public sector databases. It has also sought to depend on face-to-face identity checks by registered bodies wherever possible.

Drug Abstinence Orders

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many drug abstinence orders have been made by the courts under the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000. [91015]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Drug abstinence orders (DAO) and drug abstinence requirements (DAR) were made available to the courts covering the three pilot sites, Nottingham, Staffordshire and Hackney on 5 November 2001. As at 28 February 2002, seven drug abstinence orders and 85 drug abstinence requirements have been issued. The pilot programme was extended to a further six sites, Bedford, Blackpool, Doncaster, Torquay, Wirral, and Wrexham and Mold in the summer of 2002. Further outcomes from the pilot sites will be available in the interim evaluation report due in the spring of 2003.

Emergency Planning

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when his Department's officials last met the Scottish Executive to discuss emergency planning. [90405]

Mr. Alexander: I have been asked to reply.

Officials from the Civil Contingencies Secretariat and the Scottish Executive meet regularly to discuss contingency planning. Information relating to internal advice and discussion is not disclosed under Exemption 2 and 7*(b)* of the "Code of Practice on Access to Government Information".

External Consultants

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the total cost to his Department was of the use of external consultants in 2002. [90512]

Mr. Blunkett: The total cost to the Home Department of using external consultants for the financial year 2001–02 was £21,147,058. The cost in this year includes the cost of establishing the National Probation Directorate and various consultancies on IT business change.

Firearms

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of illegal firearms in circulation in *(a)* Lancashire, *(b)* the North West of England, *(c)* Wales and *(d)* the UK, in the last period for which figures are available. [90976]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The requested information is not collected centrally.

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been killed in each of the last six years by firearms during the commissioning of a crime. [91550]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* The numbers of persons killed by firearms during the act of a crime are not collected centrally. Available published data on the number of recorded homicide offences by shooting in England and Wales are given in the table.

	Number of homicide offences by shooting[1]
1997	58
1997–98	52
1998–99	46
1999–2000	61
2000–01	73
2001–02	96

[1] Homicide figures include shooting by crossbows, and take into account the results of police and court decisions. Therefore, they may not necessarily match the number of firearm homicides initially recorded. Data are as at 8 October 2002; figures are subject to revision as cases are dealt with by the police and by the courts, or as further information becomes available.

These homicide offences were recorded on a calendar year basis up to 1997, and on a financial year basis thereafter.

Gun Control

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what steps he is taking to control the increase in the use of guns; and if he will make a statement; [91561]

(2) what recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of legislation in controlling the illegal use of firearms. [91560]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: We have announced our intention to introduce a minimum five-year sentence for those convicted, on indictment, of possessing or distributing prohibited weapons. We will also be proposing additional powers to deal with certain types of gunwhich are vulnerable to conversion to fire live ammunition.

We will also bring in legislation to prevent anyone from carrying a replica or an air weapon in a public place without a reasonable excuse. We intend to raise the age limit at which young people can acquire and use air weapons unsupervised from 14 to 17.

The Government is constantly assessing and reviewing the effectiveness of firearms legislation, and will continue to do so.

Gun Crime

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were *(a)* injured and *(b)* killed by guns in Wales in (i) 2002 and (ii) each of the previous five years. [90740]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Available published data on the number of recorded homicide offences in which firearms were reported to have been used in Wales, are given in the table:

	Number of homicide offences involving firearms
1996	1
1997	2
1997–98	1
1998–99	0
1999–2000	0
2000–01	1

These firearms offences were recorded on a calendar year basis up to 1997, and on a financial year basis thereafter. Figures for injuries are not available.

Immigration

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many additional copies of correspondence he has asked hon. Members to provide in the last 12 months relating to *(a)* immigration and nationality issues and *(b)* other issues. [90993]

Beverley Hughes: Information on the amount of additional copies of correspondence sought is not kept. Thorough and effective procedures are in place to ensure that correspondence is tracked to avoid the necessity of requesting duplicate copies. The volume of correspondence received by the Home Office is large and, regrettably, on occasions individual letters may become detached from the files. However, this is not a common occurrence, and when it happens we recognise that it causes inconvenience and delay and reflects poorly on the high standard of service that we normally provide. We will shortly be introducing an electronic correspondence tracking system that will prevent the need for correspondence to be handled physically, and which will mean that access to all letters is immediate and complete.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he takes to trace failed asylum seekers who have disappeared. [91248]

Beverley Hughes: Where a person has left a control area without permission, escaped from detention or failed to comply with the terms of their reporting conditions, their details will be noted and posted internally within the Immigration Service and with the police. If there is reason to believe that a person is at their last known address, or if fresh intelligence comes to light, immigration officers will undertake a visit. In cases where the person concerned is considered a threat to UK national security, then the appropriate agencies will be involved.

In addition, as part of the improvements in contact management as detailed in the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, entitlement to the National Asylum Support Service support will be conditional on asylum seekers reporting as required. The Immigration Service will seek to identify and locate those who have lost contact with the Home Office.

Lunar House

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were queuing at the public caller unit of Lunar House at 8 am on *(a)* 6 January, *(b)* 7 January and *(c)* 8 January; and how many people were turned away on each day without having their applications dealt with. [90718]

Beverley Hughes: There are two public offices at Croydon, the first being that of the Public Enquiry Office (PEO), which enters through the main entrance at the front of Lunar House.

There are no records kept of the numbers of those who are initially queuing for the PEO when it opens at 8 am but the covered waiting area can hold between 500 and 600 people at any one time. However, between 6 and 8 January 2003 respectively there were 1,146, 1,153 and 827 people who attended PEO, of which 63, 80 and 72 people on each respective day could not have their cases dealt with immediately.

The other queue is that of the Asylum Screening Unit (ASU), which currently enters through a temporary entrance at the rear of the building. According to figures initially compiled for ASU management, at 8 am on 6 and 7 January there were respectively 120 and 300 people waiting in the ASU queue. On 8 January, the date of the introduction of new asylum support arrangements, 80 applicants were waiting in the queue at 8 am. Around 75 applicants (most with addresses) were asked to return the following day.

Motoring Offences

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions in the past 12 months magistrates courts and crown courts have not imposed automatic driving bans on motorists guilty of offences which individually or collectively qualify for a disqualification; and if he will make a statement. [90365]

Hilary Benn: The available information concerning individual offences which qualify for an automatic driving ban, is shown in the table. Data for 2001 will be available in February.

The Home Office Court Proceedings Database does not include information on cases where the motorist could have been disqualified under the penalty points system but was not.

Driving licence endorsements and disqualifications imposed at the magistrates courts and the Crown Court by offences subject to obligatory disqualification orders

England and Wales 2000 *Number of offences*

		Magistrates courts		
Offence type	*Total sentenced*	*Endorsements without disqualification*[1]	*Total disqualifications imposed*	*Results not reported on*[2]
Causing death or bodily harm:				
Causing death by dangerous driving	0	0	0	0
Causing death by careless driving under influence of drink or drugs	0	0	0	0
Causing death by aggravated vehicle taking	3	0	3	0
Dangerous driving	3,108	150	2,847	111
Driving etc. after consuming alcohol or taking drugs:				
Unfit to drive through drink or drugs (impairment)	1,729	148	1,535	46
Driving with alcohol in the blood above the prescribed limit	70,619	1,047	68,923	649
Unauthorised taking or theft of vehicle:				
Aggravated vehicle taking:	6,527	429	5,336	762
Driving dangerously, causing injury or damage				
Total	81,986	1,774	78,644	1,568

England and Wales 2000

Number of offences

Offence type	*Total sentenced*	*Crown courts* *Endorsements without disqualification*[1]	*Total disqualifications imposed*	*Results not reported on*[2]
Causing death or bodily harm:				
Causing death by dangerous driving	210	26	180	4
Causing death by careless driving under influence of drink or drugs	57	5	50	2
Causing death by aggravated vehicle taking	18	3	13	2
Dangerous driving	2,142	267	1,805	70
Driving etc. after consuming alcohol or taking drugs:				
Unfit to drive through drink or drugs (impairment)	74	29	35	10
Driving with alcohol in the blood above the prescribed limit	628	186	[illegible]	101
Unauthorised taking or theft of vehicle:				
Aggravated vehicle taking:				
Driving dangerously, causing injury or damage	1,614	212	1,260	142
Total	4,743	738	3,684	331

England and Wales 2000

Number of offences

Offence type	Total sentenced	All courts Endorsements without disqualification[1]	Total disqualifications imposed	*R*esults not reported on[2]
Causing death or bodily harm:				
Causing death by dangerous driving	210	26	180	4
Causing death by careless driving under influence of drink or drugs	57	5	50	2
Causing death by aggravated vehicle taking	21	3	16	2
Dangerous driving	5,250	417	4,652	181
Driving etc. after consuming alcohol or taking drugs:				
Unfit to drive through drink or drugs (impairment)	1,803	177	1,570	56
Driving with alcohol in the blood above the prescribed limit	71,247	1,233	69,264	750
Unauthorised taking or theft of vehicle:				
Aggravated vehicle taking:				
Driving dangerously, causing injury or damage	8,141	641	6,596	904
Total	86,729	2,502	82,328	1,899

[1] Concurrent endorsements.

[2] Information not reported. Includes cases where neither disqualification or endorsement given for 'special reasons' and cases where a disqualification or endorsement was given but not recorded.

Prison Statistics

Claire Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish the annual prison statistics. [91414]

Hilary Benn: Prison Statistics England and Wales 2001 is currently planned for publication in February 2003. A copy will be placed in the Library when it is published.

Prison Statistics England and Wales 2002 is planned for publication in late 2003.

Prisoner Demographics

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were in prison in England and Wales in each year since 1992; how many were *(a)* below 18 years of age and *(b)* women; of the women in prison, how many were pregnant when they were convicted; how many mothers are in prison with their children; and which prisons have mother and child facilities. [89544]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* The table provides information on the prison population, the number of females, and the number of juveniles held in England and Wales on the 30 June since 1992.

Year	*Prison population*	*Female prison population*	*Juvenile prison population*
1992	46,832	1,555	1,328
1993	44,246	1,580	1,304
1994	48,929	1,804	1,526
1995	51,086	1,998	1,675
1996	55,256	2,305	2,093
1997	61,467	2,672	2,479
1998	65,727	3,120	2,466
1999	64,529	3,207	2,422
2000	65,194	3,355	2,434
2001	66,403	3,713	2,563
2002	71,218	4,394	2,615

The number of women that were pregnant when convicted is not known.

At the week beginning 6 January 2003, there were 54 mothers and 50 babies/children held in Mother and Baby Units (MBUs).

There are currently four prisons with MBUs. These are Holloway, New Hall, Styal and Askham Grange. There are also plans to build further units at Askham Grange and Eastwood Park.

Proceeds of Crime Act

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the proposed commencement date is for the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. [91014]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Commencement dates for the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 are as follows:

The cash recovery provisions in Part 5 of the Act came into force on 30 December 2002. Part 1 of the Act, which formally establishes the Assets Recovery Agency, came into force on 13 January.

The provisions of the Act relating to civil recovery, taxation of the proceeds of crime, money laundering, financial investigation powers and information gateways (the rest of Part 5 and Parts 6, 7, 8 and 10 of the Act) will come into force in February. The Agency will then become operational.

We plan that the new powers of criminal confiscation (Parts 2, 3, 4 and 9) will come into force in March, along with the provisions on enforcement in different parts of the United Kingdom in Part 11. This will leave the provisions relating to international co-operation in Part 11, which we hope to commence in May.

Protection from Harassment Act

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women are imprisoned under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997; and how many of those are parents seeking contact with children. [90994]

Hilary Benn: The population of men and women in prison sentenced under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 England and Wales, is not available.

The number of persons sentenced to immediate custody in 2001 under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 England and Wales, was 632 men and 29 women.

Information on how many of those are parents seeking contact with children is not available.

Public Service Agreements

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to publish his autumn departmental reports on public service agreement targets; and if he will make a statement. [91005]

Mr. Blunkett: I expect the Autumn Performance Report for the Home Department to be published by the end of January or shortly thereafter.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Public Service Agreement targets the Home Office has. [91512]

Mr. Blunkett: The Home Office has 10 targets in its Public Service Agreement.

More detail on these targets can be found on the Treasury website www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/Spending_Review/spend_sr02/psa/spend_sr02_psahome.cfm

Road Deaths

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been killed in each of the last six years by motorists who have subsequently been charged with a motoring offence. [91549]

Mr. Peter Ainsworth *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* Information on the persons charged is not collected centrally. Available information taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database on total number of proceedings for offences where a motorist caused death is shown in table 1. Figures for the number of people killed in these cases are not collected. Data for 2001 will be available in February.

The numbers of fatalities in road accidents in England and Wales for 1998 to 2001 are given in table 2.

Table 1: Total proceedings at magistrates' courts by offence type
England and Wales 1995 to 2000

	Number of offences					
Offence type	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
Causing death by dangerous driving	305	333	376	335	329	359
Causing death by careless driving under influence of drink or drugs	51	63	78	80	63	72
Causing death by aggravated vehicle taking	13	27	28	35	25	34
Total	369	423	482	450	417	465

Table 2—Road fatalities in accidents involving at least one car
England and Wales

	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Number of casualties	2,630	2,674	2,666	2,492	2,552	2,458	2,484

Source:

Department for Transport

Female Fine Defaulters

Mr. Lyons: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women were jailed for failing to pay fines in *(a)* 2002 and *(b)* 1997. [91092]

Hilary Benn: The number of female fine defaulters received into prisons in England and Wales in 2001 (the latest complete year for which data is available) was 73, and in 1997 was 372.

Youth Crime

Annette Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department to estimate, for each Young Offenders Institution in England and Wales, *(a)* the number of Youth Offending Teams that each Youth Offenders Institution links with and *(b)* the average distance in miles from the youth offenders institution of each of the Youth Offending Teams with which it has links. [90487]

Hilary Benn: We understand from the Youth Justice Board *(a)* that Young Offender Institutions have links with an average of 27 Youth Offending Teams and *(b)* that the average distance between them is 44 miles.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 22 January 2003

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Coffee Producers

6. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she will take to address the difficulties faced by poor people in coffee growing countries. [92209]

Clare Short: The UK is committed to reducing global poverty as measured by progress towards achieving the MDGs. The Department for International Development has bilateral programmes in a number of coffee producing developing countries where poor people's livelihoods are significantly dependent on coffee production. These include Ethiopia, Malawi, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda; and Guatemala and Nicaragua. The UK supports countries in the development and implementation of their poverty reduction strategies, including nationally owned agricultural diversification plans to deal with commodity dependency. In Uganda, DFID is supporting a feasibility analysis for coffee certification to help poor producers realise better prices for their production. DFID also supports research in several coffee producing countries aimed at improving the competitiveness of smallholder production.

ESCAP

8. **Tony Worthington:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the outcome of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific meeting in Bangkok in December 2002. [92211]

Ms Keeble: We are pleased with the outcome of the Fifth Asia and Pacific Population (ESCAP) Conference. The plan of action adopted at Bangkok represents a balanced, comprehensive and constructive framework for addressing reproductive health and poverty in the Asia/Pacific region and fully reaffirms the principles agreed at the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development. It will help the region to make progress on the millennium development goals especially maternal and infant mortality and tackling HIV/AIDS.

West Africa

9. **Simon Hughes**: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her Department's priorities are for aid to west Africa in 2003. [92212]

Clare Short: My priorities in West Africa are:

To help consolidate peace and security in Sierra Leone;

To support Ghana's poverty reduction strategy;

To encourage Nigeria to pursue effective reforms in order to reduce poverty; and

To support poverty reduction strategies elsewhere in the region, particularly in the Gambia and Cameroon.

An immediate priority for the region is to resolve the crisis in Cote d'Ivoire. We are fully supporting the regional and international communities' efforts to assist.

Ethiopia

10. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her policy towards cancellation of Ethiopia's foreign debt. [92213]

Clare Short: HMG supports debt relief for Ethiopia within the framework of the internationally agreed Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. Ethiopia qualified for interim debt relief from international creditors under HIPC at Decision Point in November 2001. This temporarily reduces the debt service payments Ethiopia has to pay. Ethiopia will qualify for irrevocable debt relief when it reaches Completion Point in the next year or two. Total HIPC debt relief over time will amount to $1.9 billion. These resources will be freed up for Government of Ethiopia to use for poverty reduction.

Ethiopia owes the UK £15.4 million, but is already receiving full debt relief on this under the UK Government's policy, which provides 100 per cent. relief on debt service payments due, starting at Decision Point, and writes off formally the entire debt after Completion Point. The UK is also concerned that Ethiopia may finish the HIPC process with debts above the HIPC thresholds and we will seek to ensure that additional relief is provided as necessary to prevent this.

We will continue to monitor the impact of external debt on the pace of poverty reduction in Ethiopia and work with the international community to address problems that may be identified.

13. **Mr. David**: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is being done to bring about greater international debt relief for Ethiopia. [92216]

Clare Short: HMG supports debt relief for Ethiopia within the framework of the internationally agreed Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. Ethiopia qualified for interim debt relief from international creditors under HIPC at Decision Point in November 2001. This temporarily reduces the debt service payments Ethiopia has to pay. Ethiopia will qualify for irrevocable debt relief when it reaches Completion Point in the next year or two. Total HIPC debt relief over time will amount to $1.9 billion. These resources will be freed up for the Government of Ethiopia to use for poverty reduction.

Ethiopia owes the UK £15.4 million, but is already receiving full debt relief on this under the UK Government's policy, which provides 100 per cent. relief on debt service payments due, starting at Decision

Point, and writes off formally the entire debt after Completion Point. The UK is also concerned that Ethiopia may finish the HIPC process with debts above the HIPC thresholds, and we will seek to ensure that additional relief is provided as necessary to prevent this.

We will continue to monitor the impact of external debt on the pace of poverty reduction in Ethiopia and work with the international community to address problems that may be identified.

European Aid Budget

11. **Mr. Tynan:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will take steps to reform the European aid budget so that it focuses on the needs of poor people. [92214]

Clare Short: I have been working to expose the inefficiency of the EC aid budget and mobilise a commitment to reform since 1997.

My Department published a revised strategy for improving the poor performance of the European Community development programme in August 2001. I welcome the positive steps that the reform process has taken, including establishment for the first time of an EC development policy which secured poverty reduction as the central objective. We continue to work for agreement that a much greater share of EC aid should be allocated to low income countries where it will have the greatest impact on poverty reduction. In 2000, only 38 per cent. of EC aid was spent in low income countries compared to 70 per cent. in 1990. Indications are that the 2001 figure shows an improvement. Our objective remains to reverse this decline in order to improve the focus and effectiveness of EC aid.

Bangladesh

12. **James Purnell:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's efforts to relieve poverty in Bangladesh. [92215]

Clare Short: My Department finances a large programme in Bangladesh aimed at poverty reduction. We support health and education programmes with both Government and NGOs. We are working with a range of Government Departments to improve their capacity to plan and implement poverty programmes including improving the planning and management of public finances. We finance direct poverty programmes with NGO's and are strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations to increase the responsiveness of Government to poor people's needs. We are preparing a new Country Assistance Plan which will be published in April.

Iraq

14. **Mr. Swire**: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, what assessment she has made of the potential humanitarian consequences of a war in Iraq. [92217]

Clare Short: My Department is considering a wide range of contingencies, which take into account the present humanitarian situation in Iraq.

Fair Trade

15. **Claire Ward**: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, what recent action her Department has taken to promote fair trade products; and if she will make a statement. [92218]

Clare Short: My Department has provided financial support to the media campaigns of the Fairtrade Foundation designed specifically to raise both supermarket and consumer awareness of products carrying the Fairtrade Mark. In particular DFID has provided £120,000 to the Fairtrade Foundation over three years (2001–03) in support of its efforts to target new groups through its annual Fairtrade Fortnight campaigns.

In addition, last year DFID approved a project (at a total cost of £300,000) designed to address a recognised bottleneck within Fair Trade—namely the limited number of products for which international Fair Trade standards exist. The project aims to develop new Fair Trade product standards, secure the registration of new producer groups and help bring additional Fair Trade products to supermarket shelves over the next two years. The target is to increase the retail value of Fair Trade sales in the UK to over £100 million per annum by 2004 and by so doing extend the benefits of Fair Trade to a greater number of producers in developing countries. By expanding the scale of Fair Trade activities, the project also aims to secure a sustainable future for the Fairtrade Foundation, so that its core operational costs (including the cost of subsequent promotional activities) can be fully funded from the income it receives from licensees.

Although a niche market, Fair Trade can play a catalytic role. In the UK and Europe, the activities of the Fair Trade movement have raised awareness of the positive impact our buying decisions can have on poverty. These activities have in turn contributed to the growing demand for ethical trading standards to be employed by multinational companies in their dealings with developing country suppliers.

Angola

Mr Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what support her Department will pledge to the Angolan Government at the forthcoming Donor's Conference in Angola. [91678]

Clare Short: We have not so far been advised of arrangements for a donor conference on Angola, although I understand that the Angolan Government would like one to take place in Brussels within the next few months. Rather than a pledging conference, we and other donor countries see this as a timely opportunity for discussion between the donor community and the Government on their plans for economic and social reform and development, building on the base of last year's peace agreement, and on the status of their discussions with the international financial institutions. We hope to continue to provide support to Angola in economic and social reform, effective governance, demobilisation and reconciliation, and the development and implementation of a national poverty reduction strategy. We will also continue to respond to Angola'surgent humanitarian needs for as long as this is required.

Mr. Lyons: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assistance the Government is giving to Angola in the clearance of landmines. [91819]

Clare Short: My Department has allocated £300,000 to UNDP for a project aimed at improving the effectiveness of mine action through strengthened co-ordination at the provincial level. DFID has also contributed US$ 50,000 in support of a mine action database. The United Kingdom contributed 19.7 per cent. of the 6 million euros which the EC has made available for mine action in Angola. This included 5 million euros to a variety of mine clearance agencies.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs recently contributed US$460,000 from its Emergency Response Fund for Angola (ERF) to clear the mines from some of the main transport arteries used to deliver emergency supplies. The United Kingdom was one of the main donors to this fund in 2002, contributing £1.5 million.

Centre for International Briefing

Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has held with the Centre for International Briefing, Farnham; and what plans she has to visit the centre. [92041]

Clare Short: I have had no discussions with the Centre for International Briefing, Farnham and have no plans to visit the centre.

Chad/Cameroon

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions her Department has had with the Governments of *(a)* Chad and *(b)* Cameroon on World Bank funds for the Chad-Cameroon pipeline; and if she will make a statement on the social and environmental objectives of the pipeline. [91454]

Clare Short: My Department has not had any direct discussions with the Governments of Chad and Cameroon about World Bank support to the Chad-Cameroon petroleum development and pipeline project because our support is provided through multilateral channels.

We recognise that this project raises a number of potential social and environmental concerns. My original approval to the World Bank contributing towards the project was based on the view that it had the potential significantly to reduce poverty in Chad, one of the poorest countries in the world. I also believe the project will take much fuller account of social and environmental considerations with World Bank involvement than without. Project approval followed extensive improvements to the design to ensure that the project met the bank's environmental and social safeguards, and the introduction of mechanisms to monitor such impacts and ensure that oil revenues would serve to finance mainly poverty expenditures. Significant changes were made to the proposed route of the pipeline to reduce the impact on the natural and human environments. Since the project was approved, the bank, and International Finance Corporation, have allocated exceptional resources to monitor and support its implementation. Where problems have been identified, World bank management have drawn up proposals to address them which are discussed by the Board of Executive Directors, of which the UK is a member. We will continue to monitor progress on the project and take up issues as necessary with the bank so that the full benefits of this investment for the poor can be realised.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to tackle corruption in *(a)* Chad and *(b)* Cameroon. [91455]

Clare Short: Our assistance to Chad is channelled through multilateral channels. The World Bank and the European Commission are helping tackle corruption in particular through the monitoring of the revenues from the Chad-Cameroon petroleum development and pipeline project to ensure they are mainly used for poverty reduction. An international advisory committee has been established aimed at ensuring transparency and good governance in implementation of this project.

In Cameroon, we are actively engaged in the preparation of a Forest and Environment Sector programme, which will include measures aimed at combating corruption in the forestry sector. We also currently fund an independent monitor of illegal logging. More generally my Department has supported the inclusion of benchmarks on good governance, as part of the assessment of Cameroon's eligibility for debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative, and will encourage full implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Civil Servants

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many civil servants have been employed by *(a)* her Department and *(b)* each of its agencies and non-departmental bodies in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if she will make a statement. [92403]

Claire Short: The Scotland Office was established in its present form on 1 July 1999. Since that date, the department has not sold any assets.

Debt Relief

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make it her policy to support the establishment of criteria for debt cancellation which are based on the resources needed by a country to meet the Millennium Development Goals. [92355]

Clare Short: Debt relief alone cannot deliver the resources needed to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and significant new resources will be required. Developing countries generally, not just heavily indebted poor countries face a financing gap in meeting the MDGs. Further debt relief to HIPCs would not be an effective way of generating additional resources. Most bilateral creditors, like the UK, have already written off all or nearly all of the debts from HIPCs, so further relief would have to come almost entirely from existing resources provided by the multilaterals, such as the World bank. This would mean skewing money away from other equally poor non-HIPC countries, which might have better policy environments than some HIPCs. This is why we have focused on debt relief as a means of ensuring debt sustainability, and why additional donor resources will inevitably be needed to meet the MDGs.

John Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action she is taking to encourage multi-national companies to co-operate with heavily indebted poor countries. [92513]

Clare Short: The UK is concerned about the issue of creditor participation in the HIPC Initiative. Debt relief from commercial creditors accounts for only 4.4 per cent. of HIPC relief, but the potential costs to HIPC countries in terms of administrative and legal costs are much higher. We have raised this with the World Bank and the IMF, and at the G7 Summit in Kananaskis in June 2002. Bank and fund staffs are increasing the pressure on non-participating creditors. We welcome the decision last September to publish details of creditor participation—something we had pressed for—and we hope that it will increase international pressure on all creditors to deliver their share of relief. We have also asked the World Bank and the IMF to come forward with more proposals to promote creditor participation, such as a donor-funded technical assistance facility to provide legal advice to HIPC countries facing litigation. Staff are currently preparing a paper.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many full-time equivalent staff are employed in *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of the agencies it sponsors; and what the figures were for 1997. [90671]

Clare Short: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 697W).

Development Aid (Palestine)

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much development aid was paid to Palestinians in 2002; and which projects were funded. [91001]

Clare Short: DFID provided £68 million to the Palestinians in 2002. This figure comprises:

Bilateral programme: £15 million

UNRWA: £22 million

UK Share of EC funding: £31 million

Our bilateral development programme in the West Bank and Gaza Strip focuses on support for the Middle East peace process; capacity building and institutional development; improvements to basic services, and a range of emergency programmes arising from the current conflict.

Ethiopia and Eritrea

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what contribution her Department has made to the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea on the demarcation of the border between the two countries; and what estimate she has made of the impact which the projected funding shortfall of the Mission will have on the progress towards demarcation. [91163]

Clare Short: We have contributed £750,000 of support to the UN Trust Fund for the Delimitation and Demarcation of the Ethiopia/Eritrea border.

We will keep the situation under review in order to help the international community play its full part in ensuring that UNMEE is able to carry out its mandate.

Flooding (Malawi/Mozambique)

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the recent floods in *(a)* Malawi and *(b)* Mozambique. [91456]

Clare Short: In Malawi the Humanitarian Working Group of the National Food Security Task Force is now assessing the overall extent and impact of the recent floods. My Department is working with partners in this working group to develop an appropriate response.

In Mozambique, damage caused by tropical cyclone Delfina in Zambezia and Nampula provinces is not thought to be as severe as initially anticipated. However more information is required as there is currently a lack of comprehensive data. Damage to the Nacala railway will impact on the Malawi food pipeline.

Heavily Indebted Poor Countries

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action she is taking to assist countries which have passed their completion point under the HIPC initiative with unsustainable debt. [91161]

Clare Short: The Government has been working to win greater international concern for the problems of debt sustainability facing some Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPCs) as a result of falling commodity prices and I have raised these concerns at the Development Committee of the World Bank repeatedly over recent years. In Ottawa in November 2001, we asked Bank and Fund staff to revisit the debt sustainability analyses of all commodity dependent low-income countries, including HIPCs. The HIPC Initiative now has the flexibility to provide, when appropriate, additional debt relief at Completion Point, so called 'topping up', to ensure that countries exit the HIPC process with sustainable levels of debt. However, this is not enough and the UK is pressing the World Bank and the IMF to widen their approach to topping up, so that any HIPC country facing unsustainable debts, that has demonstrated its commitment to poverty reduction and economic reform, should qualify for this additional relief. In April 2002, Burkina Faso became the first country to qualify for topping up. Debt relief alone, however, cannot guarantee future sustainability. This requires sound macroeconomic policies, strong growth and export bases, including access to markets of developed countries, access to adequate financing on highly concessional loan and grant terms, and prudent policies on new borrowing. The UK is co-financing a debt strategy project aimed at helping HIPC governments to strengthen their debt management capacity. The UK is also providing substantial aid to Bolivia, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Uganda—countries that have passed their HIPC Completion Point.

Heritage Assets

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what sales of heritage assets and antique assets have been made by her Department since May 1997; if she will list other assets; and if she will estimate the total sales proceeds. [92405]

Claire Short: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given today by my hon. Friend, the Minister of State, Cabinet Office.

HIPC Initiative

John Barrett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what consideration is given to the costs associated with *(a)* the millennium development goals and *(b)* combating HIV/AIDS in the construction of poverty reduction strategy papers for countries wishing to enter the HIPC initiative. [91162]

Clare Short: I have been asked to reply.

In line with the principle of ownership and country-led processes which the UK has championed, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) set national development targets which, in most cases, closely overlap with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The costings section of PRSPs provides an estimate of the cost of reaching these national development targets and how HIPC debit relief is to be allocated accordingly.

For many HIPC countries, HIV/AIDS is an important factor in the analysis of poverty trends for PRSPs and usually costed within the health sector plans. HIV/AIDS is a multi-sector issue, and we are working with developing country partners to strengthen the quality of these plans and costings.

Mozambique

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the impact of the failure of the Government of Mozambique to declare a national emergency on international efforts to assist in providing for the needs of people unable to meet their food needs up to the next harvest period in March 2003. [92607]

Clare Short: The current situation in Mozambique should be seen in the context of the country's increased ability to meet its food needs and respond to such a crisis and the Government's legitimate caution about undermining coping strategies or risking donor fatigue.

Food production has recovered since the end of the long war in Mozambique, from 80 per cent. dependency on food aid in 1992 to now only importing about 20 per cent. of its food. The Government of Mozambique have been able to respond early to the threat of the current drought. For example the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development provided seeds and other agricultural inputs to drought-affected families, and has begun to rehabilitate small dams and irrigation schemes. The Government are conscious of the risks of large handouts of food aid contributing to weakening local self-help initiatives as people abandon traditional coping mechanisms.

Mozambique is subject to recurrent natural disasters and has frequently been forced to declare national emergencies, most recently in the floods of 2000–01 and 2001–02. The current drought affects about 3 per cent. of the population, nearly all of them in sparsely populated, semi-arid areas of the country. In this context, the Government have not declared an emergency due to legitimate concerns about donor fatigue and a perception that the current crisis forms part of a long-term trend to increased vulnerability in the drought areas, which cannot be solved with short-term aid alone.

The lack of a formal declaration of emergency has made it difficult for some donors to mobilise emergency funds, and Mozambique has not been able to form part of the Consolidated Appeal Process or the regional appeal of the Federation of the Red Cross. UN efforts in providing co-ordination services to humanitarian stakeholders have been hampered and there has been limited mapping of humanitarian programmes, leading to poor information about gaps in the delivery of assistance and difficulties with the identification of sensible projects.

However, although the Government have not made a formal joint appeal, they have requested help from individual UN agencies, eg WFP (food aid), UNICEF (supplementary feeding) and FAO (seeds and other agricultural interventions). DFID has contributed to supporting these.

Paper Supplies

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development who the suppliers are of her Department's *(a)* paper and *(b)* paper products. [91903]

Clare Short: The relevant suppliers are as follows:

London

Paper: David John Papers, Slough, Berkshire.

Envelopes and other stationery: Banner Business Supplies Ltd., Norwich, and Guilbert UK Ltd., Northampton.

Labels: Avery Denison, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire.

Paper towels and toilet tissue: Executive Cleaning Services, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire.

East Kilbride

Paper and Card: Glenmore Business Paper, Rosyth, Fife.

File covers: Astron, Livingston.

Paper towels and toilet tissue: PHS/AC Henderson, East Kilbride.

Envelopes: Banner Business Supplies Ltd., Norwich.

Poverty Linkages

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when her Department's study of the linkages between wildlife and poverty will be available *(a)* to the Department and *(b)* for wider consultation. [91416]

Clare Short: The final version of the Wildlife and Poverty paper is available on the DFID website. It will be published in the near future and a copy placed in the House of Commons Library.

Press Releases

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many press releases have been issued by her Department in each *(a)* year and *(b)* quarter from 1995–96 to 2002–03; and if she will make a statement. [92479]

Clare Short: The information is as follows:

(a) Number of press releases issued from 1995–2003 are outlined as follows:

Issued by ODA

	Number
1995	71
1996	50
To May 1997	16

Issued by DFID

	Number
From May 1997	47
1998	74
1999	82
2000	29
2001	38
2002	38
2003[1]	1

[1] Until 21 January

(b) Number of press releases issued from 1995–96 to 2002–03 are outlined as follows:

	January–March	*April–June*	*July–September*	*October–December*
1995	25	14	15	17
1996	15	11	11	13
1997	16	13	8	26
1998	29	15	9	21
1999	18	17	23	24
2000	11	7	4	7
2001	18	6	5	9
2002	8	6	8	16
2003[1]	1	—	—	—

[1] Until 21 January

With our press releases we are focusing on trying to promote coverage which raises awareness and understanding of development issues.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many days were lost due to sickness absence in the Department in 2002. [90551]

Clare Short: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) earlier today.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many working days have been lost due to illness in her Department in *(a)* 2002 and *(b)* each of the preceding five years. [90970]

Clare Short: My Department will announce the number of sick absences recorded in 2002 in due course.

The number of sick absences recorded in my Department from 1997 to 2001 is:

Year	*Number of absences*	*Average number of days per staff year*
1997	9,250	8.1
1998	8,643	7.3
1999	9,263	7.3
2000	8,426	6.2
2001	11,545	8.3

Staff numbers on which these are based have risen from 1,142 in 1997 to 1,391 in 2001.

Sudan

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to promote good governance and respect for human rights in Sudan. [91684]

Clare Short: The only long-term answer to improving human rights situation in Sudan is a peace settlement. We believe the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) peace process offers the best chance to bring an end to the civil war through a negotiated settlement between the Government of Sudan and the SPLM/A. In 2002, the talks produced breakthroughs on the key issues of state and religion and self-determination for the south and a Memorandum of Understanding on a cessation of hostilities and unimpeded humanitarian access and agreement on aspects of power and wealth-sharing, as well as human rights.

The war in Sudan has prevented many donors, including the UK, from carrying out a development programme in Sudan over the past decade. Over $500 million of development funding will become available from the international community when there is peace: this is an important incentive for the warring parties to reach a comprehensive agreement. We are co-ordinating closely with other donor countries on all matters, including assessing support for good governance. Until there is a peace agreement, we will continue to support life-saving humanitarian work and peacebuilding activities such as personnel to monitor the ceasefire in the Nuba Mountains, support for anti-slavery work and for the IGAD secretariat.

Zimbabwe

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she last met representatives of opposition parties in Zimbabwe. [91447]

Clare Short: I have not met representatives of Zimbabwe's opposition parties in recent months. My officials maintain dialogue on the humanitarian situation with a wide representation of civil society.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she last met representatives of the Government of South Africa to discuss the political situation in Zimbabwe. [91448]

Clare Short: I have had no such discussions. The British High Commission in Pretoria is in regular contact with [illegible] Government of South Africa on the situation in Zimbabwe.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development whether the World Bank continues to fund government programmes in Zimbabwe. [91449]

Clare Short: The World bank has not disbursed funds in Zimbabwe since 2000, after the Government of Zimbabwe ceased making payments on previous loans. Zimbabwe's arrears to the World Bank totalled US$107.4 million as at 6 December 2002. The World bank cannot resume lending until the arrears are repaid in full.

PRIME MINISTER

Chancellor Schroeder

Keith Vaz: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on his recent meeting with the German Chancellor Schroeder. [92159]

The Prime Minister: My wife and I visited Hanover on 11 January for a dinner with Chancellor Schroeder and his wife. We discussed policy issues of mutual interest.

Civil Servants

Mr. Laws: To ask the Prime Minister how many civil servants have been employed by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each of its agencies and non-departmental bodies in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92415]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office today.

Convention on the Future of Europe

Keith Vaz: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on UK policy towards the agreement reached between President Chirac and Chancellor Schroeder for the Convention on the Future of Europe; and what measures he will take to enhance British influence in the EU. [92123]

The Prime Minister: I welcome the Franco-German contribution to the debate on Europe's future. Strong French and German engagement is essential to take the debate on the future of the EU forward towards a more democratic, accountable and effective European Union. The paper is good for the UK. It contains important proposals which the UK has advocated, such as a full-time Chair of the European Council. The UK will continue to engage with confidence in the debate on the future of Europe.

E-mail

Mr. Watson: To ask the Prime Minister when his e-mail address will be established for members of the public to contact him online. [92987]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Guildford (Sue Doughty) on 6 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 399W.

Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister when he last discussed United States compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty with the President of the United States. [91965]

The Prime Minister: I remain in close touch with President Bush about a range of international matters.

Referendums

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Prime Minister pursuant to his answer of 18 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 811W, on referendums if he will make a statement on the Government's criteria for determining on which subjects it is appropriate for referendums to be held. [92655]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to my previous reply on 9 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 306W, where I indicated that there are no criteria, set out in either the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act or elsewhere, for determining on which subjects it is appropriate for referendums to be held.

Dedicated primary legislation is required for any particular Referendum and the Government would of course, explain its reasons for deciding that the issue in question was suitable for a referendum.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister when the United Kingdom first provided UNMOVIC and the International Atomic Energy Agency with intelligence material on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. [92306]

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom has been providing information of various kinds to UN weapons inspectors since they first started inspections in Iraq in 1991.

TRANSPORT

A3

Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the timetable is for commencement of work on the A3 tunnel at Hindhead. [92042]

Mr. Spellar: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Tim Matthews to write to the right hon. Member.

Letter from T. Matthews to Virginia Bottomley, dated 22 January 2003:

The Minister for Transport, John Spellar, has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about the timetable for commencement of work on the A3 tunnel at Hindhead.

The programme for the scheme remains as we previously advised your office in December. Subject to the satisfactory completion of the statutory procedures, we aim to start construction in 2005 and take about 4 years to build the project, opening it to traffic in 2009. The next major stage will be the publication of draft Orders under the Highways Act together with an Environmental Statement. This remains on target for publication this Autumn.

Current work is centred on further ground investigation involving the sinking of additional boreholes at both Hindhead Common and Tyndalls Wood. This work is being carried out to build up a more detailed picture of the geology to inform the tunnel design.

If you require any information please contact Paul Arnold the Project Team Leader in Dorking office (01306 878475).

Departmental Staff

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many full-time equivalent staff are employed in *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of the agencies it sponsors; and what the figures were for 1997. [90664]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, on 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 697W.

DEFENCE

Biological Agents

Mr Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what medical advice is given to personnel in advance of their inoculation against biological agents [91040]

Dr. Moonie: Independent, expert medical advice confirms that immunisation against anthrax is safe and effective. United Kingdom Armed Forces personnel included in the voluntary immunisation programme against anthrax are encouraged to take advantage of the additional protection it provides. All personnel included in the programme are comprehensively briefed on the disease and on the vaccine, and given time to consider whether to accept it. The briefing includes an information leaflet, a video, a briefing from a commanding officer and an opportunity to speak to a doctor. All the briefing materials were drawn up with the assistance of expert medical advice. There is also a help-line, and copies of all the printed materials are available from the MOD web-site [www.mod.uk] along with links to additional information and answers to frequently asked questions.

We have announced our intention to vaccinate a small cohort of medical and NBC specialists against smallpox; I refer the hon. Member to my written ministerial statement of 2 December 2002 (*Official Report*, column 60WS). This small number of personnel receive detailed specialist briefing on the vaccine and on the disease.

Blood Stocks

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what contingency measures have been put in place to ensure there are sufficient stocks of blood and plasma available to the armed forces in the event of military action in Iraq. [91885]

Dr. Moonie: The provision of blood and blood products to the armed forces in the event of military action in Iraq is the responsibility of the Defence Medical Supplies Agency who obtain all necessary requirements from the National Blood Service in England. Arrangements are in place to ensure that all anticipated requirements will be met. In extremis, the Defence Medical Services have a limited capability to take blood in theatre.

Defence Logistics Organisation

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the outcome of the McKinsey report into the operations of the Defence Logistics Organisation; and what plans he has to reduce staff numbers at the Defence Logistics Organisation. [91045]

Mr. Ingram: The McKinsey report confirmed that the rationale for a fully integrated Defence Logistics Organisation (DLO) remains as persuasive now as it was at the time of the strategic defence review in 1998. The DLO has made real, demonstrable progress towards its strategic objectives, while continuing to provide a high level of support to operations and exercises. The McKinsey report identifies the key principles that will underpin the long-term strategy for logistics support, and proposes improvements in the three core logistics processes (procurement, engineering and asset management, and materiel flow), many of which build on existing good practice within the DLO. The key principles and performance targets are embedded in the new DLO strategic plan, and work to deliver against these objectives is being taken forward in the DLO change programme. McKinsey also identified a need for wider end-to-end review of the logistics processes in the land and air environments, and this is now the subject of a separate follow up study that will report in the summer.

Staff numbers in the DLO are reducing as a result of a number of initiatives and rationalisation measures already implemented, such as the warship support modernisation initiative. The McKinsey report suggested that more significant reductions in DLO staff numbers could be achieved. More study and testing will be required before any firm conclusions can be drawn. Any reduction in staff numbers will be as a consequence of changes to modernise logistic processes and any decisions to change how the DLO's current provider functions should be undertaken in the future.

Departmental Expenditure (Newsprint)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the total expenditure of his Department was on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in 2002. [90528]

Dr. Moonie: Expenditure on commercial and HMSO publications, including newspapers and periodicals, by the Ministry of Defence in financial year 2001–02 was £8,070,439.67.

Departmental Fraud Investigations

Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many staff have been suspended pending fraud investigation in his Department in each of the last five years. [91527]

Dr. Moonie: Reported cases of suspected fraud are recorded centrally on a summary basis only, and detailed information on the number of staff under suspension pending fraud investigation in each of the last five years could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many people have been found guilty of fraud offences in his Department in each of the last five years. [91528]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the distribution of his Department's whole-time equivalent staff was, including the staff in agencies and other bodies reporting to him, in each Government office region and nation of the UK *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the most recent available period. [90479]

Dr. Moonie: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him on 15 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 609W, by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office.

Diversification Agency

Mr. Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which north east companies have had negotiations with the Defence Diversification Agency in each year since its inception. [91082]

Dr. Moonie: The Defence Diversification Agency has had dealings with some 417 companies through its office in the north east since it was set up in April 2001. Of these, deeper discussions have taken place with 59 companies and a listing of these companies follows:

Name	*Company*
Stephen Taylor	Pyramid Design Associates
Lesley Sharp	NRS UK Ltd.
	Bodycote Materials Testing
Phil Kite	William Cook Defence
R. Nassor	Stargate Precision Engineering
Tony Wilkinson	Royston Engineering Group
Jeff Sylph	North British Tapes
Owen Craggs	Neptune Engineering
Malcolm Thomson	MM Thomson
Johnathan Marks	Hunter Gears Ltd.
Jim Broadway	EMAT
Steven Knaggs	Agronautics
David Poole	AEI Cables Ltd.
Mick Callan	Welwyn Components Ltd.
John Hartas	Synthesys
Jim Wallace	Seaward Electronics
John Morrison	Sapphire Technologies Ltd.
Harry Barnshaw	Teledyne Electronic Technologies
John Johnson	PDQ Engineering Ltd.
Geoff Edwards	Oxley
Brian Johnson	Northern Precision Engineering Ltd.
Terry Williamson	Rolls Royce
Steve Grainger	Enlgma
Judith Knights	Nicholsons
Tony Brown	Metrology Software Products Ltd
Nizam Balkhi	Electronics Design
Ian Moore	Treepax
Ken Rowntree	Broady Naval Flow Control
Peter McGowan	Mercurl Urval
Raymund Kelly	TRISK
Andrew Robson	Premier Engineering
Tom Trusty	Sycopel International Ltd.
Geoff Brumfield	AIK Crossley & Bradley
Glen Callender	Bibby
Michael Stoker	Carmichael Associates
Avril Leach	People 4 U
Steven Brown	NEBCC
Paul Mitchell	Orbitel Marketing
Richard Smith	Oxford Chemicals Ltd.
Paul Newman	2Touch
David Bowles	NDI Ltd.
Barry Stoddart	Procter & Gamble
Arthur Chadwick	South Tyneside College
John Autherson	EPICC
Bob Marris	ETRUST
Dr. John Casci	Synetlx
Geoff Race	Northern Offshore Federation
Peter Lovering	Singsby Aviation
David Lussey	Peratech Ltd.
Colin Arrowsmith	ATEECC
Nick R. C. Goddard	Stephensson Gobin
Martin E. Morey	Morey Osys Technology Ltd.
John B. Aitchison	Alcan
Wayne Richardson	Senstronics
Jeannette Roddy	Answers Consulting
Mark Nails	TCS
Steph Hargreaves	Institute for Automotive and Manufacturing Advanced Practice (AMAP)
Ron Jamieson	RCID
George Ord	NE Innovation Centre Co. Ltd.

External Consultants

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the total cost to his Department was of the use of external consultants in 2002. [90513]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence places its annual return for external assistance expenditure, which includes fees for external consultants, in the Libraries of the House. These data are collected on the basis of the financial year, and details of expenditure for 2001–02 will be published shortly. To provide this information on the basis of a calendar year, and a specific figure for the cost of external consultants, could be achieved only at disproportionate cost. The figures for 2002–03 will be collected and published once the current financial year has ended.

Fair Trade

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what fair trade criteria he sets when deciding upon what suppliers to use. [89911]

Mr. Ingram: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has made clear, the Government are committed to supporting ethical trading wherever possible and provide significant support to the Fairtrade Foundation's efforts in promoting the supply and marketing of Fairtrade products.

The setting of Fairtrade criteria for the selection of suppliers would be contrary to the EC public procurement directives, which apply to this type of procurement. These rules prohibit both positive and negative forms of discrimination. The Ministry of Defence's approach is to publish its forthcoming, higher value, requirements for products that might have Fairtrade sources of supply in the Official Journal of the European Communities, and to set out in those advertisements the supplier selection and contract award criteria that will be applied. Fairtrade suppliers who satisfy the criteria and offer value for money solutions to MOD's requirements will always have every opportunity to be successful.

Field Hospitals

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many field hospitals are deployable; and if he will make a statement; [91517]

(2) what is the *(a)* establishment and *(b)* strength of each (i) regular and (ii) reserve field hospital; and where each is based. [91515]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 20 January 2003]*: The establishment and strength of each of the regular and reserve field hospital units, together with their locations, is shown in the following table:

Field hospital units

Unit	*Establishment*	*Strength*	*Based*
22 FD HOSP	105	89	Thornhill Bks, Aldershot, Hants
33 FD HOSP	105	105	Fort Blockhouse, Gosport, Hants
34 FD HOSP	105	91	Queen Elizabeth Bks, Strensall, Yorkshire
201 FD HOSP(V)	416 (TA) 12 (Regular)	368	Fenham Bks, Newcastle Upon Tyne
202 FD HOSP (V)	415 (TA) 16 (Regular)	358	Roger Nutbeem House, Kings Heath, Birmingham
203 FD HOSP (V)	416 (TA) 13 (Regular)	260	TA Centre, Llandaff North, Cardiff
204 FD HOSP (V)	416(TA) 12 (Regular)	271	TA Centre, Belfast, Northern Ireland
205 FD HOSP (V)	416 (TA) 12 (Regular)	308	Graham House, Glasgow Scotland
207 FD HOSP (V)	415 (TA) 16 (Regular)	323	TA Centre, Kings Road, Manchester
208 FD HOSP (V)	416 (TA) 13 (Regular)	337	Chavasse House, Sarum Road, Liverpool
212 FD HOSP (V)	416 (TA) 13 (Regular)	294	Endcliffe Hall, Endcliffe Vale Road, Sheffield
243 FD HOSP (V)	416 (TA) 16 (Regular)	235	TA Centre ,Keynsham, Bristol
256 FD HOSP (V)	416 (TA) 16 (regular)	316	TA Centre, Walworth, London
306 FD HOSP (V)	429 (TA) 0 (Regular)	251	Imphal Bks, Fulford Road, York

We can currently deploy four field hospitals, which would be manned by both Regular and Reserve personnel.

HM Lifeguards

Jim Dowd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many incidents involving members of the public being attacked by horses used by HM Lifeguards in Whitehall have occurred in each of the last five years; in how many cases this has resulted in claims against his Department; and what has been the result in each case. [91562]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence has not received any details of incidents within the last 12 months of members of the public being attacked by horses of the Lifeguards in Whitehall. Information relating to the previous four years could be provided only at disproportionate cost. No claims for compensation have been received during the last five years.

HMS Coventry and HMS London

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made on the disposal of HMS Coventry and HMS London; and if he will make a statement. [90339]

Mr. Ingram: I can confirm that the Romanian Government have decided to acquire HMS Coventry and HMS London under Government-to-Government arrangements. The Acquisition Agreement was countersigned earlier last week by my noble Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement, Lord Bach, and the Romanian State Secretary for Armaments, Dr. Gheorge Matache. BAE Systems will act as the United Kingdom prime contractor.

The Romanian Navy will receive highly capable and NATO compatible warships to meet their operational requirements and provide increased security in the region.

It is fitting that having completed their service in the Royal Navy, the ships will continue their useful service with Romania, which has recently been invited to become a member of NATO.

HMS Sheffield

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the programme is for the disposal of HMS Sheffield; and what revenue has been or is expected to be raised by her disposal. [91220]

Mr. Ingram: The final disposal programme and therefore subsequent revenue relating to HMS Sheffield have yet to be determined. However, I can confirm that Government-to-Government discussions are in progress with a potential customer. It is not our practice to provide details of current and sensitive disposal sales discussions and I am therefore withholding that information in accordance with Exemption 1 (International Relations) and Exemption 13 (Third Party's Commercial Confidences) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Illegal Drugs/Contraband

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the totals of *(a)* ships intercepted and *(b)* seizures made of (i) contraband and (ii) illegal drugs by the Royal Navy in each of the past five years. [91241]

Mr. Ingram: The information requested as regards seizures of illegal drugs by the Royal Navy over the last five years is as follows.

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Date	*Ship*	*Value*	*Type*
May 1999	Marlborough	1 billion	Cocaine
November 1999	Northumberland	135 million	Cocaine
July 2001	Coventry	80 million	Cocaine
July 2002	Newcastle	1.5 million	Marijuana
July 2002	Newcastle	42 million	Cocaine
September 2002	Grafton	—	Marijuana
October 2002	Grafton	65 million	Cocaine

However, statistics relating to ship interceptions and seizures of contraband are not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Iraq

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what level of BA/Rescue team support is required to support the planned deployment of Royal Naval and Royal Air Force personnel to the Persian Gulf; and what impact such a deployment would have on emergency military fire cover in the United Kingdom. [92649]

Mr. Ingram: Royal Navy vessels do not sail without a full complement of damage control and fire-fighting capabilities, which include breathing apparatus and trained personnel. The level of such support varies from ship to ship. The current Naval Task Group 03 deployment is fully equipped and has the trained personnel to deal with fire hazards. The RAF have trained personnel in the Gulf region to support long-term operations. No additional RAF personnel have been deployed. There has been no effect on emergency military fire cover in the United Kingdom and none is anticipated.

Job Sharing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the extent of job sharing in his Department. [90857]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence is committed to the work/life balance of its civilian staff. A range of flexible working patterns including part time working, flexible working hours, home working and job sharing is available to civilian staff by agreement with their management.

United Kingdom Defence Statistics 2002, Chapter 2, table 2.33 shows 5,004 civilian staff (excluding those in Trading Funds) employed on a part time basis at 1 April 2002. At 15 January 2003, 594 civilian staff were recorded centrally as being employed formally under job sharing arrangements.

Joint Task Force Exercise

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what problems of compatibility were experienced between British and US communications equipment during the US Department of Defence's Joint Task Force Exercise. [85651]

Mr. Ingram: Exercise Internal Look was a US 'Command Post' exercise. The only communications equipment employed was Command and Control (C2) computer networks. Each nation employed national systems, which were not linked, and both also used a coalition C2 network which meant that compatibility problems were not an issue during the exercise.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British troops were involved in the US Department of Defence's Joint Task Force Exercise. [85658]

Mr. Ingram: Exercise Internal Look 03 took place in December 2002.

The number of United Kingdom personnel taking part in the exercise changed on a daily basis. About 830 were involved full-time for the majority of the exercise's duration.

Marine Pollution

Mr. Bill Tynan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether it is his Department's policy to regard the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships, 1973 and the Protocol of 1978 related thereto (MARPOL 73/78), as amended and reiterated in Regulation (EC) No 417/2002 as best practice; what plans he has to take steps to apply MARPOL 73/78 to vessels falling under the auspices of his Department; and if he will make a statement. [92314]

Dr. Moonie: All of the vessels that fall under the auspices of the Ministry of Defence comply with the provisions of the marine pollution legislation quoted and which is collectively known as MARPOL 73/78. Although MARPOL 73/78 allows, under Article 3, for the exemption of military vessels from its provisions it has long been MOD policy that these vessels will comply with or put in place systems that are as good or better than the standards required by this legislation. All military ships have a management system for environmental compliance and this is audited on a regular basis. In addition, any pollution incident is reported and the appropriate steps taken to minimise the pollution potential.

Maritime Terrorist Threats

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what changes his Department has made in respect of future *(a)* numbers of and *(b)* armament for fast patrol boats as a result of Islamist terrorist maritime threats since the attack on the USS Cole. [91234]

Mr. Ingram: The Royal Navy currently has 18 Inshore Patrol Craft in commission. The requirement for naval force protection is reviewed regularly. Most recently, this has seen the decision to replace the Gibraltar Squadron with vessels previously assigned to patrol duties in the Northern Ireland region. I am, however, withholding full details of the Royal Navy's patrol craft capability in accordance with Exemption 1 of the code of practice on Access to Government Information.

Missile Inceptors

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his assessment is of the feasibility of basing missile interceptors in the UK as part of a ballistic missile defence system; and if he will make a statement. [91043]

Mr. Hoon: No such assessment has been undertaken.

Missing Firearms

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many firearms have gone missing from the stocks of the *(a)* Army, *(b)* Navy and *(c)* RAF in each of the last five years; and what category of weapons these were. [91329]

Dr. Moonie: In the last five years up to 15 January 2003, 101 firearms were declared missing from the three armed services. Over the same period, 72 were recovered. The following table indicates the losses per year by category:

Year	*Royal Navy*	*Army*	*Royal Air Force*	*Total losses*	*Total[1] recoveries*
1998	Nil	3 Pistols 11 Military Rifles	1 Military Rifle	15	11
1999	1 Pistol	1 Pistol 9 Military Rifles 1 Sub-Machine Gun 1 Mortar 1 Antique/Other 1 Shot Gun	Nil	15	15
2000	1 Military Rifle	21 Pistols 1 Military Rifle 10 Antique/Others 7 Shot Guns	1 Antique/Other 4 Target Rifles (Sport)	45	23
2001	Nil	4 Pistols 3 Military Rifles 2 Sub-Machine Guns	2 Pistols	11	14
2002	Nil	2 Pistols 4 Military Rifles 4 Sub-Machine Guns 2 Target Rifles (Sport)	3 Pistols	15	9

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[1] The numbers of recovered firearms quoted in the draft answer does not directly correlate to the losses in the same years, because losses and recoveries do not always occur in the same year.

Naval Establishments

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to his answer of 16 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 516W, and his letter to the hon. Member for New Forest, East of 18 December 2002, how many intruders of those listed in each of the tables set out in that letter as having been arrested were charged with offences; and what the reasons are for the disparity between numbers arrested and numbers convicted following incursions at *(a)* RNAD Coulport from April 2001–02 and *(b)* HMNB Clyde from April 2000–01 and from April 2001–02. [91284]

Mr. Ingram: All persons arrested, identified in the tables contained in my letter of 18 December 2002, were charged and all those persons arrested in Scotland were reported to the Procurator Fiscal with a view to prosecution. Convictions however are a matter for the judicial system.

Operational Status

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the operational status is of *(a)* 22 Regiment Royal Artillery and *(b)* 161 (Ambulance) Regiment RLC. [91048]

Mr. Ingram: 22 Regiment Royal Artillery is under the operational command of 7 Air Defence Brigade and the Regiment is currently operational. 161 (Ambulance) Regiment Royal Logistic Corps was disbanded on 1 October 2002 as a result of the Strategic Defence Review.

Pay Talks

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he has had with the Public and Commercial Services Union about their opposition to the four-year pay settlement; and if he will make a statement. [91641]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* Neither my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, nor I have met the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) to discuss this issue. But the Permanent Secretary met with representatives of the union on 25 November 2002 to discuss their concerns. The Ministry of Defence continues to listen to the concerns of the PCS, and take account of them as implementation proceeds and officials continue to maintain a close dialogue with the trade unions about this matter.

Public Service Agreements

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list PSA targets for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 which his Department has not achieved stating the progress made in each case; and if he will make a statement. [92143]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence published details of progress against all outstanding PSA targets, including for 1999–2000 to 2001–02, in its Performance Report 2001–02 (Cm 5661), laid before the House on 22 November 2002.

QinetiQ

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the timing of his placing in the Library his departmental minute on the sell-off of QinetiQ to the Carlyle Group. [91962]

Dr. Moonie: On 5 December 2002, immediately after the key terms for the sale of a stake in QinetiQ were agreed with the purchaser, I announced the details to Parliament. Following this, and in accordance with government accounting rules and in line with normal departmental practice, officials prepared a departmental minute describing the contingent liabilities accepted by the Ministry of Defence as part of the transaction. This was formally laid before Parliament on 17 December.

Members have 14 sitting days to raise any objections to the proposals detailed in the minute and this period ends on 23 January 2003.

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the composition was of the financial payment made to QinetiQ on its post-privatisation; how much was paid in respect of *(a)* staff pensions, *(b)* termination of prior contracts and *(c)* other issues. [92293]

Dr. Moonie: No such payments have been made to QinetiQ. Certain contingent liabilities in relation to staff pensions and to contract termination remain with the Ministry of Defence, and these were described in the departmental Minute laid before Parliament on 17 December 2002.

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make it his policy to postpone to go-ahead with the sale of QinetiQ to the Carlyle Group until Parliament has an opportunity to evaluate and debate the proposals set out in his departmental minute of 17 December 2002. [92300]

Dr. Moonie: No. To date, we have received no substantive objections which would justify either a delay in the sale process or a Parliamentary debate. However, we will, of course, continue to give proper consideration to any specific points raised in relation to the issues covered in the Departmental Minute laid before the House on 17 December 2002.

RAF Fairford

Mr. David Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the flight path of planes flying into and out of RAF Fairford. [92162]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* Most aircraft arriving at or departing from RAF Fairford use the Daventry corridor, situated about 20 miles to the north east of the base. Incoming planes generally descend to 2000 feet as they make their final approach along a westerly or easterly flight path as dictated by the orientation of the runway and the prevailing wind speed and direction. Similarly, planes departing the base also use a westerly or easterly flight path.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what limitations upon stored weapons apply to RAF Fairford. [92163]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* Aircraft weapons are not stored at RAF Fairford during normal peacetime operations, although to a maximum limit of 200kg, explosives may be brought to RAF Fairford in support of exercise activities. The storage facilities for explosives are licensed in accordance with relevant peacetime Explosives Regulations.

As might be expected, a small quantity of personal firearms and ammunition are held at the base.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many military personnel are stationed at RAF Fairford; and how many civilian personnel are employed there. [92164]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* As at 31 December 2002, the numbers of military and civilian personnel at RAF Fairford were:

	Military personnel stationed	*Civilian personnel employed*
RAF Fairford	175	212

Royal Navy (Amphibious Capability)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future amphibious capability of the Royal Navy in respect of *(a)* ships and *(b)* personnel. [91233]

Mr. Ingram: By the end of 2005 the Royal Navy will have substantially increased its overall capability to conduct amphibious operations. In addition to the Helicopter Landing Platform (HMS Ocean) and the Landing Ship Logistic RFA Sir Bedivere, on current plans the Royal Navy will also have available two new Landing Platform Docks (HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark) and four new Bay Class Landing Ship Dock (Auxiliary). The Invincible Class Aircraft Carriers are also capable of operating in the amphibious assault role. There are no current plans to change the Royal Marines manning requirement. Table 31 of the Departmental Performance Report 2001–02 provides details of Royal Marines units.

Search and Rescue

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the cost was in each of the last five years of his Department's search and rescue capability in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [91914]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 15 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 637–38W.

Suez Veterans

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when a decision will be made on whether Suez veterans should receive an honour. [92036]

Dr. Moonie: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 13 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 404W, to the hon. Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mrs. Brooke).

CABINET OFFICE

Annual Report

Norman Lamb: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how much producing the Cabinet Office's latest annual report cost; how many copies were printed; how many copies of it were sold at its cover price; to whom copies of the report have been provided free of charge; and how many copies were provided free of charge. [90877]

Mr. Alexander: The Stationery Office Limited (TSO) produced the latest Cabinet Office Departmental Report (Cm 5429). TSO determine the number of copies printed for retail sale and meet the costs of printing and publication. TSO are not obliged to provide this information as these are costs which they meet themselves and are not charged to Departments. TSO has sold 354 copies of the departmental report and provided the Cabinet Office with 250 copies. The Cabinet Office paid £23,177 to TSO for other costs including design and the 250 copies received. The Cabinet Office copies were mainly distributed within the Department and to some other Government Departments.

Delivery Unit

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) how many people are in the delivery unit; and how many are *(a)* working within the Treasury and *(b)* transferred to the Treasury; [91169]

(2) when the decision was made to move the delivery unit to the Treasury. [91513]

Mr. Alexander: The delivery unit remains a part of the Cabinet Office. At 1 January 2003, it had 34 full-time equivalent staff.

Civil Servants

Mr. David Laws: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many civil servants have been employed by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each of its agencies and non departmental bodies in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92364]

Mr. Alexander: Full-time equivalent numbers for staff in all Civil Service departments and agencies is released twice-yearly by Press Notice. The latest data, for April 2002, were published on 31 October 2002. Data for April of each year from 1995 to 2001 appear in the latest edition of the annual publication 'Civil Service Statistics'. Data for previous years are contained in previous editions of the publication. Copies of the Press Notices and annual publication are available from the Libraries of the House.

Comparisons over time are made difficult because of changes in the make up of the departments and agencies comprising the Civil Service. Not only do new organisations appear and old ones disappear, but staff changes may reflect the transfer of work between departments and agencies.

With the exception of those staff employed by the Health and Safety Commission and Executive, and the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, the staff employed by Executive non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) are not civil servants. Advisory NDPBs are generally supported by civil servants from their sponsor departments, and do not employ their own staff.

My department publishes annually information on public bodies, including NDPBs. This includes details on the number of staff employed by the public body. Copies of 'Public Bodies 2001', and equivalent publication for previous years, are available in the Libraries of the House. 'Public Bodies 2002' will be published shortly.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Laws: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what his estimate is of the total expenditure by his Department on ministerial travel *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* abroad, in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92426]

Mr. Alexander: Since 1999 this Government has published an annual list of all visits overseas undertaken by Cabinet Ministers costing £500 or more during each financial year. The Government has also published on an annual basis the cost of all Ministers' visits overseas. Copies of the lists are available in the Libraries of the House.

Information for 1997–98 was included in the 1999 list. The overall cost of Minister's visits for the years 1995–96 and 1996–97 was most recently provided with the 2001 list. The information for 2002–03 will be published as soon as possible after the end of the financial year.

Detailed information requested in respect of UK travel is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

All travel is undertaken fully in accordance with the rules set out in the Ministerial Code and Travel by Ministers, copies of which are available in the Libraries of the House.

Open Government

Norman Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office pursuant to his written statement of 19 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 65WS, on open government, if he will provide a breakdown of the figures given on each Department by year from 1992. [91531]

Mr. Alexander: The files prior to 1997 have been destroyed as part of the normal review process. The 1 April 1999 return covered a 33 month period.

The most detailed breakdown of figures available centrally is as follows:

Department	*As at 31 March 1997*	*1 April 1997–31 March 1998*	*1 April 1998–31 March 1999*	*1 April 1999–31 December 2001*
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	5,907	201	13	42
Cabinet Office	4,198	1,409	1,859	134
Office for National Statistics	400	0	0	1
Crown Prosecution Service	1,054	0	0	0
HM Customs and Excise	964	44	0	0
Ministry of Defence	9,081	1,519	917	535
Department for Education and Skills	3,802	0	0	0
Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions	1,496	5,754	4,334	10,693
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	10,597	3,551	956	3,496
Department of Health	890	0	383	849
Department for Work and Pensions	2,944	0	49	329
Home Office	3,162	180	88	123
Board of Inland Revenue	0	0	0	2
Lord Chancellor's Department	4,692	0	452	1,304
Court Services	2,114	1,407	0	0
Metropolitan Police	615	149	205	182
Northern Ireland (NI and Departments, Northern Ireland Office and NI Court Services)	11,808	0	0	0
Department for International Development	613	0	136	0
Scottish Executive	4,928	0	0	0
Department of Trade and Industry	111	3	33	504
HM Treasury	659	49	70	217
Wales Office, Office of the Secretary of State for Wales	237	0	0	746
Government Communications Headquarters	5,824	141	852	2,266

Statutory Instruments

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many statutory instruments have been issued by the Cabinet Office in each calendar year since 1979. [89841]

Mr. Alexander: The information requested covering the period from 1979 to 1998 could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, the information is available from 1999 onwards and is as follows:

1999: 4

2000: 3

2001: 1

2002: 2.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Coastal Defences

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if the Government has agreed with all operating authorities a common format for information on flood and coastal defence assets. [89741]

Margaret Beckett: A common format for information on all flood and sea defences was included within guidance issued to all operating authorities by the Environment Agency acting under its supervisory duty.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the Government's original target date was for the completion of the National Flood and Coastal Protection Database; what the target is now; and if she will make a statement. [89681]

Margaret Beckett: The original target date for the completion of the National Flood and Coastal Defence Database (NFCDD) was 1 September 2000. However, early analysis indicated this was not achievable. Subsequently, the delivery has proved more complex than originally envisaged, and it is currently being installed at EA sites. The revised date for delivery of Phases One and Two is now June 2003. Positive steps have been taken to provide analysis and results required for other purposes in parallel with the database development to minimise the impacts of the delays.

Livestock Disposal

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what calculation she has made of the costs of the EU directive on disposal of dead stock for *(a)* the Government and *(b)* farmers; [92075]

(2) what discussions she has had with *(a)* the livestock industry and *(b)* hunts on the introduction of the EU directive on disposal of dead stock; [92076]

(3) if she will make a statement on the Government's policy towards the forthcoming EU Directive on disposal of dead stock. [92074]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* Since April 2002, we have been involved in discussions with livestock and disposal industry stakeholders over future arrangements and funding options for disposal of fallen stock. The farming unions and the Master of the Foxhounds Association have been involved in these discussions.

I met with representatives from the farming unions and the knacker and rendering industry on 3 December 2002 to discuss a joint proposal for a National Fallen

Stock disposal scheme. The Government are prepared to make available the funding which it currently puts annually into collection and disposal of stock for the purposes of TSE testing into a National Scheme (nearly £30 million). However the industry must be responsible for additional funding and running of the Scheme (estimated to be around £20 million).

The livestock industry must now consider whether it wants to proceed with a National Scheme on this basis.

The Government expects farmers to comply with the new EU Directive. Those that do not can expect to be prosecuted.

Deer

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many deer were shot by the Forestry Commission in Somerset in *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02. [91172]

Mr. Morley: The subject of the question relates to matters undertaken by Forest Enterprise. I asked its Chief Executive, Dr. Bob McIntosh, to arrange a written response which I have attached.

Letter from Dr. Bob McIntosh to Mr. Liddell-Grainger, dated January 2003:

I refer to the question you have asked of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on how many deer were shot by the Forestry Commission in Somerset in *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02. I have been asked to reply to you.

We shot a total of 200 deer in 2000–01 (1 April-31 March) and 171 in 2001–02 (1 April-31 March) on Forestry Commission land in the county of Somerset.

I hope this is the information you require.

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs who is responsible for calculating the deer figures in the UK; and what they were at the most recent date. [91173]

Mr. Morley: No statutory body routinely collects information on overall wild deer numbers in England and Wales, or in Northern Ireland. The Deer Commission for Scotland conducts wild deer censuses in different areas every year and has estimated that wild deer in Scotland might currently number 600,000, although no completely reliable figure is available.

Stephen Harris et al. (1995) estimated the following pre-breeding population sizes for deer in Great Britain.

	England	*Scotland*	*Wales*	*Total GB*
Red deer	12,500	347,000	< 50	360,000
Fallow deer	95,000	< 4,000	< 1,000	100,000
Roe deer	150,000	350,000	50	500,000
Sika deer	2,500	9,000	0	11,500
Muntjac deer	40,000	< 50	< 250	40,000
Chinese water deer	650	0	0	650

Source:

From: Harris, S., Morris P., Wray S. and Yalden D. 1995. "A Review of British Mammals: population estimates and conservation status of British mammals other than cetaceans". JNCC, Peterborough.

Drainage Boards

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs which *(a)* local authorities and *(b)* drainage boards have still to produce a publicly available policy statement setting out plans for delivering the Government's policy aims and objectives for flood and coastal defence. [89641]

Margaret Beckett: When information on policy statements received was last compared with the Environment Agency in September 2002, statements had yet to be received from the following bodies:

Internal Drainage Boards (13)
Adlingfleet and Whitgift DC
Althorpe DB
Crowle Area IDB
Gravesend Bridge to Sheerness and Penshurst C of S
Lombards Wall to Gravesend
Bridge C of S
Rawcliffe DB
Scotter IDB
South Axholme IDB
Thorntree IDB (completion expected by December 2002)
Tickhill DB
West Axholme
West Butterwick
Woodwalton DC
Local Authorities (117)
Ashfield District Council
Aylesbury Vale District Council
Babergh District Council
Barking and Dagenham London
Borough Council
Barnet London Borough Council
Basildon District Council
Basingstoke and Deane
Borough Council
Blaby District Council
Boston Borough Council
Bracknell Forest Borough Council
Bradford City Council
Breckland Council
Brent London Borough Council
Brentwood Borough Council
Bridgnorth District Council
Brighton and Hove Council
Broadland District Council
Bromsgrove District Council
Broxbourne Borough Council
Cambridge City Council
Carrick District Council
Castle Point Borough Council
Chelmsford Borough Council
Chester-le-Street District Council
Chiltern District Council
City of London
Corby Borough Council
Craven District Council
Crawley Borough Council
Croydon London Borough Council
Dacorum Borough Council
Dartford Borough Council
Derbyshire Dales District Council
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council

Ealing London Borough Council
East Cambridgeshire District Council
East Hertfordshire District Council
East Lindsey District Council
Fenland District Council
Forest Heath District Council
Forest of Dean District Council
Greenwich London Borough Council
Guildford Borough Council
Hackney London Borough Council
Hammersmith and Fulham London Borough Council
Harborough District Council
Haringey London Borough Council
Harlow District Council
Havering London Borough Council
High Peak Borough Council
Hinckley & Bosworth Borough Council
Horsham District Council
Isles of Scilly Council
Kensington and Chelsea Royal Borough
Kettering Borough Council
King's Lynn & West Norfolk
Borough Council
Kingston upon Thames Royal Borough
Lewisham London Borough Council
Lincoln City Council
Maidstone Borough Council
Maldon District Council
Malvern Hills District Council
Mendip District Council
Merton London Borough Council
Mid Devon District Council
Milton Keynes Council
Newham London Borough Council
North Hertfordshire District Council
North Kesteven District Council
North West Leicestershire District Council
North Wiltshire District Council
Norwich City Council
Nottingham City Council
Oadby and Wigston Borough Council
Oxford City Council
Penwith District Council
Plymouth City Council
Reading Borough Council
Redbridge London Borough Council
Richmond upon Thames London
Borough Council
Rochford District Council
Rushmoor Borough Council
Salisbury District Council
Sedgefield Borough Council
Sedgemoor District Council
Selby District Council
Slough Borough Council
South Bucks District Council
South Derbyshire District Council
South Hams District Council
South Holland District Council
South Kesteven District Council
South Norfolk District Council
South Oxfordshire District Council
South Somerset District Council
Southend-on-Sea Borough Council
Spelthorne Borough Council
St. Albans District Council
Staffordshire Moorlands District Council
Stevenage Borough Council
Teesdale District Council
Three Rivers District Council
Thurrock Borough Council
Tower Hamlets London Borough Council
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
Uttlesford District Council
Wakefield City Council
Waltham Forest London Borough Council
Wandsworth London Borough Council
Watford Borough Council
West Berkshire Council
West Lindsey District Council
West Somerset District Council
West Wiltshire District Council
Westminster City Council
Weymouth & Portland Borough Council
Windsor & Maidenhead Royal Borough
Wokingham Council
Wyre Forest District Council

It should be noted that many of these councils do not have watercourses presenting significant flood risk.

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs which local authorities adopted measures to improve the thermal insulation of buildings under their Home Energy Conservation Act obligations in fewer than 0.25 per cent. of their buildings over the last year. [90805]

Mr. Morley: The Home Energy Conservation Act does not require Energy Conservation Authorities to report on specific energy efficiency measures or the numbers of buildings in which measures have been installed. They are required to report on the overall progress they have made in implementing measures they have identified as being practicable, cost-effective and likely to result in significant improvement in the energy efficiency of the residential accommodation in their area.

Environment Agency

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to review High Level Target 9 following the Environment Agency's report to her Department. [89751]

Margaret Beckett: All High Level Targets, including Target 9, are due to be reviewed this year.

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the total budget for the Environment Agency *(a)* was in 2001–02 and *(b)* is in 2002–03. [91508]

Mr. Meacher: The total expenditure budget for the Environment Agency in *(a)* 2001–02 was £662.3 million and *(b)* 2002–03 was £758.2 million.

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action the Government are taking to ensure that the Environment Agency website can cope with the volume of traffic in emergencies. [91394]

Mr. Morley: The website is not the primary means of providing flood warning. The main flood warning systems operate effectively, including the Agency's Floodline telephone service, Automatic Voice Warning systems, news media information and direct manual warnings in flood warned areas.

However, the Environment Agency has recognised the problems that occurred on its website during the new year floods. It has acted to improve the reliability of its service by installing a new high volume service to provide flood warning information for up to 100,000 visitors an hour—some 20 times more than the volume of visitors experienced during the peak of the new year floods.

In addition, the Agency has restructured its website so that the flood warning facility will be unaffected by other non-flood warning users, and updated the design and search facility to provide a more user-friendly service.

European Water Directive

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations her Department will be making to the Council of Ministers in discussions regarding the European Water Framework Directive concerning acceptable targets and objectives for levels of mercury in groundwater. [91928]

Mr. Morley: The Department will seek to ensure that both human health and the ecosystems dependent upon groundwater are protected from the risks posed by mercury. We will be looking to ensure that the Water Framework Directive and the intended new "daughter" Directive for Groundwater deliver the same high level of protection that is provided under the existing stringent regulatory regime covering mercury in groundwater.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what resources have been made available in the spending review to the Environment Agency to carry out its role as competent authority in implementing the European Water Framework Directive. [91929]

Mr. Morley: The Environment Agency has continued to receive significant grant-in-aid from the Department. This has increased from £103.7 million in 1999–2000 to £116.7 million in 2002–03 (figures in EA Corporate Plan for 2002–03).

In total, the agency's budget (grant plus charges and levies) has increased from £620 million in 1999–2000 to just short of £750 million in 2002–03. These are substantial resources, and our view is that the agency is sufficiently funded to deliver its statutory responsibilities.

It is for the agency to organise those resources so that the Water Framework Directive is adequately resourced but we are confident it has been provided with adequate means to do so.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what planning policy and regional guidance will be issued to local authorities with regard to the implementation of the European Water Framework Directive. [91930]

Mr. Morley: Planning policy is for my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. Planning policy guidance note, (PPG) 25 Development and flood risk, already makes reference to the requirements of the Water Framework Directive. In addition, PPG 23 Planning and pollution control, is currently being revised and it will also make appropriate reference. We are considering whether anything further will be required as regards the implications for planning of the Water Framework Directive.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what she estimates the impact of the European Water Framework Directive to be upon *(a)* water management and *(b)* land use planning at local government level. [91931]

Mr. Morley: The information is as follows:

(a) The Water Framework Directive sets up a catchment-based system of managing water through the establishment of river basin districts. The Environment Agency, which the Government have proposed should be the competent authority for the directive, already manages water on a catchment basis. Therefore, although boundaries will be new, the principle will not.

In addition, England is well placed in legislative and institutional terms to implement the directive-in terms of the regulatory system, licence regimes and legal framework already in place. Our second consultation paper consults on what the gaps are and how they might be filled.

The activities required by the Water Framework Directive-such as review of human activity, economic analysis, co-ordination of river basin management plans and selection of programme(s) of measures-will enable water to be managed in a more holistic way which encourages interested parties to contribute more actively to how water is managed in their area.

(b) We are considering the implications of the Directive for land use planning at local government level in discussion with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the Environment Agency and others. The Environment agency is also carrying out research into the effects of land use on water quality.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will estimate the overall costs to the United Kingdom that will be incurred by the implementation of the European Water Framework Directive. [91932]

Mr. Morley: In England and Wales a preliminary assessment of the costs and benefits of implementing the Directive was set out in the first consultation paper issued jointly by the then Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the

National Assembly for Wales. The study estimated total costs in the range of £2 billion to £9.2 billion. A copy of the paper is in the House Library.

These costs will be updated in the revised Regulatory Impact Assessment which is in progress and which will be published with the Third Consultation Paper which will be published this year.

Implementation of the directive in the United Kingdom is a devolved matter. Defra and the Welsh Assembly Government are working jointly on transposition.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what measures her Department and the Environment Agency are putting in place to prepare for the implementation of the European Water Framework Directive. [91933]

Mr. Morley: The Water Framework Directive deadlines stretch to 2015, the date by which environmental objectives must be met.

Much work is already underway by both Defra and the Environment Agency to prepare for implementation. Both have consulted and will consult further on implementation. The Environment Agency has developed an implementation programme to prepare for implementation.

Water Framework Directive

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps she has taken to consult non-governmental organisations about the interpretation and implementation of the Water Framework Directive. [88433]

Margaret Beckett: We are currently consulting on our proposals to give legal effect to the Directive. This includes proposals covering the public participation requirements of the Directive in Article 14. This is our second consultation and a third is planned for 2003. The Environment Agency have also, at our request, been carrying out consultation on various technical issues relating to the Directive.

In June 2001, we set up a forum for key stakeholders to discuss issues relating to the Water Framework Directive and water policy in general. Its membership covers a wide range of interests, including the environment, the water industry, agriculture, the countryside and industry. At its first meeting, the group agreed that it would have three main purposes: to provide input to Government thinking on transposition of the Water Framework Directive; raise issues of concern to the group relating to implementation of the WFD; and provide input into development of a long-term strategy for water.

In addition, Defra set up an interactive electronic stakeholder forum a year ago, with the aim of capturing a wider range of stakeholder views about the water environment. Ideas from this forum were directly reflected in our document on future priorities for water policy, "Directing the Flow", published last month.

Beyond that, Defra has played an active role in a wide range of stakeholder conferences and seminars organised by other organisations, where stakeholders have got together to discuss specific aspects of water policy, in many of which the Water Framework Directive was a prominent issue.

Defra officials and Ministers have also had a large number of bilateral meetings with stakeholders on water policy issues.

Finally, the Government regulatory agencies (Environment Agency, English Nature, Ofwat) have had a large number of meetings themselves with stakeholders on water policy and the Water Framework Directive.

Fallen Stock

Mr. Roger Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much fallen stock by *(a)* species, *(b)* region and *(c)* month was rendered in each year since 1997. [92166]

Mr. Morley: We do not have figures for the amount of fallen stock that has been rendered in the UK. This information is available only at disproportionate cost.

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what estimate she has made of the amount of fallen stock in terms of *(a)* weight and *(b)* species in the UK in each of the last 12 months; [92167]

(2) what the average cost was for rendering fallen stock in the last year for which figures are available. [92168]

Mr. Morley: Information regarding the amount of fallen stock for each of the last 12 months is not available. However, the industry has estimated that something in the order of, at least, 200,000 tonnes of fallen stock will need to be collected annually, when the ban on burial of fallen stock is implemented from 30 April this year.

The estimated tonnage is be made up of the following:

1,316,000 adult animal carcases (bovine, ovine, swine and equine)

2,262,000 immature animal carcases (bovine, ovine, swine and equine)

36,000,000 poultry carcases (avians).

In arriving at this figure, assumptions have been made about mortality rates for adult and immature animals and their average weight.

The United Kingdom Renderers Association estimate that the average cost for rendering fallen stock is in the order of £40–50 per tonne. In arriving at this figure, assumptions have been made to take account of seasonal variations and regional differences.

Fisheries

Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many British fishery officers have been sent during 2002 to those Baltic States which are due to accede to the European Union in 2004; and what the purpose was of sending them. [92644]

Mr. Morley: Three British Sea Fishery Officers from Defra visited Poland in 2002 to advise and train Polish inspectors on the enforcement of EU fisheries legislation.

Flooding

Mr. Flook: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on progress with its flood defence scheme at Hillfarrance, near Taunton. [91944]

Mr. Morley: Operational responsibility for flood management measures rests with the local operating authorities, normally the Environment Agency (EA) and local councils, who decide which projects to promote and their timing.

Defra is considering the EA's application for grant on its proposed flood alleviation scheme for Hillfarrance against the normal technical, economic and environmental criteria and priority score arrangements. However a final decision on grant aid cannot be taken until an application for planning permission has been considered by Taunton Deane Borough Council. Subject to this being in place, I understand the EA plan to start work in April 2003.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to provide additional funding for flood defences. [91956]

Mr. Morley: The Government are committed to maintenance and improvement of flood and coastal defences, including those to reduce the risk of coastal erosion as well as flooding, and has planned for spending of nearly £1.5 billion over the next three years:

£ million

	2002–03	*2003–04*	*2004–05*	*2005–06*
Defra[1]	131	134	137	182
ODPM[2]	280	295	332	382
Total	411	429	469	564

[1] For capital projects, Environment Agency national initiatives such as National Flood and Coastal Defence Database and Catchment Flood Management Plans, Storm Tide Forecasting Service etc.

[2] Funding from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to local authorities to support their levies to the Environment Agency and internal drainage boards and their own spend on flood and coastal defence.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she expects the Environment Agency's flood warning service to be available to all people whose homes or businesses have been designated as at risk of flooding. [89608]

Margaret Beckett: The Environment Agency has made a commitment in its Corporate Strategy to increase the coverage of its flood warning services to 77 per cent. of properties in flood risk areas by 2007. This will rise to 80 per cent. by the year 2009–10.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what proportion of the population designated as at risk of flooding will be covered by the Environment Agency's warning service by *(a)* 1 April 2003, *(b)* 1 April 2004, *(c)* 1 April 2005 and *(d)* 1 April 2006. [89610]

Margaret Beckett: The Environment Agency warns people of flooding by at least two means. These usually are a direct warning using the EA's automatic voice messaging (AVM) system and local radio announcements when flood warnings are issued. The warnings are also posted on the EA's website. As part of the EA's flood awareness campaign, each householder in a flood risk area receives an annual mailing advising them what to do during a flood. The EA plans to increase coverage of direct warnings to each household as follows:

(a) April 2003 70 per cent. of households

(b) April 2004 73 per cent. of households

(c) April 2005 75 per cent. of households

(d) April 2006 76 per cent. of households

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what criteria are used by the Government to determine whether a property is designated as at risk of flooding. [89609]

Margaret Beckett: A property is designated as at risk from flooding from main rivers and the sea if it appears within the area shown at risk on the Environment Agency's Indicative Flood Maps (which are available on the internet). These maps show the best available information on flood risk. An extreme flood outline representing the 0.1 per cent. probability of flooding in any year is under development and will be published later in 2003.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she plans to introduce a 0.5 per cent.standard for flood defences; and what estimate she has made of the cost to public funds of adapating a 0.5 per cent.standard for flood protection. [89629]

Margaret Beckett: There are no plans to introduce a common 0.5 per cent, or other common standard and no national estimate of the costs of such a standard have beenmade. There could be as many as 10,000 separate flood risk areas in England covering a very wide variety of land uses from low grade agricultural land to major industrial sites. It would not be feasible or desirable to apply the same standards to all these areas. The exclusion of flood water from some areas, particularly from some agricultural and amenity land would significantly increase the flooding problems to be addressed elsewhere.

The Department does provide indicative standards, linked to guidance on project appraisal, which are designed to ensure that suitable standards for the relevant land use are adopted where it is technically feasible and economically worthwhile to do so.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the progress made by the Environment Agency towards developing flood risk categories. [89640]

Margaret Beckett: The Environment Agency has developed a method for categorising flood risk for the prioritisation and delivery of the flood warning service and it has been implemented throughout England and Wales.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what progress has been made by the Environment Agency to identify private flood and coastal defences. [89745]

Margaret Beckett: The Environment Agency have identified all private flood defences on main river as well as all private sea defences.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what reports she has received from the Environment Agency about progress made in developing the National Flood and Coastal Defence Database. [89747]

Margaret Beckett: Defra officials have been kept fully informed by the Environment Agency about the progress of this development and receive regular reports on the project.

Fuel Poverty

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what percentage of those defined as being in fuel poverty in 2001 have carried out DIY insulation measures to improve the energy efficiency of their homes. [90806]

Mr. Morley: The information requested is not available. However, general information regarding the number of properties where improvements have been carried out will be available from the English House Condition Survey 2001, which is the responsibility of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Livestock Movements

Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations she has received from the NFU regarding the 20-day standstill movement restrictions. [91997]

Mr. Morley: The NFU and other industry organisations have made a number of representations about the 20 day standstill. Ministers and officials regularly meet industry representatives, including the NFU President and his officers, to discuss this and other matters.

Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent assessment she has made of the impact of the 20-day standstill period on British agriculture. [91998]

Mr. Morley: A detailed risk assessment and cost-benefit analysis into the 20-day standstill is currently being carried out in line with the FMD Inquiry recommendations. The emerging findings will inform the decision about the shape of the movement rules for spring which we hope to announce very soon.

Packaging Waste Recycling Targets

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) when she intends to consult on the UK's 2004 packaging waste recycling targets; [91494]

(2) what preliminary assessment she has made of the likely packaging waste recycling targets required for 2004 to enable the UK to comply with the most likely minimum targets expected to be set; [91496]

(3) when she intends to announce the UK packaging waste recovery targets *(a)* for 2004 and *(b)* for 2005. [91495]

Mr. Meacher: I expect the Advisory Committee on Packaging (ACP) to provide the Government with advice on their views on the possible targets in the UK between 2004 and 2008. I know that an ACP Task Force is currently looking at future targets, including targets for 2004. We are aiming to consult on a number of packaging issues this year, including targets for the period 2004–08. We would propose to announce the targets as early as possible, with a view to providing long-term targets to aid stability in the PRN market and future investment, but this will have to await the outcome of our consultation exercise.

Press Releases

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many press releases have been issued by her Department in each *(a)* year and *(b)* quarter from 1995–96 to 2002–03; and if she will make a statement. [92459]

Alun Michael: Defra was created in June 2001. All press releases are available on the Defra website (www.defra.gov.uk). Numbers issued are as follows:

	Number
2001	
June-end September	[1]159
October-end December	163
Total	322
2002	
January-end March	127
April-end June	129
July-end September	134
October-end December	148
Total	538

[1] First Defra release issued 14 June

Retrospective identification and enumeration of the press releases issued prior to June 2001, by the Home Office, the former DETR and MAFF press offices on policy subjects now covered by Defra would be available only at disproportionate cost.

Rodent Survey

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she expects to receive the results of the rodent survey element of the 2001 English House Condition Survey. [91066]

Mr. Morley: The English House Condition Survey conducted by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister collects data on behalf of this Department about the incidence of rodents. We expect to receive the information from the 2001 survey in February. A report on the analysis of the data will be published in due course.

Sea Pollution

Colin Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what international discussions are taking place to control the threat of pollution at sea. [91795]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* Marine pollution comes from a variety of sources and the UK is active in a wide range of international fora to tackle and prevent marine pollution.

For example, we are a contracting party to the OSPAR Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North East Atlantic and the London Convention for the Prevention of Marine Pollution from Dumping. We are also working closely with the European Union to tackle marine pollution and better protect our seas.

In addition, we are working through the United Nations Environment Programme's Washington Global Programme of Action to tackle marine pollution from land-based sources. The UK also plays a lead role in the International Maritime Organisation to address issues of ship safety and pollution from ships.

Sheep (EU Regulations)

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs which Ministers and officials attended the January Council of Ministers meeting on the EU Draft Regulations on the double-tagging of sheep. [91417]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* This month's Agriculture and Fisheries Council is scheduled to take place on 27–28 January. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is expected to head the UK delegation. My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary and I plan to accompany her. The Minister for Environment and Rural Development in the Scottish Executive and the Deputy First Minister and Minister for Rural Development and Wales Abroad in the Welsh Assembly Government, plan to attend together with the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. We will be supported by a number of officials, including the Director General responsible for Farming, Food and Fisheries.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many working days have been lost due to illness in her Department in *(a)* 2002 and *(b)* each of the preceding five years. [90967]

Alun Michael: Records are not yet available for the number of days lost due to sickness absence in 2002, but these will be announced in due course. Sickness absence figures for previous years are published in the Cabinet Office annual report "Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service", copies of which are placed in the Library of the House.

Defra was created in June 2001. The figure for that year, shown as an average per staff year, relates to parts of the former DETR and the former MAFF and its agencies.

2001—7.2 days

The Department is committed to the effective management of sickness absence, and to meeting its Service Delivery Agreement target of reducing sickness absence to 6.9 days for 2003.

TB Research

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on what funding was made available in the last financial year for TB research in the areas of *(a)* finding a cattle vaccine, *(b)* finding a badger vaccine and *(c)* providing a comprehensive cattle test for TB. [92077]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* Defra spent the following amounts on developing TB vaccines and diagnostic tests (including pathogenesis studies) for cattle and badgers in 2001–02 and 2002–03:

£

	Cost per year		
Subject	*2001–02*	*2002–03*	*Total*
Diagnostics for TB	1,133,726	2,035,792	3,169,518
Badger Vaccines	617,948	1,037,729	1,655,677
Cattle Vaccines	923,734	1,037,729	1,961,463
Total	2,675,408	4,111,250	6,786,658

A sub-group of the Independent Scientific Group on cattle TB is conducting a scoping study into the feasibility of animal TB vaccines, and is due to report shortly.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on what funding is available for consequential loss for TB breakdowns for those farmers who are part of the Woodchester Park Project area of Gloucestershire. [92078]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* Defra has made special arrangements with farmers in the Woodchester Park study area to pay fair compensation for consequential losses associated with cattle TB breakdowns in the project area. Funding is paid from the TB research programme.

Village Halls

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the impact on village halls of regulations introduced since 1997. [91844]

Alun Michael: No such specific assessment has been made. However, all proposals for regulation which have an impact on businesses, charities or voluntary bodies must be accompanied by a regulatory impact assessment. The necessary checks and balances required under the system ensure that regulation is necessary and proportionate and the risks, options, benefits and costs are fully explored.

I am aware from correspondence that concerns have been expressed in particular about the impact on village halls of the "Disability Discrimination (Providers of Services) (Adjustment of Premises) Regulations 2001". However the Disability Discrimination Act requires service providers to do only what is reasonable in all the circumstances, and there is no question of unreasonable costs being imposed.

I have recently discussed concerns expressed about the prospective impact on village halls of the Licensing Bill currently before Parliament with the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Dr Howells).

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Convention on the Future of Europe

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on the recommendation of Working Group X of the Convention on the Future of Europe that qualified majority vote should apply to minimum rules for cross-border crimes and crimes against a common policy of the EU. [92122]

Mr. MacShane: The Government support extending QMV where we believe it is in the national interest to do so. We are considering this proposal in that light. In doing so, we shall also take into account the scope of the competence to be given to the EU in this area when draft Treaty provisions are tabled as part of the Convention process.

Capita Group

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the contracts that have been awarded to the Capita Group by his Department. [89968]

Mr. Rammell: The FCO has two current contracts with Capita both covering staff recruitment services. Over their lifetime the total value of these contracts will be in the region of £1.87 million.

Civil Servants

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many civil servants have been employed by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each of its agencies and non-departmental bodies in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92373]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The number of civil servants employed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its agency from 1994 to 2003 is listed below. No civil servants are employed by non-departmental bodies. Board members of non-departmental bodies are paid expenses only.

Number of civil servants employed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its agency from 1994 to 2003

All staff in post figures correct on 1 April	*FCO*	*Wilton Park*
1994[1]	N/A[2]	N/A
1995[1]	5,984	30
1996[1]	5,787	28
1997[1]	5,539	35
1998	5,412	37
1999	5,485	48
2000	5,480	50
2001	5,490	60
2002	5,680	60

[1] Excluding ODA.

[2] The master data file for 1994 is corrupted and is being rebuilt.

Cricket World Cup

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) when *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers and officials in his Department first told the England Cricket Board that in the Government's view it would be better if the England cricket team should not go to Zimbabwe; [92681]

(2) on what dates and in what form, in addition to the oral statement by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in Westminster Hall on 17 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 191WH, *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have publicly expressed the Government's view that it would be best if the England cricket team should not go to Zimbabwe. [92682]

Mr. Straw: FCO officials told representatives of the England and Wales Cricket Board in July 2002 that Ministers might find it difficult to accept that England should play in Zimbabwe, while stressing that this was a decision for the cricket authorities.

On 16 December 2002, the International Cricket Council's security mission to Zimbabwe recommended that the matches scheduled for Zimbabwe should go ahead. In a Westminster Hall debate the following day, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Mike O'Brien, said that in his personal opinion it would be better if the England team did not go to Zimbabwe.

A statement issued by the FCO on 29 December 2002 reaffirmed that while it was not for the Government to tell the cricket authorities what to do, it was the Foreign Secretary's personal view that it would be better if England did not go. Ministers have repeatedly underlined this message since then.

Democracy (Arab States)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to promote democracy in the Arab world. [91867]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We promote democracy and good governance in the Arab world through dialogue with government and civil society, based on equality and respect, in particular for the Islamic principle of consultation (shura). Together with EU partners, we have supported initiatives designed to promote dialogue with Arab countries on human rights and civil society issues.

Entente Cordiale

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the French Government concerning appropriate celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Entente Cordiale; and if he will make a statement. [92591]

Mr. MacShane: There is close bilateral co-operation at official level about the Entente Cordiale centenary celebrations in 2004. Both countries are committed to ensuring that the centenary is a success.

Fair Trade

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what fair trade criteria he sets when deciding upon what suppliers to use. [89912]

Mr. Rammell: FCO purchasing policy is in accordance with the Government's Public Purchasing Consolidated Guidelines, which require the procurement of goods and services to be based on value for money and acquired by competition unless there are convincing reasons to the contrary.

Fair trade products are widely available in our offices. For example almost all tea and coffee provided for official meetings is fair trade and our canteens and restaurants sell fair trade products including coffee, tea, chocolate and muesli bars.

Human Rights

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the United States administration on the guidance given in the publication, "A Human Rights Approach to Prison Management—Handbook for Prison Staff", in respect of United Kingdom citizens held by the United States in the prison at Guantanamo Bay. [90232]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has not specifically discussed the publication "A Human Rights Approach to Prison Management—Handbook for Prison Staff" in the context of Guantanamo with the United States Administration. We have however discussed the welfare and treatment of British detainees held at Guantanamo Bay with the US authorities.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the United Kingdom representatives at the United Nations regarding human rights surveillance by the United Nations in Colombia. [92628]

Mr. Rammell: During my visit to New York from 2–3 December I had detailed discussions with UK and UN officials about the work of the UN Human Rights Office in Bogota.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Colombia regarding *(a)* abuses of human rights and *(b)* persecution of human rights workers. [92632]

Mr. Rammell: My hon. Friend the Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office raised these concerns at the highest level during his visit to Colombia in October. We maintain a regular dialogue with the Colombian Government and make our concerns on these issues clear.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what discussions he has had with the United States regarding abuse of human rights in Colombia; [92633]

(2) what discussions he has had with the United States regarding *(a)* Plan Colombia and *(b)* other aid packages to Colombia. [92629]

Mr. Rammell: We have regular discussions with the US Administration about developments in Colombia, including the peace process, the human rights situation, and the EU aid package. The EU also has a dialogue with the US on these issues. Neither the EU nor the UK are involved in Plan Colombia.

Iraq

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which of the sites listed in the Government's dossier on Iraq and weapons of mass destruction published on 24 September 2002 have been visited by inspectors from the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission; and whether anything of significance was found at such locations. [90179]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We understand from published information from UNMOVIC and the IAEA inspectors have visited all of the sites identified in the UK dossier. They have not reported uncovering any signs of weapons of mass destruction, or programmes for their production at the sites. Given that there had been considerable advance publicity about these sites, it is not entirely surprising that the inspectors failed to uncover any evidence of WMD programme at the sites. Compliance with the terms of UN Security Council Resolution 1441 must be more than simply allowing access to UN weapons inspectors. There must be full co-operation with the inspectors and complete openness about activities at all sites visited, as the Resolution requires.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the UN weapons inspectors have visited *(a)* the Castor Oil Production plant at Fallujah in Iraq, *(b)* the al-Dawrah Foot and Mouth Disease Vaccine Institute and *(c)* the Amariyah Sera and Vaccine Plant at Abu Ghraib in the pursuit of their duties under UN Resolution 1441. [91343]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 16 January 2003]*: Information as published by UNMOVIC and the IAEA indicates that all three sites have been visited by the UN weapons inspectors. Further information is available from their internet websites www.un.org/depts/unmovic and www.iaea.org/worldatom.

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with representatives of the Northern Iraqi Kurdish people on the situation in Iraq. [91685]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Ministers and officials regularly meet representatives of the northern Iraq Kurdish administration as well as other Iraqi oppositionists. Most recently, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister met Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, leaders of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan respectively, in December 2002.

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Government of Syria on relations with Iraq. [91686]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Iraq was one of the issues covered in a meeting the Secretary of State and I had with the Syrian Foreign Minister, Farouk Al-Shara'a, in London on 16 December. Earlier that day the Prime Minister also discussed the issue with Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which countries in the Middle East have made requests to the United Kingdom Government to take military action against Iraq on their behalf or with their support; and if he will make a statement. [91734]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: As the Government have repeatedly made clear, no decision to launch military action against Iraq has been taken, and military action is not inevitable. Our policy is to ensure that Iraq complies with its obligations under relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions.

Israeli Embassy Bombing

Rob Marris: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what relevant warnings from the Israeli Embassy in London were received by his Department in the month before 26 July 1994; and whether the warnings were passed by his Department to the courts which subsequently convicted Jawad Botmeh and Samar Alami. [86271]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Israeli Embassy made a representation for extra security to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 18 July 1994. I am assured that these were forwarded to the Diplomatic Protection Group, who are responsible for Embassy security, for action. I understand that the trial court and the Court of Appeal were aware of these facts.

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if his Department's Ministers have signed PII certificates in relation to the bombings of the Israeli Embassy and Balfour House on 26 July 1994. [86602]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: At the time of the trial in 1996, the then Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, signed a PII certificate in relation to the bombings of the Israeli Embassy and Balfour House.

Khmer Rouge

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how the UK ambassador to the UN voted in relation to the setting up of a tribunal to try former Khmer Rouge leaders; and if he will make a statement. [91069]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We support a UN-supported tribunal to bring to justice those Khmer Rouge leaders most responsible for the atrocities committed during their regime (1975–79). The UK abstained in a vote on the Khmer Rouge Tribunal Resolution at the 2002 General Assembly because of our concerns that Cambodia's commitment to the process appeared in doubt when it failed to co-sponsor the Resolution; and the UN Secretary General had expressed reservations on the Resolution's implementation. These concerns were shared by a number of other states who also abstained. However, we welcome the recent resumption of talks between Cambodian and United Nations negotiators in New York and remain prepared to offer advice and financial support for a UN-supported tribunal.

Mozambique

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many claims for property appropriated without compensation by the Mozambique Government since 1975 have been lodged with his Department; how many such claims have been settled; and what steps are being taken to secure the settlement of those claims still outstanding. [91896]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: 101 claims have been lodged with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) for property appropriated without compensation by the Mozambique Government since 1975. None of these have been settled. The FCO has made many ministerial and diplomatic representations over the years to the Mozambique authorities about the expropriated properties and we will continue to look for opportunities to do so.

Pakistan

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what recent discussions he has had with the Pakistani authorities on its blasphemy laws; [92046]

(2) if he will make a statement on the situation of Christians in Pakistan. [92045]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We are concerned about any human rights violations in Pakistan. We have serious concerns about the situation of Christians, particularly because of the many attacks against them in the past year and the misuse of the blasphemy laws. We remain deeply concerned that the death penalty can be imposed for blasphemy. The UK opposes the death penalty in all circumstances. On 15 July 2002 I raised our concerns directly with the Pakistani high commissioner in London. Together with our EU partners, we also regularly raise our concerns with the Pakistani authorities in Islamabad. We will continue to take every appropriate opportunity to urge Pakistan to pursue laws and practices which foster tolerance and mutual respect and to protect Christians and other religious minorities against discrimination, intimidation and attacks.

Paper Supplies

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs who the suppliers are of his Department's *(a)* paper and *(b)* paper products. [91913]

Mr. Rammell: The FCO has two corporate contracts for its paper requirement. The first with Dixon and Roe for recycled copier paper and second with Premier Paper for higher-grade stationery paper. Other paper products (such as index cards, diaries, planners and post-it notes) are supplied in the main by Banner Supplies Limited (BSL). This company was awarded the supply contract following an EC competitive procurement tender run jointly by the FCO and MOD. On the very rare occasions when BSL are unable to meet our needs then local sources of supply are used.

Press Releases

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many press releases have been issued by his Department in each *(a)* year and *(b)* quarter from 1995–96 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92439]

Mr. Straw: Our records of the number of Foreign and Commonwealth Office press releases issued extend back only as far as May 1997. For the figures since May 1997, I refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave to the hon. Member for Tayside North (Pete Wishart) on 12 June 2002, *Official Report*, columns 1269–70W.

During 2002 the Foreign and Commonwealth Office issued 637 press releases and has issued 25 since 1 January 2003.

Nigeria

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Nigerian authorities on the subject of religious conflict. [92047]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We remain in close touch with the Nigerian authorities on this issue. Officials from the British high commission in Abuja regularly visit the northern states where the majority of religious violence takes place and raise the matter of violence with the governors of the states concerned. In July last year, a British Government team specialising in conflict prevention visited Plateau state to inquire into the causes of violence there and discuss how the British Government might help in preventing further disturbances. The team convened a round-table discussion attended by both Christians and Muslims. We are also supporting the efforts of Coventry Cathedral's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, who have been trying to build trust between the religious communities in Kaduna over the last year. We will continue to monitor the situation closely.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the authorities in Gujarat, India on the subject of violence against Christians. [92048]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have had no discussions with the authorities in Gujarat at ministerial level. Officials have been in contact with the police authorities in Gujarat about the situation there. However, Ministers and officials have raised our concerns with the Government of India on a number of occasions since the violence began in February last year, although not specifically regarding violence against Christians. Most recently, I discussed Gujarat with Mr. I D Swami, the Indian Minister of State for Home Affairs, on 17 October 2002.

We remain very concerned about the welfare of many in Gujarat and continue to urge India to bring to justice the perpetrators of the violence.

Western Sahara

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects to receive the UN Secretary General's proposals on the putative referendum on the future of the Western Sahara; and if he will make a statement. [92325]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: From 14 to 17 January 2003, James Baker, the United Nations Secretary General's Personal Envoy, was engaged in a series of meetings with the parties concerned, discussing ideas to resolve the dispute over Western Sahara. Once he has had the opportunity to consider the response of the parties he will make his proposals public.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made concerning the referendum on the future of Western Sahara to *(a)* the Government of Morocco and *(b)* the United Nations. [92640]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I discussed the future of Western Sahara with Mohammed Benaissa, the Moroccan Minister for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, in November 2002.

Officials maintain regular contact with the United Nations Secretariat country delegations on this subject. It is discussed annually during the General Assembly and more regularly by the Security Council.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of whether Robert Mugabe and his government are guilty of genocide. [91264]

Mr. Rammell: It is unclear whether Mugabe could be considered to have committed genocide.

Much of the intimidation, political violence and withholding of food is directed against the opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change, and the areas where it has support.

Genocide has to be committed against a "national, ethnic, racial or religious group".

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the political situation in Zimbabwe. [91818]

Mr. Rammell: The political, economic and humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate, with recent food riots and the alleged assault of two MDC MPs in police custody.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Theft/Fraud

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money has been lost by her Department and its agencies and non-departmental public bodies through *(a)* fraud and *(b)* theft for each year since 1996–97. [92469]

Dr. Howells: All thefts and frauds are reported for each financial year to the Treasury. Details are no longer available for the period prior to 1998.

(a) There have been no reported instances of fraud.

(b) in 1998 a lap top computer was stolen, estimated value £1,350 and in 2001 computer hardware to a value of £1,823 was lost to theft. In 2002 computer hardware to a value of £3,200 was lost to theft. Non-departmental bodies report direct to the Treasury and details are not held by the Department.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what her estimate is of the cost of theft and fraud to *(a)* her Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies in 2002. [89895]

Dr. Howells: All thefts and frauds are reported for each financial year to the Treasury. In 2002 known losses through theft or fraud have been *(a)* £3,200 (theft of computer equipment) *(b)* £2,800 (thefts). Information for non-departmental public bodies is not held centrally.

Performance-enhancing Drugs

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many tests for erythropoietin and human growth hormones she expects to be conducted by UK Sport in each of the next three years; and if she will make a statement. [91874]

Mr. Caborn: The introduction to sport of testing for the detection of blood plasma expanders such as erythropoietin (EPO) is quite recent. The testing protocols are still being assessed to ensure that they are effective and at present there is not full agreement about the most appropriate testing regime for EPO. However, UK Sport, the national anti-doping organisation, is proposing to include EPO testing at several major events in the UK (both at and prior to the event) over the next 12 months. Previously, UK Sport has undertaken testing for EPO at the 2001 World Half Marathon, the 2002 London Marathon and the Commonwealth Games. UK Sport will continue to monitor the development of an agreed testing procedure.

As part of the 2002 Spending Review this government has allocated additional funds to UK Sport, which amounts to £1.5 million in 2004–05 and £3.2 million in 2005–06. Once testing protocols for EPO are agreed, this increase in funding will enable UK Sport to make a full assessment of the needs for this type of testing, to plan the delivery of testing in those sports that are at greatest risk from EPO abuse and to introduce EPO testing to the UK's on-going anti-doping programme.

There is no approved test for human growth hormones at present. However, UK Sport is regularly in touch with the leading experts on these substances who are based in the UK. Once a test is approved, UK Sport will be able to assess the need and the resources required to introduce human growth hormone testing to the UK's anti-doping programme.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Roger Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many working days have been lost in her Department and due to illness in each year since 1997–98. [92718]

Dr. Howells: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Members for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) and Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 714W.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Assault Sentences

Mr. Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average sentence for assaulting a shop worker was in the last two years. [90261]

Hilary Benn: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Drugs

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of the departmental budget allocated in this financial year for tackling drug crime will be spent on *(a)* staff and *(b)* associated staff costs; and if he will make a statement. [91672]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: All expenditure on tackling drugs contributes to the fight against drug crime.

Of the departmental expenditure specifically targeted on delivering the Drug Strategy, some 13 per cent. will be spent on staffing and associated costs in the current financial year.

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his estimate is of the numbers and percentage of prisoners who will be participating in drug treatment programmes in each of the next 10 years. [90270]

Hilary Benn: The Prison Service is committed to delivering the following Key Performance Targets by March 2004:

5,700 prisoners to enter a rehabilitation programme or therapeutic community annually;

27,000 prisoners to enter Detoxification annually;

25,000 initial Counselling, Assessment, Referral, Advice and Throughcare (CARATs) assessments to be undertaken annually; and

to maintain 28,000 prisoners on voluntary testing compacts.

The Government's recent Spending Review 2002 makes provision to boost treatment in prisons and revised targets are now being negotiated taking into account additional funds. These will define delivery until March 2006. It is, however, too soon to confirm what these revisions will be.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what budget has been allocated for the education campaign due to be launched this spring on drug misuse; what assessment will take place of the effectiveness of the campaign; who will carry out the assessment; when the results will be published; and if he will make a statement. [91673]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The campaign is jointly funded by the Home Office and the Department for Health. £3 million has been allocated in this year and a similar level of funding is anticipated over the following three years. The campaign will be fully evaluated, including a quantitative tracking survey which will be supplemented by qualitative surveys as appropriate. The evaluation contract is being commissioned through COI (Central Office of Information), the Government's communications agency, and we anticipate appointing a research agency in the near future. The tracking survey results will be placed in the Library when they become available.

Under-age Drinking

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on under-age drinking. [90960]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: A number of legislative measures are in place to help tackle under-age drinking. The Licensing (Young Persons) Act 2000 made it an offence for any person to sell alcohol to a person under 18 on licensed premises, or knowingly to allow another person to do so. It also created the offence of buying, or attempting to buy, alcohol on licensed premises on behalf of a person under 18. Measures in the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001 provided the police and local authorities with increased powers to tackle under-age drinking, including for example, measures to make it easier for local authorities to designate areas where restrictions on anti-social drinking will apply. It also created a positive duty on licensees and their staff not to sell alcohol to under 18s.

The Licensing Bill currently in the House of Lords contains proposals to amend the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001 to reinstate the police power to confiscate sealed containers (in addition to opened containers) from young people in public places, where a police officer reasonably believes that the young person is, or has been, or intends to, consume the alcohol in a public place.

In addition, the Home Office, together with other Departments, are working with the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit on their study into tackling the harm associated with alcohol misuse. This has involved a public consultation, run jointly with the Department of Health. The project will pay particular attention to issues such as alcohol-related crime and anti-social behaviour, problems faced by vulnerable groups such as children and what works best in tackling the problems of alcohol misuse.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Aerospace Industry

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what purpose capital spending on aerospace programmes for financial year 2003–04 set out in Annex A, table 3 of his departmental report, Cm 5416 is intended; and if she will make a statement. [91958]

Alan Johnson: The capital spending on aerospace programmes, recorded in the departmental report (CM 5416), relates to the net capital requirement anticipated at the time the report was published taking account of the payments and receipts under the Government's portfolio of Launch Investment contracts. Through Launch Investment partnerships the Government support the design and development of civil aerospace projects in the UK.

Appointments

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry who have been members of the Ethnic Minority Business Advisory Forum since its inception; what *(a)* expenses and *(b)* salary each received; and if she will make a statement. [91666]

Nigel Griffiths: Current members of the Ethnic Minority Business Forum (EMBF) are as follows:

Current members of the EMBF

Ms Yvonne Thompson[1]	Ms Maxine James	Mr. Leslie Fairclough
Mrs. Jaswin MacDonald	Ms Adeeba Malik	Mr. Michael Davis-Bingham
Mr. Tony Sealey	Sir Gulam Noon MBE	Mr. Numan Azmi
Mr. Kam Kothia	Professor Monder Ram	Miss Mai Sim Lei
Mr. Niyazi Enver	Mr. Askar Sheibani	Mrs. Rita Patel
Dr. Haider Imam	Mr. Mohammed Isap	Councillor Mohammed Afzal Khan

[1] Chair

Previous members who have served on the EMBF since it was set up in 2002 but who are no longer members are as follows:

Previous members of the EMBF

Ms Jennifer Craig	Mr. Pravin Kapadia
Mr. Mohammed Nazir	Mr. Jeffery Yap
Mr. Clyde Williams	Mrs. Sukvinder Studds
Lord Amir Bhatia OBE	—

Members are unpaid but are reimbursed for travel and subsistence, according to the rates applicable to senior civil servants.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry who have been members of the Advisory Committee on Business and the Environment since its inception; what expenses or salary each received; and if she will make a statement. [91665]

Mr. Wilson: The members of the Advisory Committee on Business and the Environment (ACBE) are appointed for two-year terms jointly by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. No members of ACBE have ever received a salary; they are however entitled to claim reimbursement for reasonable travel expenses. Since its inception in May 1991 the members, and their organisations at the time of appointment, have been:

Advisory Committee on Business and the Environment (ACBE)

ACBE I, May 1991-May 1993	
Sir John A. Collins	Shell UK Ltd.
Norman Adsetts OBE	Sheffield Insulation Group
Rod Aspinwall	Aspinwall & Company Ltd.
John Baker	National Power
Anthony Bird OBE	The Bird Group of Companies
David Challen	J. Henry Schroder Wagg & Co.
Sir Anthony Cleaver	IMB UK Ltd.
Peter Costain	Costain Group plc
Ian Coull	J. Sainsbury plc
Sue Green	Legal & General Group plc
Christopher Hampson	ICI
Sir Christopher Harding	BET plc
Peter Heath	Cleanaway Ltd.
Nicholas Hood CBE	Wessex Water plc
Robert J. Jones	British Gas plc
David Lyon	Bowater plc
Dorothy Mackenzie	Dragon International
Cameron McLatchie OBE	British Polythene Industries plc
Nigel Palmer OBE	Pittard Garner plc
Dr. Robin C. Paul	Albright & Wilson plc
Paul Rink	Wolstenholme Rink plc
George Simpson	Rover Group
John Spiers	Norsk Hydro UK Ltd.
Derek Wanless	National Westminster Bank
David Yeomans	David Yeomans Associates
ACBE II, November 1993-April 1996	
Derek Wanless	National Westminster Bank
John Baker	National Power
Sir Peter Bonfield CBE	British Telecommunications plc
Cedric Brown	British Gas plc
Ann Burdus	Dawsons International
Rodney Chase	British Petroleum plc
Mike Clasper CBE	Procter & Gamble Europe
David Davies	Johnson Matthey plc
Peter Davies	DHL International Ltd.
Dr. Oliver Doubleday	Bax Farm
Richard Gamble	Royal Insurance plc
Ian Gibson CBE	Nissan Motor Manufacturing (UK) Ltd.
Roger Hewitt	Roundhay Securities Ltd.
Derek Higgs	Prudential Portfolio Managers Ltd.
Ron Huggins	Kimberley-Clarke Ltd.
Sir Gordon Jones	Yorkshire Water plc
Martin Laing CBE	John Laing plc
Robert Lawton	Lawton Farms
David Malpas	Tesco plc
Jean Parker CBE	Vacu-Lug Traction Tyres Ltd.
Dr. Robin C. Paul CBE	Albright & Wilson UK Ltd.
George Phillipson	Redland Aggregates Ltd.
Sir Anthony Pilkington	Pilkington plc
Alan Smith	The Boddington Group
John Spiers CBE	Norsk Kydro UK Ltd.
Geoff Turnball MBE	GT Group
ACBE III, May 1996-September 1999	
David Davies	Past Chairman and Chief Executive, Johnson Matthey plc
Marcus Beresford	GKN plc
Henry Casley	Southern Electric plc
Rodney Chase	British Petroleum plc
Mike Clasper CBE	Procter & Gamble Europe
Vic Cocker	Severn Trent Water plc
Dr. Peter Doyle CBE	Zeneca Group plc
Anthony Greener	Diageo plc
Roy Harrison	Tarmac plc
Derek Higgs	Prudential Portfolio Managers Ltd.
Stephen Lusty	Airmaster Environmental Engineering
Dr. George Matthewson CBE	Royal Bank of Scotland plc[1]
Ian McAllister CBE	Ford Motor Company Ltd.
Sir Brian Moffat OBE	British Steel plc
Stuart Sweetman	Post Office Counters
Roger Taylor	Sun Alliance
Archie Norman	ASDA Group plc[2]
Adrian White	Biwater Ltd.[2]
ACBE IV, November 1999-September 2001	
Dr. Chris Fay	Formerly of Shell UK Ltd.
Gerry Acher	KPMG
Dr. Robin Bidwell	ERM
Vic Cocker	Formerly of Severn Trent
Rodney Chase	BP Amoco
Gordon Edge	Generics Group
Roy Gardner	Centrica
Sheila Hamilton	Teknek Electronics
Roy Harrison	Formerly of Tarmac
Richard Haythornwaite	Blue Circle
Ian McAllister CBE	Ford Motor Company Ltd.
Rob Margetts	Huntsman Corporation
Dee Razdan	Adtranz
Harry Skidmore	Easi-bind International
Ian Stephenson	Johnson Matthey
Stuart Sweetman	Post Office Counters
Tessa Tennant	Formerly of Henderson Investors
Dr. Alan Tillotson	ARENA Network: Wales Environment Centre
ACBE V, November 2001-September 2003	
Dr. Chris Fay OBE	Formerly of Shell UK Ltd.
Gerry Acher CBE	KPMG
Robin Bidwell CBE	ERM
Vic Cocker CBE	WRAP
Roy Gardner	Centrica plc
Richard Haythornthwaite	Invensys
Ian McAllister CBE	Ford Motor Company Ltd.
Dee Razdan	Bombardier Transportation
Harry Skidmore	Easi-Bind International Ltd.
Ian Stephenson	Johnson Matthey
Alan Tillotson	Chief Executive, ARENA Network
Nick Baldwin	Powergen
Tony Bastock OBE	Contract Chemicals
Colin Drummond	Viridor Ltd.
Linda McGoldrick	Marsh-MMC
Chris Mellor	Anglian Water plc
Lynne Meredith	BAA
Sir Nigel Mobbs	Slough Estates plc
Paul Morgan	Roseberry Recycling Ltd.
Peter Morgan	Baltimore Technologies plc
Prof. Ken Vowles OBE	Executive Director International, Scottish Power

[1] Resigned part way through this term.

[2] Resigned part way through term.

Business Insurance Costs

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent assessment she has made of the impact of insurance costs on the competitiveness of British industry. [91841]

Nigel Griffiths: In a recent 'omnibus' survey of SMEs for the Small Business Service, 28 per cent. of the sample said insurance was an issue for them, although only 3 per cent. said it was the greatest obstacle they faced (competition/sales was most frequently cited as the greatest obstacle, by 24 per cent. of firms).

The Government also announced on 12 December 2002 details of a review of the operation of the Employers Liability Compulsory Insurance system, one of the objectives of which is to

> "Assess the scale and nature of the current difficulties being experienced in relation to ELCI, in particular the extent to which these difficulties are likely to be short-term only, repeated in the future or permanent."

Miners' Compensation (Newton-le-Willows)

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many miners in Newton-le-Willows have received *(a)* offers and *(b)* final offer settlements for their white finger and pneumoconiosis claims. [91877]

Mr. Wilson: The figures are as follows:

	COPD	*VWF*
Number of full and final offers made	68	50
Number of full and final settlements	34	37

Note:

Newton-le-Willows was defined using postcode WA12.

Consumer Credit Act

Mr. David: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what plans she has to amend the Consumer Credit Act 1974; [92091]

(2) what the scope is of her review of the Consumer Credit Act 1974; [92092]

(3) when the Government intends to publish its review of the Consumer Credit Act 1974 [92093]

Miss Melanie Johnson: In July 2001 I announced a review of the Consumer Credit Act 1974. As part of this review I have already published consultations to extend the provisions of the Act by removing the financial limit, to make the terms for early settlement of loans fairer to consumers and to enable agreements to be concluded on line.

In August 2002 I published a progress report which can be found along with all other publications related to this review on the DTI website. This can be found on: http://www.dti.gov.uk/ccp/topicsl/consumer_finance.htm

I will be publishing further consultations on reviewing the licensing regime, the provisions on extortionate credit and on simplifying the advertising regulations.

Credit Cards

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will introduce measures to require credit card providers to include a comparative box in their marketing material setting out the key features and costs of the credit cards they provide. [92565]

Miss Melanie Johnson: A review of the Consumer Credit Act was announced in July 2001 and as part of this review I will be publishing a consultation on the simplification of the credit advertising regulations.

In preparation for that, my Department is in regular discussion with the credit industry and consumer bodies on the calculation and advertising of APRs on credit cards, and the provision for other key information.

Debt Management Companies

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what measures she plans to introduce to ensure good practice among debt management companies; [91833]

(2) what assessment she has made of the Office of Fair Trade's guidance for debt management companies and the level of protection they offer to consumers. [91834]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Companies providing debt management services, whether they charge or not, are required to be licensed under the Consumer Credit Act 1974. Under the Act the Director General of Fair Trading (DGFT) has a duty to ensure applicants for a licence are fit to engage in the activities for which they are licensed.

In December 2001 the DGFT issued guidelines to debt management companies to ensure they deal fairly and openly with consumers—the Debt Management Guidance (December 2001). A copy of the guidance can be found in the Libraries of the House.

The guidance requires that companies offering debt management services should comply with the best practice identified in it. Where the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) has evidence of practices breaching the guidelines the DGFT can take action to refuse or revoke the consumer credit licence, or take such other action as appropriate under other legislation (e.g. Unfair Terms in Consumer Contracts Regulations etc).

I am satisfied that the guidance ensures consumers a good level of protection; and I am looking forward with interest to the results of the Compliance Review which the OFT is currently undertaking.

Electricity Industry

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions she has had with Ofgem about modification P95A, P100, P102, P103 and P114 to the Balancing and Settlement Code; and if she will make a statement. [92353]

Mr. Wilson: The Governance Procedures for the industry Codes are under the locus of the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets, Ofgem, as the independent regulator. I have not had discussions with the authority regarding these modification proposals.

Modifications P102, P103 and P114 to the Balancing and Settlement Code (BSC) are currently in the assessment phase. Following the assessment phase, the BSC panel will make a recommendation to the authority on whether the modifications better achieve the BSC objectives. At the BSC Panel meeting on the 16th January 2003, the Panel rejected modification P95A and recommended that modification P100 be made. The authority will now make a final decision on their implementation on the basis of the BSC objectives and their wider statutory obligations.

Post Boxes

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on the future of red post boxes in urban areas. [92179]

Mr. Timms: These are matters that fall within the day to day responsibility of Royal Mail and I have therefore asked the Chairman to reply direct to the hon. Member.

New Cars

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how she intends to monitor the effect of the new EU block exemption regulations for the sale of motor vehicles that come into force on 1 October 2003. [92653]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* The Department is in regular contact with businesses and representatives of the car retailing and servicing sector, and organisations representing the consumer interests, and will be working to ensure that if there is evidence that the new block exemption is being infringed, that evidence is brought to the attention of the relevant enforcement authority.

The regulation places responsibility on the Commission to monitor its operation on a regular basis, and to report in May 2008. From May 2004, the regulation will also be enforced in the UK by the Office of Fair Trading under the new modernisation of enforcement of European Union Competition rules.

Post Office Card Account

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what consultation took place with the Department for Work and Pensions before the delay imposed on the issue of personal invitation documents for the post office card account. [91138]

Mr. Timms: Ministers and officials of the Department of Trade and Industry are working closely with colleagues from the Department for Work and Pensions on all aspects of the migration of benefits and pensions to ACT and the introduction of universal banking services.

Postcodes

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what use her Department and its agencies make of postcode areas for *(a)* the collection and publication of data, *(b)* devising formulae for the distribution of grants and awards and *(c)* the delivery of services; and when such usages were last reviewed. [87740]

Ms Hewitt: This information is not held centrally by the Department and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. I have asked the relevant agencies to respond to my hon. Friend.

Letter from A. Brimelow to Mr. Paul Truswell:

HOUSE OF COMMONS PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS: 2002/563

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question 563 tabled on 13 December 2002, about the use made of postcode areas for *(a)* the collection and publication of data, *(b)* devising formulae for distribution of grants and awards, *(c)* the delivery of services; and when such usages were last reviewed.

The Patent Office publish an annual facts and figures booklet which includes a breakdown of the number of patent, trade mark and design applications filed and granted or registered by region based upon postcode data provided by the applicant. The Patent Office Search and Advisory Service also uses postcode analysis on an ad-hoc basis to answer general Intellectual Property enquiries made under that service. The last review was in 2001.

We do not distribute grants or awards to our customers.

Letter from Ms R. J. R. Anderson to Mr. Paul Truswell:

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTION ON THE USE OF POST CODES

As Chief Executive off the Radiocommunications Agency, I have been requested to reply directly to your question of 13 December 2002 to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

The Radiocommunications Agency does not use post codes for *(a)* collecting or publicising data, other than for collecting customer addresses; or *(b)* devising formulae for the distribution of grants or awards. For *(c)* the delivery of services, the Agency only uses post codes as a customer search aid and for defining which of its national or regional offices has responsibility for particular customers.

Letter from Dr. R. Heathcote to Mr. Paul Truswell, dated January 2003:

RE: Review and use of postcode information for the data processing, distribution and delivery of services.

You tabled a Parliamentary Question on 13 December 2002 to Patricia Hewitt, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, concerning what use was made of post code areas for *(a)* the collection and publication of data, *(b)* devising of grants and awards and *(c)* the delivery of services; and when such usages were last reviewed. I have been asked to reply in respect of the Employment Tribunals Service (ETS), which is an executive agency of the DTI, providing the administrative support for the Employment Tribunals and the Employment Appeal Tribunal (EAT) in Great Britain.

The ETS does not use postcode areas for the collection and publication of data. The agency's work does not involve devising formulae for the distribution of awards and grants, although the tribunals do make awards of compensation on the cases which they deal with, these are not determined according to postcode.

Prior to 1996, each office had a regional boundary which was defined, with some exceptions, along county borders. These borders were realigned along postcode area boundaries as a result of the de-centralisation of the applications process. This meant that applications were sent direct to the appropriate office, according to the post code of the place where the applicant either worked or applied to work. Since then, changes to the boundaries between offices have been made to accommodate changing workloads particularly the opening of a new tribunal office at Watford in July 2000, whose regional area was carved out of neighbouring regions by transferring post code areas to it.

Employment Tribunals in Scotland have retained their centralised system with all applications being sent to the Glasgow office, with cases then being generally assigned to a local office or hearing centre on the basis of the postcode of the applicant's home address. EAT has only two offices (London and Edinburgh) covering England & Wales and Scotland respectively, dealing with appeals split along the border between the two countries, not according to postcodes.

The agency is presently undertaking a review of the distribution of workloads with regards to the geographical match between the origin of tribunal cases and the present spread of its 33 offices and hearing centre around the country. This review was initiated as a result of a recommendation contained within 'Moving Forward: the report of the Employment Tribunal System Taskforce'. A full copy of the taskforce report can be accessed at www.employmenttribunalsystemtaskforce.gov.uk The work that is currently being done in support of the analysis of postcodes will also consider public transport links to our existing network of offices.

Letter from D. Flynn to Mr. Paul Truswell, dated 20 January 2003:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to your question (2002/563) as to what use The Insolvency Service makes of postcode areas for *(a)* the collection and publication of data, *(b)* devising formulae for the distribution of grants and awards and *(c)* the delivery of services; and when such usages were last reviewed.

The Insolvency Service has made no use of postcode areas for the collection and publication of data, devising formulae for the distribution of grant and awards or the delivery of services.

Letter from Dr. J. W. Llewellyn to Mr. Paul Truswell:

The Secretary for Trade and Industry has asked me to reply on behalf of the National Weights and Measures Laboratory (NWML) to your question on what use her Department and its Agencies makes of postcode areas for *(a)* the collection and publication of data, *(b)* devising formulae for the distribution of grants and awards and *(c)* the delivery of services; and when such usages were last reviewed.

NWML does not use postcodes in any of the ways described.

Letter from C. Clancy to Mr. Paul Truswell:

I am responding on behalf of Companies House, Executive Agency to your Parliamentary Question on the Department of Trade and Industry's policy on the usage of postal code areas.

Companies House does not make use of postcodes in the collection and publication of data or in devising formulae for the distribution of grants and awards.

In the delivery of services, postcodes are used to target invitations for company directors and their professional advisers to attend regionally held seminars on directors' legal responsibilities under the Companies Act. This was last reviewed in February 2002. In the last twelve months they have also been used to target invitations to customers to take part in regionally based focus groups, where they can give face to face feedback on Companies House services and its relations with customers. It will be reviewed in April 2003.

Rural Businesses (Broadband)

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what financial assistance her Department is providing to help small businesses in rural areas access broadband services. [91738]

Mr. Timms: I refer the right hon. Member to the reply that I gave him on 9 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 65W.

Textile Industry

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assistance she is giving to the textile industry in East Lancashire; and if she will make a statement. [91184]

Mr. Timms: Since 1997 in East Lancashire the Small Business Service (SBS) have made seven awards totalling £167,000 to textile firms under the Enterprise Grant Scheme. SBS have also established an ethnic apparel support group to help companies market their products and assist with their production capacity. The North West Development Agency is working with North West "TexNet", the Cluster Management Group for the textile industry, to identify further measures to sustain the industry and develop the cluster. NWDA will consider individual projects as they are brought forward and action as necessary.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

A-Levels

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many pupils and students sat A-levels in *(a)* French, *(b)* German, *(c)* Spanish and *(d)* Russian in each year since 1998. [91316]

Mr. Miliband: The number of pupils and students who were entered for A-levels in French, German, Spanish and Russian in years 1998 to 2001 are:

	Age	
	17	*All ages*
1998		
French	17,994	20,622
German	8,088	9,316
Spanish	3,969	5,068
Russian	303	534
1999		
French	16,163	18,662
German	7,663	8,916
Spanish	4,108	5,233
Russian	293	541
2000		
French	13,830	16,049
German	6,706	7,930
Spanish	3,933	5,084
Russian	314	538
2001		
French	14,149	16,076
German	6,849	7,901
Spanish	4,030	5,046
Russian	285	498

Education Maintenance Allowance

Mr. Flook: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills when 16 to 18-year-olds in Somerset will become entitled to Education Maintenance Allowance. [92180]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The national Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) scheme will be available from September 2004 across the whole of England.

In non-pilot areas such as Somerset, the first tranche of students who will be eligible to apply from that date will be those students who complete their compulsory education in the 2003–04 academic year. In existing pilot areas, EMA will continue to be available to all students age 16–19 (and in a small number of cases, age 20) in post-compulsory further education.

Free Nursery Places

Mr. Wood: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what progress has been made towards meeting the 2004 target for having free nursery places available to all three year-olds; and for what reason such places are not yet available to all three year-olds. [89554]

Maria Eagle: Currently around 70 per cent. of three year-olds are able to access a free, part-time early education place. The 65 most deprived local education authorities already offer a free place to all three year-olds whose parents want one. The remaining authorities are responsible for devising eligibility criteria for the distribution of free places in their area according to social need.

On 11 December 2002, Charles Clarke announced that all three year-olds will be entitled to receive a free place from April 2004. This is six months earlier than originally planned.

It has been necessary to increase gradually the number of free early education places available for three year-olds in order to allow authorities time to build up the amount of provision in their areas.

GCSEs

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many pupils sat GCSEs in *(a)* French, *(b)* German, *(c)* Spanish and *(d)* Russian in each year since 1997. [91317]

Mr. Miliband: The number of pupils entered for GCSEs in French, German, Spanish and Russian in each of the five years since 1997 is as follows.

	Age	
	15	*All ages*
1997		
French	299,868	313,013
German	126,170	130,687
Spanish	33,594	40,845
Russian	1,308	1,895
1998		
French	301,253	312,358
German	125,940	129,674
Spanish	37,987	44,575
Russian	1,167	1,705
1999		
French	306,061	316,742
German	128,491	132,027
Spanish	38,705	45,113
Russian	1,113	1,655
2000		
French	308,032	318,889
German	126,176	129,696
Spanish	41,400	47,935
Russian	1,230	1,758
2001		
French	315,656	326,065
German	129,098	132,178
Spanish	44,692	50,944
Russian	1,225	1,801

IT Equipment

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will make a statement on progress in providing teachers in Broxtowe with a laptop computer with internet access. [92004]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In May 2002 Nottinghamshire LEA, responsible for Broxtowe, was allocated a total of £867,926 and latest records show the LEA has spent £828,360, purchasing 936 laptop computers. To date LEAs have been given £60 million to purchase laptop computers on behalf of their schools. So far over 60,000 laptops have been purchased.

I announced on 9 January 2003 a £195 million extension of the Laptops for Teachers initiative to April 2006, making the total amount of funding £300 million. This will result in two thirds of all eligible teachers benefiting from personal access to a laptop computer over the four year period of this initiative. LEAs, including Nottinghamshire will receive a further allocation of Laptops for Teachers funding in May this year.

Leadership Incentive Grant

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assessment he has made of the administrative cost of the *(a)* introduction and *(b)* implementation of the leadership incentive grants; and if he will make a statement. [91525]

Mr. Miliband *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* Our current estimate of costs for administering the Leadership Incentive Grant process this financial year is approximately £400,000 to cover the cost of promoting collaborative working between schools.

For the next financial year we have provisionally set aside £1 million from the Targeted Improvement Grant to fund local activity in support of national funding of £175 million to schools.

Rights of the Child

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, pursuant to his answer of 19 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 976W, when he received a copy of the report on the United Kingdom by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. [90138]

Mr. Denham: The report was published on 4 October 2002, and I received a copy that day. The report was circulated to relevant Whitehall Departments on the same day.

Teachers

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the average number of hours worked per week was for *(a)* teachers, *(b)* deputy head teachers, *(c)* head teachers and *(d)* all teachers in each year since 1997. [91522]

Mr. Miliband *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* The information is as follows:

(i) The only year between 1997–2002 for which information is available is 2000.

Average number hours worked per week

Grade	*Hours/week*
Heads	59.1
Deputy heads	56.6
Classroom teachers	51.8
All teachers	52.8

Source:
2000 OME Teacher's Workload Diary Survey

(ii) On 15 January, Government, employers and school work force unions signed a national Agreement that will raise standards and tackle work load by removing unnecessary bureaucracy and by transferring some of the administrative, clerical and managerial work currently undertaken by teachers to trained support staff, allowing teachers to focus on their core professional responsibilities.

Schools will be supported by additional resources that will enable them to employ at least 10,000 more teachers and at least 50,000 more support staff during this Parliament.

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what proportion of the working time of *(a)* teachers, *(b)* deputy head teachers, *(c)* head teachers and *(d)* all teachers was spent on (i) teaching, (ii) other teaching related tasks and (iii) non-teaching related tasks in each year since 1997. [91523]

Mr. Miliband *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* The information is as follows:

(i) The only year between 1997–2002 for which information is available is 2000.

Proportion of time spent on activities by grade as at March 2000

Percentage

	Heads	*Deputy Heads*	*Classroom*	*All Teachers*
Teaching	5	24	34	30
Teaching related activity[1]	17	27	30	28
Non-teaching related activity[2]	78	49	36	42
Total	100	100	100	100

[1] Teaching related activities include time spent for lesson preparation and planning, marking pupils work, writing reports, and reporting to parents and families. It also includes time spent on training.

[2] Non-Teaching related activities include non-teaching contact, administrative work, staff management and other activities.

Source:

2000 OME Teacher's Workload Diary Survey

(ii) On 15 January, Government, employers and school workforce unions signed a national agreement that will raise standards and tackle workload by removing unnecessary bureaucracy and by transferring some of the administrative, clerical and managerial work currently undertaken by teachers to trained support staff, allowing teachers to focus on their core professional responsibilities.

Schools will be supported by additional resources that will enable them to employ at least 10,000 more teachers and at least 50,000 more support staff during this Parliament.

SCOTLAND

Civil Servants

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many civil servants have been employed by *(a)* her Department and *(b)* each of its agencies and non-departmental bodies in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if she will make a statement. [92406]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given today by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office.

Departmental Running Costs

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what the running costs were of the Department in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* the most recent year for which figures are available. [90752]

Mrs. Liddell: The Scotland Office was established in its present form on 1 July 1999.

Details of the Department's administration costs are set out in the Departmental Reports and Resource Accounts of the Department.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what her estimate is of the number of permanent staff in the Scotland Office in each year from 1999–2000 to 2003–04; if she will give the reasons underlying any change in staff numbers; and if she will make a statement. [90377]

Mrs. Liddell: Details of staff numbers from 1999–2000 to 2003–04 plans are set out in the Scotland Office Departmental Report 2002.

The Department was established in its current form on 1 July 1999. Since that time the Department has sought to recruit the staff it requires to meet its objectives and to carry out efficiently and effectively the work it is asked to do.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many full time equivalent staff there were at the Scotland Office in each year since 1999–2000. [90446]

Mrs. Liddell: Details of staff numbers since 1999–2000 are set out in the Scotland Office Departmental Report for 2002.

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland pursuant to her answer of 19 December 2002, to the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), *Official Report,* column 915W, what the Scotland Office's *(a)* current staffing level and *(b)* full staffing level is; and when she expects her Department to reach its optimum staffing level. [91028]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* My Department, which includes the Office of the Advocate General for Scotland, currently has 122 staff in post and we are planning to reach 130 staff during the course of 2003–04. Staffing levels are reviewed annually.

External Consultants

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what the total cost to her Department was of the use of external consultants in 2002. [90501]

Mrs. Liddell: In 2001–02, my Department spent £17,484 on external consultants. Details for the current financial year are not yet available.

Theft/Fraud

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much money has been lost by her Department and its agencies and non-departmental public bodies through *(a)* fraud and *(b)* theft in each year since 1996–97. [92485]

Mrs. Liddell: The Scotland Office was established in its present form on 1 July 1999.

The cost of theft to the department in 1999–2000 was estimated at £2,200. Since then, no cases of theft or fraud have been reported to the department.

Heritage Assets

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what sales of heritage assets and antique assets have been made by her Department since May 1997; if she will list other assets; and if she will estimate the total sales proceeds. [92408]

Mrs. Liddell: The Scotland Office was established in its present form on 1 July 1999. Since that date, the department has not sold any assets.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Adoption and Children Bill

Vera Baird: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, when the new draft court rules to support the Adoption and Children Bill will be made available for consultation. [91839]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The Adoption and Children Bill received Royal Assent on 7 November 2002. The Adoption and Children Act was published on 9 December 2002 with explanatory notes following in early January 2003.

I, and Ministerial colleagues here and in Department of Health, are considering plans for implementation of the Act.

Full implementation is anticipated by the end of 2004. However, some elements such as the definition of "harm" in relation to domestic violence are expected sooner. We expect to consult on an amendment to the Family Proceedings Rules 1991 (DomesticViolence) this spring.

Annual Report

Norman Lamb: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, how much producing the Lord Chancellor's Department's latest annual report cost; how many copies were printed; how many copies of it were sold at its cover price; to whom copies of the report have been provided free of charge; and how many copies were provided free of charge. [90886]

Ms Rosie Winterton: My Department was charged a total of £48,710.50 by The Stationery Office Ltd. (TSO) for publication of our latest annual report. The total number of copies of the report printed, as opposed to those supplied to my Department under the terms of the contract, is a matter of commercial judgment by TSO and not disclosed to us. I understand 362 copies of the report have been sold at the cover price of £23.50. My Department was supplied with a further 1,250 copies under the terms of our contract with TSO. Approximately 1,150 of these were distributed internally (including to our agencies and sister Departments) with the balance being used for promotional purposes. The report is also available to view on my Department's website (www.lcd.gov.uk/ deprep0102/index.htm).

Royal Appointments

Margaret Moran: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will list the *(a)* roles and ranks, *(b)* purpose and *(c)* cost of royal appointments in (i) the UK and (ii) Bedfordshire. [91083]

The Prime Minister: I am replying to this question as it relates to matters for which I am responsible.

The Lord-Lieutenant of a county or metropolitan area is the permanent local representative of The Monarch. The duties of the post include attending on Royalty during official visits to the county, performing certain duties in connection with the armed forces, and making presentations of honours and awards on behalf of The Monarch. Lord-Lieutenants also play an important role in supporting and encouraging voluntary and community activities in their areas. In the shire counties the Lord-Lieutenant has leadership of the local magistracy as Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Justices of the Peace, and in carrying out the duties of the Keeper of the Rolls. There are 47 Lord-Lieutenants in England. The expenditure of Lord-Lieutenants for the financial year 2001–02 was approximately £758,700. The Lord-Lieutenant for Bedfordshire did not submit a claim for 2001–02.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Construction Industry Training Levy

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has to equalise the company wage bill threshold level at which the construction industry training levy becomes payable. [91851]

Jane Kennedy: The Construction Industry Training Board is funded through a statutory levy which is based on the payroll costs of companies within its scope. Small companies are exempted from the levy. The level of exemption from payment of levy is included in the annual Levy Order, made by the Department on advice from the Board.

The levy threshold level, which is currently set at £15,000 payroll cost, applies equally to all companies within the scope of the Construction Industry Training Board. The levy threshold in Great Britain, which is set at £61,000, reflects the respective Boards.

The Department has no plans to alter this threshold, but will continue to review the situation with the CITB when proposals for a Levy Order come forward.

Corporal Punishment

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the Office of Law Reform will complete its analysis of the responses to the public consultation on 'Physical Punishment in the Home–Thinking About the Issues, Looking at the Evidence'. [90456]

Mr. Pearson: The consultation process, the largest the Office of Law Reform has undertaken, drew a wealth of responses. In all, some 1,700 people expressed their views in one way or another. Analysing these has taken some time, but the Office is now in the later stages of preparing a report on the consultation process containing this analysis.

Exam Results

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of children in *(a)* Northern Ireland and *(b)* England achieved A*-C grades at GCSE in all three core subjects in each of the last five years. [91577]

Jane Kennedy: The information is as follows:

(a) Figures for 2001–02 are not yet available.

The percentages of all 15-year-olds achieving grades A*-C in all three core subjects (English, Mathematics and a Science) were as follows:

	Percentage
1996–97	41
1997–98	39
1998–99	41
1999–2000	42
2000–01	42

(b) The Department for Education and Skills will provide this information.

Killyleagh High School

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the plans for the former Killyleagh High School premises. [91927]

Jane Kennedy: I understand that no formal decision has yet been taken on the future use of the former Killyleagh High School premises, although the matter is to be considered shortly by the South Eastern Education and Library Board.

Landfill Directive

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what financial assistance will be given to district councils to assist with the costs of implementing EC Directive 1999/31 on the landfill of waste. [92276]

Angela Smith: Waste Management Plans prepared by district councils in Northern Ireland are a key element of the Government's strategy for implementing EU Directive 1999/31 on landfill of waste. These plans will provide a network of facilities for the segregation, reprocessing and treatment of waste, resulting in its diversion from landfill.

To facilitate the preparation and implementation of their plans, the Department of the Environment provided district councils with grant aid of £2 million in 2001–02 and £3.6 million in 2002–03. An indicative sum of £6.4 million has been set aside for 2003–04 for this purpose. As a result of the 2002 Spending Review, it is expected that this level of grant aid will at least be maintained up to 2005–06.

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what penalties will be placed on local authorities and site operators who do not comply with the EC Directive 1999/31 on the landfill of waste. [92279]

Angela Smith: The Landfill Directive contains two separate components—targets for reducing the amount of biodegradable municipal waste (BMW) going to landfill and the introduction of detailed regulatory requirements in relation to the design, operation and aftercare of sites.

The Waste and Emissions Trading Bill, currently before Parliament, sets the framework for the introduction of local authority landfill allowances schemes in each of the four territories of the UK to ensure that the BMW targets are met. The Bill permits allocating authorities (in the case of NI, the Department of the Environment) to make regulations setting the level of penalties and supplementary penalties where a local authority has breached its landfill allowance or has failed to maintain prescribed records, make prescribed returns etc. Penalties are automatic, but allocating authorities may extend the time for paying any penalty (including interest) or relieve a local authority, whether or not subject to conditions, from liability to the whole or any part of a penalty (including interest).

The Bill also provides for penalties to be imposed on landfill site operators who fail to maintain prescribed records, make prescribed returns etc The penalties are stated on the face of the Bill and include fines and/or imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years.

In Northern Ireland, a consultation exercise on options for meeting the BMW targets has just ended and an analysis of responses is under way. If this shows support for a system of district council landfill allowances, the provisions of the Bill in relation to penalties will be applied.

The Department of the Environment proposes to consult on the regulatory requirements of the Directive, including penalties, later this year.

Planning Applications

Mr. Peter Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many planning applications submitted to the Department have not been determined after *(a)* three, *(b)* six, *(c)* nine and *(d)* 12 months; and for those over 12 months, how long it is since they were first submitted. [91366]

Angela Smith: The total number of planning applications received by the Planning Service has increased from 19,771 in 1997–98 to 24,504 in 2001–02, an increase of 24 per cent. within five years. The result of this continuing increase has been an increase in the numbers of live applications in the system. At 31 December 2002, there were 11,361 live applications.

Planning Service is committed to reducing the numbers of live applications, and in order to deal with this significant increase in workload, additional staff have been put in place and further staff are currently being recruited.

Of the 11,361 live applications at 31 December 2002:

5,305 were submitted three months or less ago;

2,203 were submitted between three and six months ago;

1,239 were submitted between six and nine months ago;

637 were submitted between nine and 12 months ago; and

1,977 were submitted over a year ago.

Aggregating these figures to deal with the specific questions:

6,056 applications have not been determined after three months;

3,853 applications have not been determined after six months;

2,614 applications have not been determined after nine months; and

1,977 applications have not been determined after 12 months.

Of the 1,977 applications older than 12 months:

375 were submitted between 12 and 15 months ago;

224 were submitted between 15 and 18 months ago;

216 were submitted between 18 and 21 months ago; and

177 were submitted between 21 and 24 months ago, with the remaining 985 older than two years.

The number of cases live for longer than two years include major applications being processed under the Article 31 procedure and other contentious cases. Article 31 cases include applications which have led to public inquiries or hearings before the Planning Appeals Commission, and applications which require the submission of an Environmental Statement. The processing of other contentious cases is often extended where Planning Service is involved in protracted discussions with applicants, local communities and elected representatives in order to seek acceptable solutions to matters causing local concern.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Work-related Illness

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what estimate he has made of the number of days lost from the UK workplace due to stress; and if he will make a statement. [88243]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Estimates from the 2001–02 survey of Self-reported Work-related Illness indicate that self-reported work-related stress, depression or anxiety account for thirteen and a half million reported lost working days per year in Britain.

The statistics highlight the importance of tackling work-related stress, which the Health and Safety Commission has recognised by developing a strategy and priority programme of work. So far the Commission has published guidance to help managers and employers undertake a stress risk assessment; commissioned and published research about the evidence linking different factors in the workplace with stress; commissioned research on best practice interventions in dealing with work-related stress (which will be published in the spring); launched new web pages to provide a forum for sharing best practice; and begun the important job of developing standards of good management practice. These standards will provide the yardstick by which organisations can gauge their performance in tackling a range of key stressors.

Adviser Discretion Fund

Sir. Archy Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many payments have been made yearly from the Adviser Discretion Fund; and how many of these payments have gone to help pay for advance childcare deposits or other childcare costs in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* the UK. [90764]

Maria Eagle: Information on the number of awards made through the adviser discretion fund since its introduction in July 2001 is in the table.

Total number of Adviser Discretion Fund awards

	Scotland	*GB*[1]
2001 (from July)	15,205	49,819
2002 (up to November)	19,441	173,778
Total	34,646	223,597

Information on all the goods and services the Adviser Discretion Fund has helped to purchase is not collected centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, the following table gives information under broad headings on the type of goods and services purchased using the Adviser Discretion Fund by people who have started work after receiving an award from the fund.

Type of goods or services purchased	*Proportion of the number of awards provided to people who have moved into work (percentage)*[2]
Help with clothes purchase	52
Help with travel fares	20
Help buying tools	6
Help with training/certificates	2
Help overcoming other barriers	20

[1] Employment services in Northern Ireland are the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Office.

[2] This information cannot be broken down by country.

Source:

Jobcentre Plus

Departmental Expenditure (Newsprint)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the total expenditure of his Department was on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in 2002. [90516]

Mr. McCartney: The Department's total expenditure on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in 2002 was approximately £173,000. Subscriptions may also be taken at local level and information about these is not collected centrally.

Employment Zone Model

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions pursuant to his oral answer to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Linda Gilroy), of 13 January, *Official Report*, column 393, on the economically inactive, if he will make a statement on the Government's plans for the future of the employment zone model. [91615]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The performance of the 15 employment zones is encouraging, and they have already helped over 29,000 long-term unemployed people from deprived areas move into work.

From October 2003 we are extending the employment zone approach to lone parents and New Deal returners in existing zone areas. We want to see how well the employment zone approach translates to this wider client group. From April 2004 we also intend to test a multiple provider approach in some employment zone areas.

We are continuing to look at the lessons we can learn from employment zones and how these can be put to use in the longer term.

Jobs Transition Service

John Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on the work of the Jobs Transition Service. [89050]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: We have introduced the Rapid Response Service, formerly known as the Job Transition Service, to provide support for people affected by redundancies and help them make the transition into sustainable new jobs. The nature of the help provided by the service is tailored to the needs of the individuals, the employer and the local labour market. This can include offering information, advice and guidance to those affected, help with jobsearch, facilitating retraining where necessary or developing customised retraining programmes. People affected by redundancy can also have early access to Jobcentre Plus programmes such as the New Deals and Work Based Learning for Adults.

In Scotland the Rapid Response Service builds on and complements the work already undertaken by the Scottish Executive's Partnership Action for Continued Employment (PACE) initiative. Training provision for individuals involved in a large scale redundancy in Scotland is normally met by PACE partnerships or Training for Work (TfW). However, the Rapid Response Service can provide specific, job-focused training in cases where TfW or PACE partnership support is not appropriate. The Rapid Response Service also provides its full range of non-training services in cases of major redundancies in Scotland.

By December 2002, the Rapid Response Service nationally had provided support to over 200 companies and made its services available to over 67,000 people facing redundancy.

New Deal

Mr. Clelland: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people in *(a)* Newcastle upon Tyne and *(b)* Gateshead have been assisted by the New Deal. [89530]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The available information is in the table.

Total number of programme participants[1]

	Newcastle upon Tyne[2]	*Gateshead*[2]
New Deal for Young People (from January 1998)	7,930	4,570
New Deal 25 plus (from July 1998)	6,560	3,260
New Deal for Lone Parents (from July 1998)	1,710	1,140
New Deal 50 plus (Employment Credit claims) (from April 2000)	440	370

[1] Up to end of September 2002.

[2] Local authority areas.

Note:

The information is not available at local authority level for the New Deal for Disabled People and New Deal for Partners.

Source:

New Evaluation Database.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) pursuant to his answer of 19 December 2002, refs 88095, 88096 and 88138, on the New Deal Environment Task Force, if he will list the amount of the under spend in each financial year to 2002–03; [89862]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 19 December 2002, refs 88095, 88096 and 88138, on the New Deal Environment Task Force, if he will list the other welfare to work initiatives that have been supported by the under spend against the original assumptions for the Environment Task Force; and if he will list the *(a)* additional amount spent as a result of the under spend on the Environment Task Force, *(b)* planned total spending and *(c)* actual expenditure in each financial year to 2002–03 for each such initiative. [89870]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Information on under spends and their re-allocation is not available for individual New Deal Options, because while records are kept on the annual expenditure on each New Deal for Young People Option, annual budgets are not allocated on that basis. The purpose of the New Deal is to help young people move into work by meeting their individual needs. Therefore, an overall budget is allocated to Jobcentre Plus districts, which is then used as required to meet this objective.

My answer of 19 December to the hon. Member, *Official Report*, column 1031W, refers to expenditure and under spends across the New Deal for Young People which have been re-allocated to support other welfare to work initiatives. For example, at the time of the 1998 Budget, it was estimated that £2.620 billion Windfall Tax would be spent on the New Deal for Young People by March 2002. Actual expenditure on the programme during this period was £1.190 billion, freeing funds for new initiatives such as Action Teams for Jobs and the permanent establishment of the New Deals.

Information on the allocation of the Windfall Tax to welfare to work initiatives is in the pre-Budget report published in November 2002. This is available in the Library.

Ms Christine Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many young people in the City of Chester have been helped into jobs by the New Deal. [90281]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Up to the end of September 2002, the New Deal had helped nearly 400,000 young people into work, including 374 in the City of Chester.

Pension Income

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the average pension income was in each year since 1997. [93077]

Mr. McCartney: The average incomes of pensioners is in the table.

£ per week

	Average pension income		
Year	*All pensioner units*	*Pensioner couples*	*Single pensioners*
1997–98	196	280	143
1998–99	201	285	148
1999–2000	209	291	155
2000–01	215	301	160

Notes:

1. All incomes are £ per week and at 2000–01 prices.
2. The average incomes quoted are net incomes before housing costs, which measures the net incomes before a reduction for the cost of housing.
3. Pensioners are defined as: single (no-cohabiting) people over state pension age (65 for men and 60 for women) and couples (married or cohabiting) where the man, who is defined as the head of the couple is aged 65 and over.

Source:

Pensioners' Incomes Series, 2000/1

Sickness Absence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many days were lost due to sickness absence in the Department in 2002. [90535]

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many working days were lost due to illness in his Department in *(a)* 2002 and *(b)* each of the preceding five years. [90742]

Mr. McCartney: The information is not available in the form requested. Statistics for the DWP are available from April 2002.

The number of days lost due to sickness absence between 1 April 2002 and 30 November 2002 is 1,113,333.9 days. Using this figure, the average number of working days lost due to sickness for this period equates to 12.2 days per person.

Statutory Instruments

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many statutory instruments were issued by the Department of Social Security in each calendar year since its formation; and how many have been issued by his Department since June 2001. [89848]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Year	*Statutory instruments issued*
Department for Social Security	
25 July 1988 to 31 December 1988	26
1989	61
1990	83
1991	83
1992	85
1993	73
1994	72
1995	80
1996	145
1997	90
1998	61
1999	90
2000	110
1 January 2001 to 7 June 2001	70
Department for Work and Pensions	
8 June 2001 to 31 December 2001	38
1 January 2002 to 31 December 2002	98

Thames Gateway

Jon Cruddas: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what assessment he has made of the extra resources required to support the growth and development of new communities in the Thames Gateway area; what discussions he has had with other Government Departments in relation to supporting the growth and development of new communities in the Thames Gateway; and what resources he has allocated to support the growth and development of new communities in the Thames Gateway. [90426]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: We are supporting deprived areas in the Thames Gateway through a variety of initiatives designed to help people furthest from the labour market find and keep jobs. These include the new deal for communities, action teams for jobs, employment zones, and the minority ethnic outreach service. The costs of this work are met from the overall budgets for these programmes.

We are working closely with partners in these Thames Gateway areas to ensure that the problems faced by people in the poorest communities are tackled in an intensive and co-ordinated way.

Winter Fuel Payment

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what his projections are of *(a)* the cash level and *(b)* the level at 2001–02 prices of the winter fuel allowance in (i) 2007–08, (ii) 2011–12 and (iii) 2021–22. [90125]

Mr. McCartney: The winter fuel payment was introduced in 1997–78 at £20 for each eligible household and £50 for those on income support or income-based jobseeker's allowance. It was increased to £100 for winter 1999–2000 and to the current rate of £200 for each eligible household in winter 2000–01.

This amount will continue to be paid for the rest of this Parliament, but we will keep the rate under review.

Workplace Health and Safety

Mr. Barry Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions pursuant to his answer of

11 December, *Official Report*, column 379W, on workplace health and safety, what the cost was to the Exchequer of work-place accidents and illnesses for the most recent year for which figures are available. [90017]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The most recent year for which figures are available is 1995–96. I refer the hon. member to the answer I gave him on 11 December 2002, *Official Report*, volume 396, column 379W.

HEALTH

Brachytherapy Treatment

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if it is his policy to support the introduction of brachytherapy treatment facilities by hospital trusts; [91274]

(2) what his policy is to eliminate the differential availability of brachytherapy for prostate cancer patients in different parts of the country; [91275]

(3) if he will make a statement on the efficiency of brachytherapy as a treatment for certain prostate cancers; and if he will list those primary care trusts which are known to his Department *(a)* to fund and *(b)* to refuse to fund brachytherapy for the treatment of prostate cancer; [91277]

(4) what guidance he has issued to PCTs on the desirability of *(a)* their determining which prostate cancer sufferers should be funded for brachytherapy treatment and *(b)* their allocating cancer treatment funds en bloc to hospital trusts for them to determine which patients should receive funding for brachytherapy. [91278]

Ms Blears *[holding answers 21 January 2003]:* The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) recently published guidance on the organisation and delivery of services for people with urological cancers, including prostate cancer. The guidance states that the option of brachytherapy should be discussed with men with early prostate cancer.

However, the NICE guidance also acknowledges that the place of brachytherapy in the treatment of prostate cancer is uncertain and notes the importance of research to evaluate the effectiveness of brachytherapy for prostate cancer. The guidance refers to a randomised intergroup trial comparing brachytherapy with radical surgery that is being organised by the National Cancer Institute of Canada and the American College of Surgeons Oncology Group and strongly encourages United Kingdom participation in this study. As a result, the Department is making £900,000 available through the National Cancer Research Network (NCRN) to enable national health service patients to enter this trial. The National Cancer Research Institute Prostate Cancer Clinical Studies Group and the NCRN are working closely together to take this trial forward in the NHS.

No guidance has been issued to primary care trusts (PCTs) on the allocation of funding for brachytherapy treatment. We are devolving power from the centre to enable PCTs to use the extra resources for the NHS to deliver on both national and local priorities for their communities, accounting publicly for how they have used them.

It is not possible to list which PCTs fund brachytherapy, as this information is not collected centrally. Decisions on this treatment are a matter for the clinician and funding authority concerned and should be made in the light of all the available evidence.

As more evidence on the effectiveness and cost effectiveness of brachytherapy becomes available, the Department will consider whether this treatment is a suitable topic for referral to NICE as a technology appraisal.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the refusal of the New Forest Primary Care Trust to offer brachytherapy treatment for prostate cancer. [91276]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* The decision on whether or not to commission brachytherapy for local patients is currently a matter for individual primary care trusts (PCTs). Brachytheraphy is a comparatively new therapy, for which there is currently a limited evidence base which many clinicians regard as inconclusive.

Local PCTs recognise the need to consider very carefully whether to provide a treatment for which the National Institute for Clinical Excellence has asserted that more research on effectiveness is needed.

In view of this, and the understandable desire of patients for brachytherapy, concerted work is currently underway through the central south coast cancer network to review this treatment and agree a way forward for local health services. This process of review is currently underway and is expected to conclude before the end of the financial year.

Cancer Funds

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what items of expenditure he has included in his tracking exercise for earmarked cancer funds; [91940]

(2) when he will publish the results of his investigation into the destination of money earmarked for cancer in *(a)* 2001–02 and *(b)* 2002–03. [91939]

Ms Blears: We have asked strategic health authorities to identify total additional investment in cancer services, with a sub total for cancer drugs and supporting information on new service developments.

Further details are available at http://www.doh.gov.uk/cancer/trackinginvestment.htm

We intend to publish the results in late spring 2003.

Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Syndrome

Helen Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent evaluation his Department has made of the incidence of carbon monoxide poisoning syndrome. [91606]

Ms Blears: The Department does not routinely collect information on the incidence of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Information that the Department evaluates is taken from the other Government Departments and the National Poisons Information service.

Helen Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action his Department is taking to ensure effective *(a)* diagnosis, *(b)* treatment and *(c)* rehabilitation for people suffering chronic effects of carbon monoxide poisoning syndrome. [91610]

Ms Blears: In February 2002, the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Nursing Officer published a letter Carbon Monoxide: The Forgotten Killer. This letter pulled together the most current information available on carbon monoxide and was forwarded to community nurses, midwives, health visitors and general practitioners. The letter gives instruction on how to diagnose carbon monoxide poisoning as well as how to manage patients who may display symptoms of poisoning.

The Department has also forwarded a videotape, prepared for the Health and Safety Executive, to all GP surgeries. This tape again highlights the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning and gives advice to medical practitioners on how to diagnose possible poisoning cases.

The Department has supported and continues to support voluntary organisations through the Section 64 Grants to Voluntary Organisations Scheme. These organisations provide support and advice for people and their families who have been affected by carbon monoxide poisoning.

Officials in the Department have also published two papers in scientific journals that discuss carbon monoxide poisoning and in particular how exposure to long-term, low concentrations of carbon monoxide can affect health. The Department has also included a research project on carbon monoxide in its most recent programme of research in the air pollution field. The results of this project will be made available to the public on completion.

Cardiac Resuscitation

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of patients suffering cardiac arrests were resuscitated by ambulance staff, in each ambulance trust area in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [91587]

Mr. Lammy: This information is not collected centrally.

Chronic Heart Disease

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many primary care practices have chronic heart disease management registers. [88750]

Ms Blears: The development of practice-based registers of people with coronary heart disease (CHD) is a milestone under the national service framework (NSF) for coronary heart disease. We are not collecting data on all aspects of implementation of the NSF centrally and the national focus has been on monitoring the immediate priorities. Progress towards the milestones is being monitored locally by strategic health authorities.

Evidence from the Primary Care and CHD collaboratives suggests that most practices have registers in place. In due course, the Commission for Health Improvement will provide an independent assessment of progress, including a specific review of the NSF for CHD.

Commission for Health Improvement

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many employees there are in the Commission for Health Improvement. [91073]

Mr. Lammy: The number of people employed by the Commission for Health Improvement totals 328.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many full-time equivalent staff are employed in *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of the agencies it sponsors; and what the figures were for 1997. [90673]

Mr. Lammy: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, 16 January 2003, *Official Report,* column 697W.

Drug Rehabilitation (Kent)

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many registered drug addicts there were in *(a)* Tunbridge Wells and *(b)* Kent in each of the past five years. [92110]

Ms Blears: Following the closure of the Home Office Addicts Index in 1997, the regional drug misuse databases were the main source of information on persons presenting to drug treatment services with a drug problem. Information is available by health authority (HA) area and is shown in the table.

Number of users reported as presenting for treatment for drug misuse in East Kent and West Kent Has during the six month periods ending 30 September 1996 to 31 March 2001

Six month period ending	*East Kent HA*	*West Kent HA*	*Total*
September 1996	106	356	462
March 1997	57	296	353
September 1997	105	196	301
March 1998	20	195	215
September 1998	14	222	236
March 1999	63	132	195
September 1999	132	116	248
March 2000	180	288	468
September 2000	174	284	458
March 2001	162	201	363

Notes:

1. Reporting to the Regional Drug Misuse Databases was voluntary; changes in the numbers of users presenting may, at least in part, be due to changes in reporting practice.

2. Following NHS reorganisation in 2002, East Kent and West Kent health authorities became part of the Kent and Medway strategic health authority.

Source:

The Department of Health series of Statistical Bulletins "Statistics from the regional Drug Misuse Databases". Bulletins for the six months ending March 1998 onwards are available on the internet at: http://www.doh.qov.uk/public/work public health.htm£SDD

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many drug rehabilitation places were available to registered drug addicts in *(a)* Tunbridge Wells and *(b)* Kent in each of the past five years. [92117]

Ms Blears: In the case of residential rehabilitation, places are often purchased at a residential centre that may be outside the drug misuser's area of residence. Some social services agree to fund long distance placements with the agreement of the drug misusers so that he or she can be removed from the area where they are involved in drug using. Purchasing decisions are entirely a matter for agreement between the drug misusers and the local agencies.

Food Additives

Mr. Hendry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment he has made of the effect of food colourings on the behaviour of children. [92335]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* The Committee on Toxicity of Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT) assessed a recent study investigating the possible effects of food colourings on the behaviour of children. COT considered that, while the research findings were consistent with the published reports, it was not possible to reach any firm conclusions about the significance of the observed effects.

The Food Standards Agency subsequently established a working group to advise on the feasibility of further research. The group held its first meeting on 13 December 2002 and is expected to conclude its work this spring.

Haemophilia

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether recombinant treatment products will be made available this year to all haemophilia sufferers in *(a)* England and *(b)* Northern Ireland. [91283]

Ms Blears: In England, all haemophilia patients up to the age of 21 years receive recombinant clotting factors. The Government are considering the case for extending provision to all other haemophilia patients. A decision will be made shortly.

Recombinant clotting factors have recently been made available for all haemophilia patients in Northern Ireland.

Health Services (Norfolk)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many members of the Commission for Health Improvement attended the scrutiny sessions of the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital in 2002; and what was the cost of the visit; [91071]

(2) how many members of the Commission for Health Improvement attended the scrutiny sessions of the Norfolk Mental Health Trust in 2002; and what the cost was. [91072]

Mr. Lammy: Teams carrying out clinical governance reviews are multidisciplinary. Each team normally comprises: a doctor, a nurse, a national health service manager, a lay member and another clinical professional who is not a doctor or a nurse; for example, a pharmacist or physiotherapist. A Commission for Health Improvement (CHI) review manager co-ordinates the team's work and a team of analysts collate and analyse data about the trust.

CHI has commenced a clinical governance review of Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital NHS Trust. The review week is on 20 January 2003. The review team will comprise:

one medical doctor;

one nurse;

one clinical professional who is not a doctor or nurse;

one lay person;

one manager; and

one other.

CHI conducted a clinical governance review of Norfolk Mental Health NHS Trust between July and December 2002. The CHI review team that visited Norfolk Mental Health NHS Trust comprised eight members:

one lay member;

one mental health service user reviewer;

two occupational therapists;

three mental health specialists; and

one manager.

The average cost of a clinical governance review from start to publication of the clinical governance review report ranges between £159,000 for an acute trust and 229,000 for a mental health trust. The difference in cost is due to the team size. The mental health review uses more reviewers and service users.

Healthy Start Scheme

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will announce the results of his consultation on the Healthy Start proposals; whether the Healthy Start Scheme will maintain the value of benefit to mothers who choose to bottle-feed their babies; and how many mothers and children he estimates will be eligible for the Healthy Start Scheme in each of the next five years. [91074]

Ms Blears: The Department intends to publish a summary of healthy start consultation responses in spring 2003.

The numbers of mothers and children eligible for the welfare food scheme will continue to be determined by the number of families which are in receipt of qualifying income-based benefits, and the numbers of children who receive day care from eligible providers.

Decisions about the proposed reformed scheme will not be taken until the results of the consultation have been fully assessed.

Herbal Medicines

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information his Department collates on the number of adverse events in relation to *(a)* herbal medicines and *(b)* dietary supplements. [91127]

Ms Blears: The Medicines Control Agency/Committee on Safety of Medicines (MCA/CSM) Yellow Card Scheme collates reports of suspected adverse reactions to medicines. The scheme was extended to include unlicensed herbal remedies in October 1996. The MCA also collates reports of suspected adverse reactions to vitamins and minerals.

In addition, the MCA collates information on the safety of medicines, including unlicensed herbal remedies and vitamins and minerals from the published literature (such as the recent article in the "Lancet" on 11 January 2003), from other regulatory authorities and from external bodies such as Guy's Hospital medical toxicology unit.

A number of articles have been published in the CSM/MCA drug safety bulletin, "Current Problems in Pharmacovigilance", drawing attention to adverse reactions associated with the use of herbal remedies and encouraging reporting through the Yellow Card Scheme.

Herbal medicines and vitamin and mineral supplements are often supplied without prescription, and are taken without advice from doctors or pharmacists. It is generally recognised that the reporting rate for medicines supplied over the counter (OTC) is lower than that of suspected adverse reactions associated with prescription medicines. To increase reporting of suspected adverse reactions with OTC medicines, the Yellow Card Scheme has recently been extended to include nurses as reporters, and will be extended to include patient reporting via NHS Direct in the near future.

Hospital Food

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the answer of 7 January 2003, *Official Report,* column 181W, what proportion of trusts make no use of leading chef dishes. [91589]

Mr. Lammy: Through the Better Hospital Food programme, acute hospital trusts were asked to include three leading chef dishes in their menus each day.

Information collected from the national health service does not differentiate between hospitals which have included no leading chef dishes in their menus and those which have included fewer than three. It is therefore not possible to provide an accurate number of trusts which have made no use of these dishes.

Hospital Hygiene

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidelines he has issued on the use of alcoholic hand gels in the prevention of the spread of noroviruses; and if he will make a statement. [91129]

Ms Blears: Evidence based guidelines on the general principles for preventing healthcare associated infection were commissioned and funded by the Department and published in January 2001[1]. These guidelines include the standard principles for hand hygiene and use of alcoholic hand rubs to decontaminate hands.

Chief Executives of NHS trusts were recently reminded that the incidence of gastro-enteritis increases at this time of the year and that they may wish to consult published guidance on managing outbreaks due to norovirus, previously referred to as small round structured viruses or Norwalk-like viruses[2].

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what powers have been given to ward managers to enforce rigorous cleaning standards with particular reference to powers to withhold payment from contractors or staff; and if he will make a statement on the use of these powers by ward managers to date. [91130]

Mr. Lammy: Health Service Circular HSC 2001/010, issued in April 2001, required national health service trusts and primary care trusts to ensure that all ward sisters and charge nurses have authority to ensure that the basics of care, including standards of cleanliness, are right. The circular also required that modern matrons be introduced to provide highly visible, accessible and authoritative figures.

Where problems arise with cleaning standards which ward sisters or charge nurses are unable to resolve directly, then there should be systems to address these, including the authority for matrons to instruct that payment for cleaning services be withheld.

Guidance on a system to address problems with cleaning services, including withholding of payment or termination of contracts, is set out in "Process Mapping the Housekeeper Service—A Toolkit for Change", launched in November 2002.

The exercise of these powers is a matter for local discretion, and information is not held centrally on the extent to which they have been applied.

HPA

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many IT Systems within the organisations due to be amalgamated within the HPA will require re-engineering as a result of the changes. [90087]

Ms Blears: Over time, all information technology systems will need to be reviewed and updated, to ensure they contribute to the objectives of the proposed Health Protection Agency (HPA), as set out in "Getting Ahead of the Curve", issued in January 2002. The board of the proposed HPA will be responsible for developing the necessary strategy.

In the immediate term, priority is being given to ensuring that, on the establishment of the proposed HPA, existing systems continue to function effectively.

Job Sharing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the extent of job sharing in his Department. [90860]

Mr. Lammy: The percentage of staff who work part-time within the Department is 9 per cent. Of those part-time workers, 10 posts are known to be job shares. However, that number could be a great deal higher, as employees working on job share contracts are recorded as 'part-time' workers.

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[1] *Journal of Hospital Infection (2001)* 47(Supplement): SI doi:10.1053/jhin.2000.0921 available at http://www.doh.gov.uk/hai/epic.htm.

[2] *Journal of Hospital Infection (2000)* 45:1–10 Article nojhin.2000.0662 available at http//www.phls.org.uk/topics az/norwalk/hospital srsv.pdf

It is therefore not possible to correctly identify the number of staff employed on a job share contract, as these figures do not differentiate between those actually employed part-time and those employed specifically on a job share contract.

Medical Reservists

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to ensure that there are no consequences for the level of service provided by Queen Alexandra hospital in Portsmouth and Portsmouth hospitals NHS trust should medical staff working there be required to join troops in the middle east or be required to serve in war with Iraq; and if he will make a statement. [91395]

Ms Blears: The Portsmouth hospitals national health service trust has worked for many years with the Ministry of Defence to ensure that the provision of hospital services is not adversely affected when military medical personnel are required to deploy on exercises and other military commitments.

Contingency planning is ongoing between the Department of Health and the trust to minimise the effect of any call up should further deployments be required. The NHS community in Portsmouth and Hampshire is working with the trust in support of these contingency plans.

Mid-Essex Hospital Trust

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the total pay costs for employees in the latest available financial year were in the Mid-Essex hospital trust area. [91365]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* The total employee costs for Mid Essex Hospital Services National Health Service trust for 2001–02 was £76,664,000.

Source:

Summarisation Schedule for Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust 2001–02.

Milk

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the Healthy Start Scheme will reflect FSA guidance on the age limits for *(a)* whole milk and *(b)* semi-skimmed milk. [91076]

Ms Blears: The guidance provided by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) on the age limits for whole and semi-skimmed milk is based upon that provided by the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy (COMA). The welfare food scheme will continue to follow this advice.

Decisions about the proposed reform of the scheme will not be taken until the results of the public consultation, which closed on the 13 December 2002, have been assessed.

Mixed-sex Mental Health Wards

Mr. Flook: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many mixed sex mental health wards there are in *(a)* Somerset and *(b)* Somerset and Dorset strategic health authority area. [91946]

Ms Blears: The information requested is not available, as compliance is measured on a trust by trust basis and not at individual ward level.

Hospital wards generally care for both men and women. Guidance issued to the national health service for new mental health accommodation recommends that patient privacy is maintained through providing single bedrooms, preferably with en-suite facilities.

In existing facilities it is the responsibility of each NHS trust to determine the most appropriate configuration to meet their specific requirements. Wards may be split into single sex bays or single rooms, or otherwise configured to provide adequate segregation of gender.

Overseas Dental Surgeons

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what training is on offer for those with qualifications from the University of Nairobi, who are not refugees, to qualify for registration as a UK dental surgeon; [87427]

(2) for what reason dental qualifications from the University of Nairobi are not recognised for registration as a UK dental surgeon; and if he will make a statement. [87426]

Mr. Lammy: The General Dental Council (GDC) may only register dentists who have satisfied the GDC that they have the requisite knowledge and skills to practise safely.

Accordingly, section 15 (1) of the Dental Act 1984 empowers the GDC to register as dentists graduates of a university dental school in the United Kingdom or any person who is a national of a member state of the European Economic Area and holds an appropriate European diploma. Section 16 of the Act empowers the GDC to set an examination for other dentists who trained abroad and are seeking registration here.

The national advice centre for post graduate education of dentists, which is located at the Royal College of Surgeons, advises dentists on how to acquire the training and experience required to sit the GDC's international qualifying examination.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if his Department will check that each NHS trust has instituted a Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) before community health councils are abolished; where a suitable PALS has not been implemented in an area, if he will extend the life of the local community health council to maintain cover; and whose responsibility it is to ensure a PALS is instituted before the relevant community health council is abolished. [91862]

Mr. Lammy: Patient advice and liaison services (PALS) are not linked to the abolition of Community Health Councils (CHCs). CHCs will be replaced by a new system of patient and public involvement, based on local authority scrutiny of health services and the establishment of the Commission of Patient and Public Involvement in Health and Patients' Forums.

PALS are an additional resource, providing a responsive service for patients, their families and carers.

The Department has commissioned a mapping exercise of PALS implementation, due for completion at the end of January. Initial responses indicate an 89 per cent. implementation rate. It is anticipated that all trusts will have implemented PALS by April 2003.

PHLS Laboratories

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) in how many cases discussions about the financial terms of the transfer of a PHLS laboratory to the relevant NHS trust have not begun; [90060]

(2) how many agreements have been reached between NHS trusts and the PHLS about the financial details of the transfer of laboratories; and in how many cases such agreements are outstanding. [90059]

Ms Blears: Detailed discussions about all the laboratory transfers are well advanced between Public Health Laboratory Service group directorates and national health service trusts. All are due to be completed by 31 March 2003.

Prostate Cancer

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to begin his Department's public awareness campaign on prostate cancer. [92634]

Ms Blears: The national health service prostate cancer programme stated that an education programme for the public, patients and professionals on the risks associated with individual testing for prostate cancer will be introduced.

This has been achieved through the prostate cancer risk management programme, which sent out evidence-based primary care resource packs to all general practitioners in England from 23 September 2002 to aid them in counselling men who are worried about prostate cancer. This ensures that men make an informed choice about whether or not to have a prostate specific antigen (PSA) test based on an information leaflet developed specifically for men about the advantages and disadvantages of having a PSA test.

The Department is funding a Section 64 grant to the Prostate Cancer Charity to increase further information about prostate cancer. This is supporting the creation, review, provision and dissemination of a range of awareness material, supported by £135,000 over three years.

Red Alert Status

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the hospitals that have been on red alert on each day since 1 November 2002 in England and Wales. [91469]

Mr. Lammy: The term "red alert" is used by very few trusts and does not have a standard definition.

All hospitals have escalation procedures, which are activated during times of increasing pressure. However, details of these procedures will depend on local circumstances and are not held centrally.

Retained Organs Commission

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Health who the members of the Retained Organs Commission are; and what their *(a)* profession and *(b)* attendance records are. [91315]

Mr. Lammy: Details of all Retained Organs Commission board members, including their names and curricula vitae, are available on the Commission's website at www.nhs.uk/retainedorgans

The official minutes of each board meeting record those members who attend, and these are also published on the Commission's website. I have asked the Chair of the Commission to write to the hon. Member with further details of Commissioner's attendance.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many days were lost due to sickness absence in the Department in 2002. [90538]

Mr. Lammy: The statistics on days lost due to sickness absence within the Department of Health during the year 2002 will be available in due course. The figures will be available through the "Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service 2002" produced by the Cabinet Office. The report will be available on the Cabinet Office website and will be placed in the Library.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many working days have been lost due to illness in his Department in *(a)* 2002 and *(b)* each of the preceding five years. [90969]

Mr. Lammy: The statistics on days lost due to sickness absence within the Department of Health during the year 2002 will be available in due course. The figures will be available through the "Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service 2002" produced by the Cabinet Office. The report will be available on the Cabinet Office website and will be placed in the Library.

The average number of working days lost since 1997 are shown in the table.

	Average[1] days lost per employee through sickness (per staff year)
1997	7.8
1998	[2]9.2
1999	6.6
2000	5.5
2001	6.5

[1] Working days absences exclude weekends and bank holidays for staff working a "Monday to Friday" week.

[2] Based on pre-audit data and methodology. In 1998 Civil Service departments and agencies undertook an audit of their monitoring systems following the 'Working Well Together' report. The re-worked figures were not submitted in time for publication of the 1998 report and unadjusted figures were published in this year.

Source:

Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service BMI Health Services report (1997 Table I, 1998 Table K), Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service BIOSS report Table H (1999), Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service BIOSS report table H (2000), Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service AON report table E (2001).

The Department is committed to meeting its public service agreement targets for reducing sickness absence and will be conducting a review of its guidance for both long-term and short-term sickness absence management.

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library a copy of the NHS PASA report on timber. [89674]

Mr. Lammy: The National Health Service Purchasing and Supply Agency has not published a specific report on timber. The Agency has published its second environmental report for 2001–02, which includes a comprehensive section on timber. This report has been placed in the Library. The Agency also gives details of its policy on timber, and the environmental issues relating to timber and purchasing in the NHS, on its website. Members of the public can also also obtain such details by writing to Corporate Affairs, National Health Service Purchasing and Supply Agency, 80 Lightfoot Street, Chester CH2 SAD.

Type 2 Diabetes

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many new cases of Type 2 diabetes have been diagnosed in each of the last five years in *(a)* males under 30, *(b)* males 30 and over, *(c)* females under 30 and *(d)* females 30 and over; and if he will make a statement. [91648]

Mr. Lammy: This information is not collected in the form requested.

Waiting Lists

Mr. Flook: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people in the Taunton and Somerset NHS trust area were waiting for in-patient treatment on the latest available date. [91945]

Ms Blears: At the end of November 2002, the number waiting for in-patient treatment at the Taunton and Somerset national health service trust was 6,408.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Arson

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many *(a)* malicious vehicle fires, *(b)* incidents of arson and *(c)* incidents of arson in educational establishments there were, broken down by local authority fire brigade area, in England and Wales, in (i) 1997 and (ii) 2001. [92497]

Mr. Raynsford: The information requested is in the following table.

Malicious fires[1,2] by location and brigade area, England and Wales, 1997 and 2001[3]

Brigade area	*1997 total*	*Road vehicles*	*Educational establishments*	*2001[3] total*	*Road vehicles*	*Educational establishments*
England and Wales	72,932	38,218	1,081	109,816	72,081	1,052
England	67,682	35,162	1,007	102,402	67,038	1,005
England—non-met. counties	34,292	17,519	462	53,184	34,458	499
Avon	1,514	887	20	3,227	2,513	22
Bedfordshire	824	513	0	1,162	865	10
Berkshire	800	509	12	1,224	943	2
Buckinghamshire	926	562	12	1,424	1,033	9
Cambridgeshire	890	504	15	1,199	813	5
Cheshire	1,129	432	25	1,627	948	14
Cleveland	1,353	571	36	2,409	1,486	5
Cornwall	347	178	0	533	311	5
Cumbria	557	300	8	675	380	10
Derbyshire	949	507	13	1,370	942	15
Devon	959	443	20	1,107	614	21
Dorset	643	286	10	975	579	17
Durham	1,151	507	31	1,398	751	12
East Sussex	857	455	9	1,431	919	17
Essex	1,128	649	12	2,424	1,687	21
Gloucestershire	527	264	14	680	466	5
Hampshire	1,205	526	11	1,459	821	24
Hereford and Worcester	610	299	0	827	445	5
Hertfordshire	848	431	13	1,302	885	8
Humberside	1,528	722	8	2,245	1,380	32
Isle of Wight	87	22	0	125	32	0
Kent	1,865	1,086	25	3,006	2,143	24
Lancashire	1,968	821	37	2,835	1,367	41
Leicestershire	1,345	752	22	1,877	1,175	32
Lincolnshire	551	263	8	855	473	0
Norfolk	850	411	5	1,135	738	6
North Yorkshire	552	255	11	891	555	6
Northamptonshire	929	550	4	1,439	954	10
Northumberland	528	272	5	617	371	5
Nottinghamshire	1,661	818	18	3,614	2,668	15
Oxfordshire	645	372	1	787	562	11
Shropshire	518	309	10	848	515	0

Malicious fires[1,2] by location and brigade area, England and Wales, 1997 and 2001[3]

Brigade area	*1997 total*	*Road vehicles*	*Educational establishments*	*2001[3] total*	*Road vehicles*	*Educational establishments*
Somerset	448	226	15	808	511	15
Staffordshire	1,169	653	3	1,742	1,135	33
Suffolk	386	164	6	701	404	16
Surrey	570	329	5	922	661	8
Warwickshire	535	343	10	765	567	5
West Sussex	582	239	2	985	539	5
Wiltshire	358	89	4	533	306	10
Isles of Scilly	0	0	0	1	0	0
England—met. Counties	33,390	17,644	545	49,218	32,580	506
Greater Manchester	7,271	4,042	156	10,497	7,016	122
Merseyside	3,562	1,569	123	5,595	3,468	61
South Yorkshire	2,415	1,562	30	3,403	2,379	43
Tyne and Wear	3,152	1,581	29	3,808	2,259	35
West Midlands	5,900	3,044	66	7,551	4,826	57
West Yorkshire	4,702	2,874	69	8,111	6,168	90
Greater London	6,388	2,971	72	10,253	6,464	98
Wales	5,250	3,056	74	7,414	5,043	47
North Wales	635	275	23	1,153	689	0
Mid and West Wales	1,523	991	18	2,088	1,518	4
South Wales	3,092	1,791	33	4,173	2,836	42

[1] Including late call and heat and smoke damage incidents.

[2] Figures are based on sampled data weighted to true brigade totals.

[3] Figures are provisional

City of London

Harry Cohen: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister for what reasons the City of London received the ceiling in the recently announced local authority grant settlement; and if he will make a statement. [91876]

Mr. Leslie: The City of London gained primarily from the "fixed costs" elements in the Education and EPCS blocks to reflect the diseconomies of scale faced by smaller authorities and the increased weighting for daytime visitors and commuters in the Highways and EPCS blocks.

Community Projects

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what powers he has to ensure that local authority income from the sales of schools and community buildings is invested in the community on specific projects. [92341]

Mr. Raynsford: Local authorities are free to use these receipts for any capital purpose in accordance with Office of the Deputy Prime Minister policy of giving authorities increased financial freedom.

Flood Protection

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how much was paid in grant to each local authority in respect of *(a)* coastal defence and *(b)* flood protection in each of the last five years; and how much will be paid to each local authority for 2003–04. [89643]

Margaret Beckett: I have been asked to reply.

Defra provides grant to local authorities for flood defence and coast protection capital works which satisfy essential criteria. Authorities may claim grant on eligible expenditure during the construction of works. Details are provided in the table for the grant paid to each authority for each of the last five years. For 2002–03 the amount shown is that paid to date. Allocations to all operating authorities for 2003–04 are still being considered.

Payments 1998 to 2000–01

	Financial year					
	1998–99		*1999–2000*		*2000–01*	
Payee name	*Coast protection*	*Flood defence*	*Coast protection*	*Flood defence*	*Coast protection*	*Flood defence*
Adur District Council	8,415.00		14,423.00			
Allerdale Borough Council	25,808.37		1,029,147.65		108,678.35	
Alnwick District Council					12,285.17	
Arun District Council	1,487,515.34		802,715.68		16,182.40	
Babergh District Council						49,992.50
Barrow Borough Council	34,415.00		43,627.85		21,036.79	
Berwick upon Tweed Borough Council	26,117.16		143,029.00		442,155.87	
Birmingham City Council						373,794.38
Blackpool Borough Council	3,092,956.75		6,610,695.00		3,159,713.30	
Blyth Valley, Borough of	2,038.00				32,987.88	
Bournemouth Borough Council	384,229.21		232,529.88		258,282.20	

Payments 1998 to 2000–01

	Financial year					
	1998–99		*1999–2000*		*2000–01*	
Payee name	*Coast protection*	*Flood defence*	*Coast protection*	*Flood defence*	*Coast protection*	*Flood defence*
Bridgnorth District Council				107,500.00		
Brighton and Hove Council			625,835.13		42,573.38	
Cambridgeshire County Council				7,371.00		
Canterbury City Council	2,616,936.90		450,970.41		75,236.28	
Caradon District Council	106,695.02	5,219.67			65,780.14	
Carrick District Council						
Charnwood Borough Council						
Chichester District Council	26,211.72		71,818.89		19,896.03	
Christchurch Borough Council			1,005,697.73		103,071.25	
Copeland Borough Council			18,604.85		24,726.05	
Derby City Council						
Derbyshire Dales District Council						
Dover District Council	452,168.55		117,401.21		45,574.79	
Easington District Council	5,607.67		42,677.63			
East Devon District Council	530,010.56		371,770.95		56,669.90	
East Riding of Yorkshire Council	3,321,397.41		560,889.12		151,110.22	
Eastbourne Borough Council	5,554,467.88		1,526,994.63			
Epping Forest District Council				74,731.25		10,494.25
Fareham Borough Council					42,096.60	
Gosport Borough Council	503,662.45		547,932.99		130,744.02	
Great Yarmouth Borough Council	1,065,829.70		339,333.80		123,521.25	
Hartlepool Borough Council	3,401.25				53,281.94	
Hastings Borough Council						
Havant Borough Council	21,387.50		587,992.50		21,226.22	
Hertsmere Borough Council		146,583.05				
Isle of Scilly Council	354,909.00		10,842.50			
Isle of Wight Council	587,134.65		918,297.51			
Kerrier District Council					41,486.15	
Kings Lynn and West Norfolk, Borough					361,373.40	
Kingston Upon Hull City Council				17,463.22		
Lancaster City Council	295,520.00		340,934.92	121,500.00	602,221.99	
Lewes District Council			55,679.00			
New Forest District Council	413,180.88	48,092.32	216,284.18		350,955.55	8,046.65
North Cornwall District Council						41,692.95
North Devon District Council		2,830.50	255,014.55		9,014.26	272,378.63
North Dorset District Council		4,714.71				
North East Lincolnshire Council				3,269.38		
North Norfolk District Council	479,324.00		431,628.67		142,318.01	
North Tyneside Council						
Poole, Borough of	56,000.00		9,588.22	3,554.73	402,567.58	
Portsmouth City Council	892,535.77		68,485.97		38,244.20	
Purbeck District Council		103,353.36				43,398.53
Redbridge, London Borough of						
Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council	11,413.85		37,738.10		16,910.46	
Restormel, Borough of	228,930.60					68,690.25
Salisbury District Council		15,688.13				
Scarborough Borough Council	265,760.10		3,181,993.70	38,141.10	3,127,940.77	
Sefton, Metropolitan Borough of				565,895.70		727,342.38
Shepway District Council	213,532.48	327,422.72	365,011.25	75,068.67	70,179.57	
South Bedfordshire District Council						8,123.71
South Hams District Council					39,131.26	
South Herefordshire District Council						21,005.75
South Somerset District Council		69,396.48				21,970.34
South Tyneside Council						
Southend on Sea Borough Council	2,479.85	17,804.22				81,225.00
Suffolk Coastal District Council	211,280.03		1,574,443.60		232,582.74	
Sunderland, City of			239,964.16		33,023.55	
Taunton Deane Borough Council				70.25		
Telford and Wrekin Council				20,000.00		10,860.99
Tendring District Council			79,342.47		608,024.05	
Thanet District Council	104,470.00					
Torbay Borough Council		2,581.25		20,452.46		
Wakefield City Council		47,466.87				
Wansbeck District Council	100,610.25				97,777.50	
Waveney District Council	16,454.52		247,385.05		44,836.86	
West Devon District Council						16,685.00
West Dorset District Council	532,636.52	44,299.75	252,620.76	158,363.49	126,383.31	172,940.36
West Oxfordshire District Council						
West Somerset District Council			55,682.25			
Weymouth and Portland Borough Council				7,198.64		
Windsor and Maidenhead Borough Council		20,201.25				
Wirral, Metropolitan Borough of	145,875.00		1,282,500.00		1,151,820.25	
Worthing Borough Council			18,191.84			
Wyre Borough Council					59,259.58	22,851.00
Total	24,181,318.94	855,654.28	24,785,714.60	1,220,579.89	12,562,881.07	1,951,492.667

Payments 2001–02 to 2002–03

	2001–02		*2002–03*	
	Coast protection	*Flood defence*	*Coast protection*	*Flood defence*
Adur District Council				
Allerdale Borough Council	10,791.84		897,894.40	76,469.85
Alnwick District Council	2,493.75			
Arun District Council	201,976.10		52,870.43	
Babergh District Council				
Barrow Borough Council	2,375.97			
Berwick upon Tweed Borough Council	1,912,494.59			
Birmingham City Council		153,556.38		
Blackpool Borough Council	1,850,268.67			
Blyth Valley, Borough of	1,810.13		2,143.75	
Bournemouth Borough Council	237,197.18		360,004.15	
Bridgnorth District Council				
Brighton and Hove Council	57,831.63			
Cambridgeshire County Council				
Canterbury City Council	170,595.74		106,627.40	32,024.25
Caradon District Council	57,046.69		53,842.57	
Carrick District Council			21,066.85	
Charnwood Borough Council				111,982.50
Chichester District Council				
Christchurch Borough Council			47,583.62	
Copeland Borough Council	12,290.40			
Derby City Council				21,375.00
Derbyshire Dales District Council		41,829.04		
Dover District Council	796,595.41		8,646.99	
Easington District Council				
East Devon District Council	24,685.49	6,750.00	62,775.78	39,230.10
East Riding of Yorkshire Council	1,288,543.89	272,311.94		
Eastbourne Borough Council	912,078.13		38,655.50	
Epping Forest District Council				
Fareham Borough Council				
Gosport Borough Council	30,131.86		36,064.63	
Great Yarmouth Borough Council	260,863.42		66,078.56	
Hartlepool Borough Council	2,618.26			
Hastings Borough Council	22,546.49			
Havant Borough Council	68,333.66		41,063.75	
Hertsmere Borough Council		17,735.23		
Isle of Scilly Council				
Isle of Wight Council			100,154.57	
Kerrier District Council	1,965.63			
Kings Lynn and West Norfolk, Borough				
Kingston Upon Hull City Council				
Lancaster City Council	662,125.85	116,748.31	2,194.50	
Lewes District Council				
New Forest District Council	87,277.50		290,780.75	
North Cornwall District Council				
North Devon District Council			14,102.32	
North Dorset District Council				
North East Lincolnshire Council				
North Norfolk District Council	39,240.00		28,363.65	
North Tyneside Council	2,400.98			
Poole, Borough of	111,933.16			
Portsmouth City Council	102,160.51		5,374.26	
Purbeck District Council				
Redbridge, London Borough of				16,920.00
Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council	339,698.20		22,879.73	
Restormel, Borough of	26,394.15		3,058.38	18,695.00
Salisbury District Council	20,516.25			
Scarborough Borough Council	4,200,712.68	6,786.34	11,746,934.22	
Sefton, Metropolitan Borough of	10,113.31	469,782.74		11,523.00
Shepway District Council			2,890.23	24,170.35
South Bedfordshire District Council				
South Hams District Council	2,576.14	6,010.90		
South Herefordshire District Council				
South Somerset District Council				
South Tyneside Council	26,335.05			
Southend on Sea Borough Council		765,179.10		1,984,447.48
Suffolk Coastal District Council	65,697.50			
Sunderland, City of	21,726.95		10,365.25	
Taunton Deane Borough Council				

Payments 2001–02 to 2002–03

	2001–02		*2002–03*	
	Coast protection	*Flood defence*	*Coast protection*	*Flood defence*
Telford and Wrekin Council		68,09*6.06		5,568.99
Tendring District Council	180,133.72			
Thanet District Council				
Torbay Borough Council		652.99		
Wakefield City Council				
Wansbeck District Council	110,345.72			
Waveney District Council				
West Devon District Council				
West Dorset District Council	294,571.57	206,086.95	600,499.10	1,730,650.04
West Oxfordshire District Council		37,220.25		
West Somerset District Council	23,524.38			
Weymouth and Portland Borough Council	14,603.71		553,657.21	
Windsor and Maidenhead Borough Council				
Wirral, Metropolitan Borough of	16,886.89			
Worthing Borough Council				
Wyre Borough Council	3,985.77			10,280.25
Total	14,288,494.92	2,168,746.23	15,176,572.55	4,083,336.79

Housing (Rural Areas)

Andrew George: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what proportion of housing stock was *(a)* owner occupied, *(b)* public sector rented and *(c)* private sector rented in (i) England and (ii) local authorities defined as rural, by region, in each year since 1978. [90836]

Mr. McNulty: The proportions of the housing stock owner occupied, public sector rented and private sector rented in England are tabled. Information on the proportions for rural authorities by region is also provided, but is available only for 2001.

Proportion of dwellings by tenure: England

Percentage

	Owner occupied	*Public rented*	*Private rented*
1978	56	31	13
1979	57	31	12
1980	59	29	12
1981	60	29	11
1982	60	29	11
1983	61	28	11
1984	62	27	11
1985	63	27	11
1986	64	26	10
1987	65	25	10
1988	66	25	10
1989	67	24	9
1990	67	23	10
1991	67	23	10
1992	67	23	10
1993	67	22	10
1994	67	22	11
1995	67	22	11
1996	68	22	11
1997	68	21	11
1998	68	21	11
1998	69	21	10
1999	69	20	10
2000	70	20	10
2001	70	19	10

Note:

Public rented is Registered Social Landlord plus local authority.

Percentages may not add exactly to 100 due to rounding.

Proportion of dwellings by tenure in 'rural' local authorities by Government Office Region: 2001

Percentage

	Owner occupied	*Public rented*	*Private rented*
North East	60	33	7
North West	75	14	11
Yorkshire and the Humber	78	14	8
East Midlands	76	16	9
West Midlands	72	17	11
East	76	14	10
London	—	—	—
South East	78	12	10
South West	73	15	11
England	75	15	10

Note:

Public rented is Registered Social Landlord plus local authority.

Percentages may not add exactly to 100 due to rounding.

Housing Co-operatives

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what discussions he has held with the Housing Corporation concerning the funding of new developments through housing co-operatives; and if he will make a statement. [92342]

Mr. McNulty: There have been no discussions specifically about funding new developments through housing co-operatives.

The Housing Corporation publishes an annual National Investment Strategy which sets out its investment objectives and policies. This is supported by investment strategies produced in each region which contain regional priorities derived from the regional housing statements prepared by the Government office for the region and the corporation with various regional and local bodies. Funding in each region is allocated according to these priorities and registered social landlords, including housing co-operatives, can bid for this funding.

Housing Corporation

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what discussions he has held with the Housing Corporation on the provision of adequate funding for the rehabilitation of street properties. [92343]

Mr. McNulty: There have been no discussions specifically about funding the rehabilitation of street properties.

The Housing Corporation's national investment strategy aims to focus more of its programme on increasing the supply of homes, particularly in areas of high demand. However, the corporation will continue to fund refurbishment of existing properties where this meets strategic priorities.

Local Government Finance

Harry Cohen: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister which London local authorities will not have a real terms grant increase this year based on inflation, wage commitments and net nursing care and health transfers applicable to those local authorities; how much the shortfall is in each case in *(a)* percentage and *(b)* cash terms; and what percentage that represents of each of those local authorities' average Band D council tax. [91873]

Mr. Leslie: All London authorities received a like-for-like increase in grant of at least 3.5 per cent. in the provisional settlement, considerably above the latest increase in the retail price indices. This increase fully reflects-at national level-the transfers of function and new burdens, including those for social services.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what plans he has to review the revenue supply grant settlement for South Somerset District Council for 2003–04; and if he will make a statement. [92296]

Mr. Raynsford: The consultation on the 2003–04 provisional local government finance settlement closed on 14 January. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is currently considering the representations that were made during the consultation period, including those on behalf of South Somerset District Council. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will announce the settlement to Parliament at the beginning of February.

TREASURY

Departmental Spending Plans

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the budget was of *(a)* Customs and Excise, *(b)* the Inland Revenue and *(c)* the Government Actuary's Department will be in 2004–05 and 2005–06; and if he will make a statement. [91775]

Ruth Kelly: The spending plans for all Departments for the years 2004–05 and 2005–06 were published in July 2002 in the 2002 Spending Review White Paper: "Opportunity and Security for All". The Chancellor's Departments including Customs and Excise, Inland Revenue and the Government Actuary's Department were covered in chapter 20. http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/Spending_Review/spend_sr02/report/spend_sr02_repchap20.cfm

Building Restoration (VAT)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to alter VAT rates on the restoration of buildings. [91990]

John Healey: The Government's long-term objective is to secure a reduced rate of VAT for the repair and maintenance of listed buildings that are used as places of worship, which are currently not permitted under long-standing formal European agreements with our European partners. In Budget 2001, the Chancellor announced that the European Commission has indicated that it will review its reduced rates for VAT in 2003. In the meantime, the Government have introduced a grant scheme to run in the interim period, until the review has been completed.

Child Tax Credit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families received the children's tax credit in 2001–02, broken down into those that received *(a)* under £100, *(b)* £101 to £200, *(c)* £201 to £300, *(d)* £301 to £400, *(e)* £401 to £500 and *(f)* over £500; and in what form it was collected in each case. [91971]

Dawn Primarolo: I regret that the breakdown requested is not available. For the number receiving the Children's Tax Credit (ChTC) for 2001–02 via PAYE code adjustments, and for the number of these for which the adjustment was reduced because the claimant was a higher rate, I refer the hon. Member to my answer to him on 17 April 2002, *Official Report*, column 971W.

Estimates of the values of the 2001–02 ChTC to all taxpayers, including those claiming via self assessment, will become available from the Survey of Personal Incomes towards the end of this year.

Construction Industry

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the value is of tax lost in the last year to the Inland Revenue in connection with the Construction Industry Scheme. [91950]

Dawn Primarolo: The information requested is not available.

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimates have been made of the cost to date of developing software to manage the Construction Industry Scheme. [91951]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue will not begin software development until a decision has been taken on the future of the Construction Industry Scheme, following analysis of the responses to the consultation document.

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimates have been made of the total costs for developing software for the future administration of the Construction Industry Scheme. [91952]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue published a Consultation Document with the PBR entitled "The Inland Revenue and The Construction Industry: Working Together for a New Scheme". This document contains a series of proposals for the future of taxation in the Construction Industry. The overall estimated cost to the Inland Revenue of putting these proposals in place—including IT, capital costs and staff training—is £40 million. At this stage in the development it is not possible to provide any reliable estimates for specific elements.

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many Construction Industry Scheme vouchers the Inland Revenue processed in the last financial year. [91954]

Dawn Primarolo: The total number of CIS vouchers processed during the period 5 April 2001 to 31 March 2002 was £8,821,609.

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress is being made by the Inland Revenue to develop software to manage the Construction Industry Scheme. [91955]

Dawn Primarolo: The consultation period for the consultation document "The Inland Revenue and the Construction Industry: Working Together for a New Scheme" ends on 28 February 2003. No decision on the future of the Construction Industry Scheme will be taken until the responses to the document have been analysed. In the meantime, software development will not begin.

Cot Deaths

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for each year since 1997 the death rates from sudden infant death syndrome for babies born into families in the manual social classes. [91984]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Paul Marsden, dated 22 January 2003:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question asking to list each year since 1997 the death rates from sudden infant death syndrome for babies born into families in the manual social classes. (91984)

The table below provides sudden infant death rates by social class based on father's occupation in England and Wales for the years 1997–2001. Recording of occupation on births and deaths where the birth was registered solely by the mother is incomplete. For this reason, sudden infant death rates by social class are shown excluding sole registered births. The death rates for solely registered births are shown separately.

Occupation at death was used to derive numbers of deaths by social class in this table, as only a 10 per cent. sample of birth registrations are coded to an occupation.

Sudden infant death rates by social class based on father's occupation[1,2]*, 1997–2001, England and Wales*

Rates[3]

	Year of death				
Social class	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Non-manual	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1
Manual	0.6	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4
All births (excl. sole registered births)	0.5	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.3
Sole registered births	1.8	1.5	1.4	1.3	1.3
All births	0.6	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4

[1] Numbers of infant deaths by social class are based on father's occupation at death registration.

[2] Numbers of live births by social class, used in calculating rates, are based on father's occupation at birth registration.

[3] Rate per 1,000 live births.

Euro

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if his Department has completed the preliminary technical work relating to the five economic tests of the euro; and if he will make a statement; [92080]

(2) if he will list the studies commissioned on the five economic tests for the euro, stating in each case whether each *(a)* has been completed, *(b)* is under way and *(c)* has yet to be started; and if he will make a statement. [92081]

Ruth Kelly: The preliminary analysis supporting the five tests assessment— technical work needed to enable the assessment to be completed within two years of the start of the Parliament—is well under way.

The "Paper for the Treasury Committee on the Treasury's Approach to the Preliminary and Technical Work" published on 6 September 2002 set out a number of supporting studies that will be published alongside the assessment of the five economic tests. Further detail can be found in the 6 September Paper.

Government Procurement Savings

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reason the figure of £850 million saved in Government procurement was not included in the Treasury performance report against public service agreement. [91937]

Mr. Boateng: The data gathering for the value for money gains in 2001–02 was not completed by the publication date of the Performance Report. Total gains for 2000–01 and 2001–02 are £815 million.

Income Tax

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much income tax was paid during the last financial year, broken down by *(a)* gender and *(b)* 10 year age bands. [91970]

Dawn Primarolo: Amounts of income tax liabilities broken down by gender and 10 year age bands in 2000–01 are in the table.

£ million

Age band	*Male Total tax*	*Female Total tax*	*All Total tax*
Under 20	250	140	390
20–29	7,170	4,270	11,400
30–39	21,500	7,650	29,100
40–49	22,900	6,530	29,400
50–59	17,800	4,680	22,500
60–69	6,060	1,780	7,840
70 or over	3,160	1,750	4,910
All	78,800	26,800	105,600

Estimates are based on the Survey of Personal Incomes.

Inland Revenue

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the *(a)* nominal and *(b)* real percentage increase in spending in the Inland Revenue from 1998–99 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [91720]

Dawn Primarolo: As the 2002–03 expenditure information will not be available until after the end of the financial year it is not possible to answer this question at the present time.

Insurance Standard

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had with the International Accounting Standards Board regarding the development of a new insurance standard. [91197]

Mr. Boateng: None.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the total expenditure by his Department on ministerial travel *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* abroad, in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92434]

Ruth Kelly: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer given to him today by the Minister of State, Cabinet Office.

National Investment and Loan Office

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the annual cost of the National Investment and Loan Office in each year from 1990–91 to 2003–04 (planned). [91728]

Ruth Kelly: The annual costs of the National Investment and Loans Office in each year from 1990–91 to 2003–04 are outlined in the table.

£000

	Running Costs	*Other Current*	*Capital*	*Total*	*Income applied against expenditure and raised from fees and charges*	*Net Total*
1990–91	1,167	163		1,330	1,133	197
1991–92	1,236	432		1,668	1,355	313
1992–93	1,154	384		1,538	1,538	—
1993–94	1,234	173		1,407	1,407	—
1994–95	1,263	177		1,440	1,366	74
1995–96	1,221	604		1,825	1,574	251
1996–97	1,183	517	105	1,805	1,738	67
1997–98	1,490	4,080	12	5,582	5,263	319
1998–99	1,490	3,763	36	5,289	5,289	—
1999–2000	1,450	3,802	14	5,266	5,266	—
2000–01	1,397	3,810	25	5,232	5,232	—
2001–02	1,538	4,942	21	6,501	6,407	94
2002–03	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2003–04	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Notes:

1. NILO ceased to exist on 1 July 2002, with functions merged into either the UK Debt Management Office or HM Treasury.
2. Under previous accounting treatment, as used in the years 1990–91 to 1995–96, 'other current' and 'capital' costs are grouped together.
3. The increase in costs in 1997–98 coincides with the first full year that OPG was part of NILO.
4. Costs for 2001–02 are stated in resource terms, following the introduction of resource accounting across Government.
5. Any income above the amounts listed in the table was returned to the Consolidated Fund as extra receipts.

National Savings and Investments

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to privatise National Savings and Investments; and if he will make a statement. [91727]

Ruth Kelly: There are no plans to privatise National Savings and Investments.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the reduction in the annual costs of government borrowing as a consequence of the existence of National Savings and Investments *(a)* in gross terms and *(b)* net of the administrative costs involved; and if he will make a statement. [91729]

Ruth Kelly: National Savings and Investments' Annual Report includes information on "value added". This is a measure of how cost-effective they are at raising finance for government from the retail sector. It is a measure of the difference in the cost of raising funds through NS&I (after taking account of administrative costs and, where appropriate, tax-foregone) and the cost of raising the same amount through similar (ie variable, fixed-[illegible] or index-linked) gilts. By raising cost-effective finance, NS&I help to reduce the overall cost of government borrowing.

The value added figure for 2001–02 was £76.3 million. If administrative costs had been omitted (gross) the figure would have been £232.1 million.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the outstanding amount of savings and investment with National Savings and Investments, broken down by product; and if he will make a statement. [91730]

Ruth Kelly: The total invested in National Savings and Investments' products at 31 March 2002 was £62.3 billion. The breakdown by product was published in National Savings and Investments Product Accounts 2001–02 on 18 December 2002. The position as at end-March 2002 was as follows:

National Savings and Investments' product breakdown at end-March 2002

	£ million
Capital Bonds	1,284
Children's Bonus Bonds	1,209
Fixed Rate Savings Bonds	529
Guaranteed Equity Bonds	40
Income Bonds	9,285
Individual Savings Accounts	886
Investment Accounts	7,433
Ordinary Accounts	1,378
Pensioners Guaranteed Income Bonds	4,056
Premium Bonds	17,299
Savings Certificates	18,022
Treasurers' Accounts	61
Products no longer on sale	836
Total	62,318

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the total administration costs for National Savings and Investments in each year from 1990–91 to 2005–06 (planned); and if he will make a statement. [91731]

Ruth Kelly: National Savings and Investments' administrative costs from 1990–91 to 2005–06 (planned) are outlined in the following table.

Year	*Cash accounting basis (£000)*	*Resource accounting basis from 1998–99 (£000)*
1990–91	£173,224 (including £6,650 capital expenditure)	
1991 -92	£181,714 (including £6,143 capital expenditure)	
1992–93	£196,960 (including £12,803 capital expenditure)	
1993–94	£198,769 (including £4,778 capital expenditure)	
1994–95	£196,701 (including £4,046 capital expenditure)	
1995–96	£193,520 (including £5,382 capital expenditure)	
1996–97	£179,656 (including £3,521 capital expenditure)	
1997–98	£175,537 (including £3,066 capital expenditure	
1998–99	£171,016 (including £6,110 capital expenditure)	£180,337 (including provision of £5,110 for product accounts adjustments which did not form part of public expenditure)
1999–2000	£169,097 (including £120 capital disposals)	£179,661 (including provision of £589 for product accounts adjustments which did not form part of public expenditure)
2000–01	£167,429 (including £3,300 capital expenditure)	£165,561
2001–02	£163,847 (including £122 capital expenditure	£174,073
2002–03	£170,608 (including £300 capital expenditure)	£171,170
2003–04	£170,200 (including £1,300 capital expenditure)	£172,300
2004–05	£172,490 (including £500 capital expenditure)	£172,300
2005–06	£170,280 (including £500 capital expenditure)	170,300

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the present *(a)* maturity structure and *(b)* average interest cost of outstanding monies borrowed by the UK Government through National Savings and Investments; and if he will make a statement. [91732]

Ruth Kelly: As at end-March 2002, the weighted average maturity for all National Savings and Investments' products is estimated at 4.14 years.

The total interest cost of NS&I products (including Premium Bond prizes) for 2001–02 was £2,447 million. This equates to an average interest cost of 3.9 per cent. per annum.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the annual saving in each of the last 10 years from borrowing money through National Savings and Investments rather than through conventional issuance of UK Government debt securities; how much of that saving is due to *(a)* the term structure of debt and *(b)* the underlying cost of debt; and if he will make a statement. [91733]

Ruth Kelly: National Savings and Investments' Annual Report includes information on "value added", a measure of how cost-effective they are at raising finance for government relative to comparable gilt yields. The measure has only formally been used since 1998–99 so figures are not readily available for earlier years. The figures from 1998–99 to 2001–02 were as follows:

	£ million
1998–99	110
1999–2000	329
2000–01	82
2001–02	76

Office for National Statistics

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of real terms expenditure at the Office for National Statistics in each year from 1996–97 to 2005–06 (planned); and if he will make a statement. [91701]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Colin Mowl to Mr. David Laws, dated 22 January 2003:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question concerning real term expenditure at the Office for National Statistics in each year from 1996–97 to 2005–06 (planned). I am replying in his absence. (91701)

The requested information is shown in the attached table.

Office for National Statistics[1] spending

Financial year	*Expenditure[2] (£ million)*
1996–97[3]	126.7
1997–98	106.5
1998–99[4]	109.6
1999–2000[4]	108.5
2000–01[4]	156.6
2001–02[4]	206.9
2002–03[4]	147.4
2003–04[5]	139.5
2004–05[5]	156.7
2005–06[5]	165.7

[1] The Office for National Statistics' principal activities are the collection, analysis and dissemination of business, economic, socio-economic, health and population statistics, the production of social surveys, the census of population for England and Wales, maintenance of the National Health Service Central Register and the register of births, deaths and marriages.

[2] Figures are in real terms (2002–03 prices). Expenditure is calculated as the total of the resource budget plus the capital budget less depreciation. Figures are actual expenditure to 2001–02 and planned expenditure thereafter.

[3] The Office for National Statistics was created as a Government Department and an Executive Agency on 1 April 1996 by merging the Central Statistical Office (CSO) and the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS). During 1996–97, ONS moved most of its London staff from four existing sites to a complex of building at Drummond Gate Pimlico. Most of the cost of refurbishment and fitting out of those buildings fell in 1996–97.

[4] Figures from 1998–99 to 2002–03 include additional provision for planning, fieldwork and initial processing of the 2001 Census of Population in England Wales.

[5] Figures from 2003–04 include additional provision in the Spending Review 2002 settlement for ONS to invest in a programme of modernisation to improve the quality of official statistics.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what reasons underlie the increase in real spending on the Office for National Statistics, comparing 1998–99 with 2003–04; and if he will make a statement. [91705]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Colin Mowl to Mr. David Laws, dated 22 January 2003:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question concerning what reasons underlie the increase in real spending on the Office for National Statistics, comparing 1998 with 2003–04. I am replying in his absence. (91705)

Office for National Statistics spending[1] in 1998–99 was £109.6 million in real terms (2002–03 prices) and is estimated to increase to £139.5 million in 2003–04. Most of the increase in funding is to enable the Office for National Statistics to develop a programme of "Neighbourhood Statistics" to provide better local level data to inform policy and programmes to combat social exclusion. The balance is to support the Office's programme of modernisation aimed at improving and expanding statistical outputs, and enhancing web-enabled access by data users and suppliers.

[1] Spending is calculated as the total of the resource budget plus the capital budget less depreciation.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his latest estimate is of the value of *(a)* land, *(b)* buildings and *(c)* other assets owned by the Office for National Statistics; and if he will make a statement. [91706]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Colin Mowl to Mr. David Laws, dated 22 January, 2003:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question concerning the value of *(a)* land, *(b)* buildings and *(c)* other assets owned by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). I am replying in his absence. (91706)

As at 31March 2002 the written down value of assets owned by ONS was as follows;

a) Land £6,779,000

b) Buildings £36,853,000

c) Other assets £9,372,000

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his latest estimate is of the total value of all the fixed assets of the Office for National Statistics; and if he will make a statement. [91707]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. David Laws, dated 22 January 2003:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question concerning the total value of all the fixed assets of the Office for National Statistics (ONS). (91707)

As at 31st March 2002 the value of assets owned by ONS was £53 million.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his latest estimate is of the value of the Drummond Gate Offices of the Office for National Statistics; and if he will make a statement. [91708]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Colin Mowl to Mr. David Laws, dated 22 January 2003:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question concerning the value of the Drummond Gate Offices of the Office for National Statistics (ONS). I am replying in his absence. (91708)

ONS leases the Drummond Gate office and is therefore unable to say what its estimated value is. However, the refurbishment work undertaken by ONS has been capitalised and its written down value at 31st March 2002 was £21,104,000.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many motor vehicles are owned by the Office for National Statistics; if he will list these with the current total valuation; and if he will make a statement. [91711]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Colin Mowl to Mr. David Laws, dated 22 January 2003:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your question concerning how many motor vehicles are owned by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and their total current valuation. I am replying in his absence. (91711)

ONS owns fourteen vehicles. Their written down values as at 31st March 2002 were:

Vauxhall Astra	£1,873
Ford Focus	£4,082
Vauxhall Astra	£3,843
Ford Focus	£5,755
Ford Focus	£5,840
Ford Focus	£5,843
Vauxhall Vectra	£6,302
Ford Mondeo	£7,246
Ford Zetec	£8,033
Celebrity Scooter	£1,956 (disabled wheelchair)
Ford Mondeo	£10,192
Ford Focus	£7,820
Citroen Zsara	£7,805
Ford Mondeo	£9,407
	£85,997

Office of Government Commerce

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what savings the Office of Government Commerce has secured in *(a)* financial years (i) 2000–01 and (ii) 2001–02 and *(b)* from May 2002 to December 2002. [91936]

Mr. Boateng: Value for money gains in the financial years 2000–01 and 2001–02 were as follows:

2000–01—£414 million

2001–02—£401 million

The 2000–01 gains figure has been adjusted down from the £433 million total reported in the Treasury Performance Report.

As data on gains is collected in the financial year following procurement action, a figure for 2002–03 is not yet available.

Pensions

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the estimated cost of income tax relief for approved pension schemes as stated in table 7 of the November 2002 'Tax Ready Reckoner and Tax Reliefs' includes tax paid on all pension payments including the state retirement pension; what the tax take was from pension income netted off in the total cost given in the row; and if he will make a statement. [91743]

Ruth Kelly: The estimated net cost of relief for approved pension schemes is the sum of the front-end contributions to these schemes plus the relief on the investment income of funds, net of the tax paid on current private pensions in payment. Since income tax relief is not given on an accruing entitlement to the state retirement pension it would not be appropriate to include current payments from these in the net cost of relief to private schemes.

A more detailed breakdown of the estimate for 2001–02 is contained in table T7.9 of Inland Revenue Statistics. The latest version is on the Inland Revenue website; http://www.inlandrevenue.gov.uk/stats/pensions/p_t09_1.htm

Mr Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of total government revenue is represented by the total public sector pension obligation. [92072]

Mr. Boateng: Expenditure on unfunded public service pensions, net of employee contributions, is estimated to total about £13.2 billion in 2002–03. Annual government revenue for 2002–03 is estimated at £400 billion (Table B12 of November 2002 pre-Budget Report, Cm 5664). Funded public sector pensions are paid from the particular pension fund and information on the totals of those payments and the related pension fund receipts is not held centrally.

Public Services Productivity

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 9 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 360W, on public services productivity, if he will place in the Library a list of attendees for the meetings of the Public Services Productivity Panel for 2000–02; and if he will make a statement. [91745]

Mr. Boateng: The Public Services Productivity Panel is a small group of senior business people and public sector managers that was established to identify ways of improving productivity in the public sector. A list of panel members from 2000–02 will be placed in the Library.

Sustainable Fuels

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what fiscal measures he proposes to encourage the use of sustainable fuels in road vehicles. [91845]

John Healey: The Government's taxation plans are announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his annual Budget. In making his judgment, he considers all relevant economic, social and environmental factors.

Last year, the Government introduced a reduced rate of duty for biodiesel set at 20p per litre less than the prevailing rate for ultra low sulphur diesel.

In the Pre-Budget Report, we announced a reduced rate of duty for bioethanol, to be set at 20p per litre less than the prevailing rate for ultra low sulphur petrol.

The Green Fuel Challenge has resulted in support, in the form of duty exemptions, for pilot projects promoting research into the use of hydrogen, methanol and biogas from landfill sites as fuel for road vehicles.

Tax Returns

Norman Lamb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many self-assessment tax-returns were received by the Inland Revenue, and how many of these that have subsequently been lost *(a)* in the current financial year to date and *(b)* in each previous year of the operation of the self-assessment system; and how many complaints were received by the Inland Revenue from taxpayers who claim to have submitted their tax-returns before the self-assessment deadline, but where the Inland Revenue has no such record of such a tax-return being received (i) in the current financial year to date and (ii) in each previous year of the operation of the self-assessment system; [91575]

(2) if he will make a statement on the loss of self-assessment tax return forms by the Inland Revenue. [91573]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* Around 9 million self-assessment return forms are received by the Inland Revenue each year. In an operation of this size a very small proportion of returns may be misplaced. But the Revenue do not keep specific data about the number. The Revenue do their utmost to keep to a minimum any inconvenience to taxpayers and do their best to help those affected.

Taxation

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the income tax receipts foregone, since 1 October 2000, as a result of the Government's policy of levying a lower rate of tax on ultra-low sulphur petrol. [91023]

John Healey: No income tax receipts have been foregone, but the cost to the Exchequer of introducing, in October 2000, a lower duty rate for ultra-low sulphur petrol (ULSP) relative to that for ordinary unleaded petrol, is estimated to be £1,200 million to December 2002. Complete conversion of the UK unleaded petrol markets to these cleaner specification fuels has been achieved.

Thermal Insulation

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received on the VAT rate of 17.5 per cent. on the sale of thermal insulation products for private purchasers; and if he will make a statement. [91976]

John Healey: The Government has received numerous representations from members of the public, and others from individual hon. members and businesses. Under long-standing formal agreements with our European partners, we are not able to introduce a reduced rate of VAT for energy-efficient or energy-saving materials sold direct to the public. The Government has pressed the European Commission to bring forward, during this year's review of VAT reduced rates, proposals to allow a reduced rate for energy-saving materials purchased for DIY installation.

Unpaid Tax

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his latest estimate is of unpaid tax by each major category of tax for the last year for which information is available; and if he will make a statement. [91716]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue's financial account runs from the beginning of November until the end of October. The figures for the period to 25 October 2002, will not be verified until June of this year.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 23 January 2003

TREASURY

New Taxes

15. **Mrs. Roe:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the annual cost to business of new taxes introduced since May 1997. [92747]

John Healey: The net effect of the Government's Corporation Tax changes introduced since 1997 is to reduce the corporate tax burden on business. We now have the lowest corporation tax rates in UK history. We have introduced a series of targeted measures, including tax credits for R&D to reward entrepreneurship.

Tax Credits

16. **Andrew Selous:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the costs of introducing tax credits. [92748]

Dawn Primarolo: Through the new tax credits the Government is investing £13 billion in supporting families of which £2.7 billion is additional to what is already available. No government has spent so much on children and families.

Interest Rates

17. **Mr. Viggers:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the recent effect of interest rates upon the balance of payments. [92749]

Ruth Kelly: It is difficult to isolate the specific effect of interest rate movements on the balance of payments. However, the Government's strong macroeconomic framework has delivered economic stability and historically low interest rates so that the UK economy is well placed to benefit as the pace of global recovery picks up.

Manufacturing

19. **Mr. Liddell-Grainger:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, what estimate he has made of the annual cost to manufacturing businesses of taxes and regulations introduced since May 1997. [92751]

Dawn Primarolo: The net effect of the Government's Corporation Tax changes introduced since 1997 is to reduce the corporate tax burden on business. We now have the lowest corporation tax rates in UK history. We have introduced a series of targeted measures, including tax credits for R&D to reward entrepreneurship.

The Government is committed to ensuring that regulations are fair and effective, so that they protect the vulnerable but do not stifle enterprise or productivity.

In August 1998, the Government introduced Regulatory Impact Assessments (RIAs) to develop a more open system of assessing the risks, costs and benefits of new legislative proposals. A thorough regulatory impact assessment is required for all new regulations that impact on business, charities or the voluntary sector.

21. **Joyce Quin:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the trends in manufacturing industry throughout the United Kingdom in the last year. [92753]

John Healey: After achieving its fastest rate of output growth for six years in 2000, the past two years have clearly been difficult for the manufacturing sector, not just in the UK but across the industrialised world. Nonetheless, the domestic macroeconomic stability that this Government's policies have put in place, together with our wide range of policies designed to improve productivity and enterprise, offer solid foundations for manufacturers to build on when the recovery in the world economy gathers pace.

European Stability and Growth Pact

22. **Mike Gapes:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his policy concerning reform of the European Stability and Growth Pact. [92754]

Ruth Kelly: This Government has consistently made clear that it supports a prudent interpretation of the Stability and Growth Pact, which takes into account the economic cycle, sustainability and the important role of public investment. A prudent interpretation of the Stability and Growth Pact will provide a long-term solution and strengthen fiscal discipline. We continue to discuss this with our EU colleagues.

South America

23. **Brian White:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, what assessment the International Monetary Fund has made of the current economic situation in South America. [92755]

Ruth Kelly: The latest IMF assessment of economic developments and prospects in Latin America was in its 'World Economic Outlook', published in September 2002. That showed 2002 was a difficult year, with an estimated fall in GDP of 0.6 per cent. for the region, but a recovery is expected during 2003. Growth rates experienced in 2002 varied widely, but countries with sound policy frameworks were generally better able to withstand the period of uncertainty.

Global Economy

Helen Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, what recent discussions he has had on the participation of the poorest countries in the global economy; and if he will make a statement. [92752]

John Healey: Overcoming economic marginalisation and integrating the poorest countries into the global economy is vital to securing the economic growth required to meet our Millennium Development Goal of halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015.

We will continue to engage the international community on this issue as we have done over the past year through the G7 and G8, the EU, and the IMF and World Bank—supporting their proposals for high-level dialogue between potential investors and developing country governments. Yesterday, the Chancellor of the Exchequer addressed key corporate figures as well as NGO leaders and developing country representatives, when he spoke at a Chatham House conference on the role of the private sector in developing countries through increased levels of investment, improved accountability and strategic and consultative engagement in the wider development context.

Today, the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for International Development are publishing their detailed proposals for an International Finance Facility to release $50 billion a year in additional aid flows for investment in developing countries. This additional support will help poor countries put in place the reforms required to attract increased private sector investment.

Annuities

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will take steps to bring rules governing investment-linked annuities into line with those already in operation for pensioners in income drawdown. [91556]

Ruth Kelly: On 17 December the Government published, for consultation, simplification proposals for the pension tax rules. The consultation paper, "Simplifying the taxation of pensions: increasing choice and flexibility", is available in the House of Commons Library. The consultation is to allow people the opportunity to put forward their views before final decisions are taken.

The consultation paper puts forward a proposed framework of general benefit rules within which new retirement products can be developed consistent with the requirement to annuities by age 75. These rules will apply to both annuities and drawdown products.

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will take steps to enable new providers to take over the payment of conventional annuities; [91557]

(2) if he will make it his policy to enable with-profits annuitants to transfer to other annuity providers. [91555]

Ruth Kelly: Tax legislation does not prevent the transfer of liability to pay an annuity to a different provider so long as the terms of the annuity are not altered. It is a matter of contract between the parties whether this can occur at the request of the annuitant.

Bank of England

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his latest estimate is of the value of the Bank of England's land and buildings at *(a)* Threadneedle Street, London, *(b)* other London addresses and *(c)* other UK addresses, based on (i) the valuation for existing use and (ii) the highest valuation for alternative use; and if he will make a statement. [92515]

Ruth Kelly: As at 30 November 2002, the existing use value of the Bank of England's land and buildings (including fixed plant) in the respective locations is:

(a) £172.4 million

(b) £40 million

(c) £17.2 million

These figures reflect a professional valuation as at 28 February 2001 by Insignia Richard Ellis, plus the cost of subsequent additions, less depreciation.

Valuations for alternative uses are not available. These figures are unaudited.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his latest estimate is of the value of the fixed assets of the Bank of England; and what date these estimates were made; and if he will make a statement. [92516]

Ruth Kelly: A valuation of the tangible fixed assets of the Bank of England, as at 28 February 2002, was included in the Bank's Annual Report, laid before Parliament on 23 May 2002.

Census

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what margin of error is officially regarded as acceptable for the 2001 census in *(a)* inner city areas and *(b)* rural areas; and if he will make a statement. [92496]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from L. Cook to Mr. E. Pickles, dated 23 January 2003:

As National Statistician and Registrar General for England and Wales I have been asked to reply to your recent question to the Chancellor of the Exchequer asking what margin of error is officially regarded as acceptable for the 2001 Census in *(a)* inner city areas and *(b)* rural areas. (92496)

I published the margins of error, also known as confidence intervals, when the first results from the 2001 Census were released on 30 September 2002 for England and Wales (and inner city and rural areas.)

For England and Wales as a whole, the 95 per cent confidence interval (the range within which the true population would fall for 95 per cent of the times the sample was repeated) was plus or minus 0.2 per cent or 104,000 people. For local authority areas the percentage margins of error are larger, ranging from 6.1 per cent in Luton to 0.6 per cent in Dudley, East Dorset and Redcar and Cleveland.

All Census population estimates have been subject to rigorous quality assurance which followed an agreed strategy which had been the subject of wide consultation with census users. The population of each local authority by age and sex was considered in a consistent and detailed manner—this involved comparison against diagnostic ranges derived from rolled-forward population estimates and aggregated administrative sources (such as Birth Registration and Pensions data).

The quality assurance process means that the census figures are the best estimates we can provide for the population and they are all within acceptable confidence intervals.

Of importance also to confidence in census results is that we can explain changes and unusual results. There is insufficient cohesion between the measures of the various contributors to intercensal change in the United Kingdom. This is not acceptable to many users.

We are reviewing at present our methods of measuring external migration, and I have initiated a review to identify what we can do to estimate more effectively the population between censuses in areas of large change from sources we cannot measure well.

Civil Servants

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many civil servants have been employed by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each of its agencies and non-departmental bodies in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92370]

Ruth Kelly: Figures for HM Treasury and its agencies at 1 April for the period 1994–2001 are published in Civil Service Statistics copies of which are available in the House of Commons Library. Figures for 2002 will be published in due course.

Economic Inactivity

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many working-age people not in full-time education were economically inactive in each year since 1997. [91978]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from L. Cook to Mr. David Willetts, dated 23 January 2003:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question about economically inactive people not in full-time education. ([illegible]1978)

The attached table give the information requested. These estimates are from the Labour Force Survey (LFS).

Economically inactive people of working age[1] who are not in full-time education United Kingdom; 1997–2002[2]

Thousands

December to November	
1996–97	6,316
1997–98	6,320
1998–99	6,215
1999–2000	6,271
2000–01	6,327
2001–02	6,342

[1] Men aged 16–64 and women aged 16–59.

[2] Average for the twelve month period ending November of each year.

Note:

These Labour Force Survey (LFS) estimates are Not Seasonally Adjusted (NSA) and have not yet been adjusted to take account of the recent Census2001 results.

Source:

Labour Force Survey (ONS)

EMU

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he plans to publish the 14 supporting studies on euro convergence before his Department's assessment of the five tests for entry to EMU. [92818]

Ruth Kelly: I refer the hon. Member to my answer to the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) on 20 January 2003, *Official Report,* column 54W.

Equity Release

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to change the regulatory regime applicable to equity release products and providers. [92567]

Ruth Kelly: The Government is giving the Financial Services Authority responsibility for regulating mortgage business, including mortgage based equity release arrangements. In August last year, the FSA published its consultation paper, CP 146 setting out its approach to regulating mortgage sales including lifetime mortgages (the FSA's term for regulated equity release mortgages). It is expected that regulation of lifetime and other mortgages will come into force in October 2004.

As for home reversions, the Government announced in its Green Paper on Pensions that it would be looking at options to create a level playing field for the regulation of equity release and home reversion plans to protect consumers and make the market work better. The Government is gathering evidence of consumer detriment to decide the appropriate level of regulation. If the Government decides to go ahead and regulate home reversions the likely timescale would be a consultation later in the year, and the Government would decide on the basis of legal advice whether secondary or primary legislation was necessary.

EU (Economic Reform)

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the Government's strategy is for economic reform in the European Union; and if he will make a statement. [91198]

Ruth Kelly: The Government's White Paper on European economic reform (Realising Europe's Potential; economic reform in Europe, February 2002) sets out the Government's strategy for economic reform in the European Union and describes the next steps in this process. These include:

further reform of labour markets to meet EU employment targets and establish employment opportunity for all;

less and better targeted state aid;

continued improvement of the EU competition regime;

work to deliver a genuine single market in services, including financial services, as well as in manufacturing; and

the full opening up of gas, electricity and telecoms markets.

Heritage and Antique Assets

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what sales of heritage assets and antique assets have been made by his Department since May 1997; if he will list such assets; and if he will estimate the total sales proceeds. [92372]

Ruth Kelly: HM Treasury did not hold or dispose of any heritage assets over this period.

HM Treasury's Resource Accounts (1999–2000, Cm 5062 and 2000–01, HC 573) include a disclosure of all asset disposals including separate figures for antiques. Accounts for 2001–02 will be published shortly. Resource accounts were not compiled for years before 1999, and so data are not available in the form requested.

Home Insurance

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 14 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 514W, on home insurance, if he will publish the guidelines set out for the Financial Services Authority for their consultation on home insurance. [93035]

Ruth Kelly: The Government have not issued guidelines to the Financial Services Authority (FSA) on the content of their consultation on mortgages and whether it should include requirements in relation to fees charged for switching home insurance.

Investment Growth

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on whether the Pre-Budget Report predictions of fixed investment growth will be fulfilled. [92817]

Ruth Kelly: As normal, the Government will update its forecasts for the UK economy in the forthcoming Budget.

Migration Statistics

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what level of net international migration of population of working age is assumed in his trend growth projections for 2002–03 to 2007–08; and if he will make a statement. [90983]

Ruth Kelly: The Treasury's neutral trend growth projections for 2002–03 to 2007–08 assume net inward migration to the UK of 104,000 people of working age a year.

Pension Contribution Tax Relief

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost to the Exchequer after *(a)* five years, *(b)* 10 years and *(c)* 20 years, of the Government's proposals to give people a lifetime limit for pension contribution tax relief. [91091]

Ruth Kelly: The cost of the proposed regime will depend on behavioural effects and the final design of the new regime, which will be decided in light of the consultation process.

Public Sector Workers (Retirement)

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to allow all staff in his Department to retire at age 65; what proportion of staff retire at or before age 60; and if he will make a statement. [92553]

Mr. Boateng: Retirement policy is a matter for individual public sector employers and detailed numerical information is not held centrally. Government policy as set out in last year's pensions green paper, "Simplicity, security and choice: Working and saving for retirement (Cm 5677)" is to encourage people to work up to the age of 65 and beyond if they wish. Public service employers are reviewing their retirement policies to take account of that. In local government, the normal pension age is already 65 for new entrants. Longer serving staff may have rights to an earlier normal pension age, between 60 and 65, depending on their length of service.

As set out in the Green Paper, the Government proposes to increase the normal pension age from 60 to 65 for new entrants to pension schemes such the NHS, teachers and civil service. Some 75 per cent. of civil servants already have the option to retire at age 65 and the numbers able to serve beyond age 60 are expected to increase. NHS staff are generally encouraged to continue to work beyond age 60 and those retiring on age grounds typically leave well after age 60. In the state education sector, teachers can normally work until age 65 if they wish and they can work beyond 65 by mutual agreement between the individual and the employer.

In the armed forces, police and fire services the great majority of people leave before age 60 and pensions for those retiring are payable well before 60. There are a few posts in these services where individuals may be retained beyond age 60. There are a few posts in these services where individuals may be retained beyond age 60.

Public Service Agreements

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) whether the figure of 87 per cent. in Annex B of the Treasury Autumn Performance Report for the proportion of PSA performance targets met is based on the same calculation as the figure of 87 per cent. contained in Annex A2 of the Departmental Report; [87634]

(2) if he will place in the Library the calculations on which he based the statement that 87 per cent. of PSA performance targets have been met or partly met by 2002, as stated in Annex A2 of HM Treasury Departmental Report 2002; [87635]

(3) if he will place in the Library the calculations on which he based the statement that 87 per cent. of PSA performance targets have been met or partly met, as stated in Annex B of HM Treasury Autumn Performance Report, Cm 5665; [87636]

(4) pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) of 27 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 343, if he will place in the Library his calculations for his statement that 93 per cent. of PSA performance targets have been met. [87842]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 17 December 2002]:* Both reports gave the latest position available at the time of publication, and are based on the same calculation: the number of targets met or partly met, divided by the total number of targets assessed. The Autumn Performance Report is therefore more up to date, and is based on 169 targets met or partly met out of 194 targets assessed. 11 targets have subsequently been met or nearly met, giving 180 targets out of 194, which is how the 93 per cent. figure is derived.

Public Service Pension Schemes

Lynne Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of further savings that will be made if the rules of public service pension schemes are changed so that new members receive an unreduced pension from age 65. [91084]

Ruth Kelly: As noted in Cm 5677, "Simplicity, security and choice: Working and saving for retirement", the Government envisages that the higher pension age might be introduced in most schemes as part of a package of changes to pension arrangements. This would allow for improvements to benefits which employers and staff value and have a positive impact on staff recruitment and retention, including greater flexibility in the transition from work to retirement, and help the financial sustainability of public service pension schemes. Also, while it is envisaged that the new pension packages will be introduced for new employees, the Government will also be consulting on how and to what timescale the higher pension age and any associated enhancement to benefits could be extended to existing employees while protecting rights already accrued. Against that background there are too many uncertainties to give estimates of any likely net costs or savings and these will only become available as proposals are worked up for individual public services after full consultation with staff representatives. The effects of increasing pension ages would also vary considerably from scheme to scheme and build up gradually over time.

Research and Development

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the total amount of money that was spent on research and development by small and medium-sized companies in *(a)* 1998–99, *(b)* 1999–2000, *(c)* 2000–01 and *(d)* 2001–02. [91020]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from C. Mowl to Mr. Howard Flight, dated 23 January 2003:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question concerning what estimate has been made of the total amount of money that was spent on research and development by small and medium sized companies in *(a)* 1998–99, *(b)* 1999–2000, *(c)* 2000–01 and *(d)* 2001–02. I am replying in his absence. (91020)

The answer requires extensive new analysis, using historic information from ONS's interdepartmental business register (IDBR), in order to apply the current definition of small and medium sized businesses (SMEs) based on the Commission Recommendation (96/280/EC) of 3 April 1996. This analysis is in hand as a matter of urgency.

An answer will be provided shortly.

Royal Mint

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many of the recommendations made by Grant Thornton in its Action Plan on the Royal Mint had been addressed by 31 December 2002; if he will place a report on the actions in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [90952]

Ruth Kelly: Of the 70 recommendations contained in the above report, 67 have been completed. Of the remaining three, one is being addressed as part of a new Code of Practice for the Royal Mint and will be put in place by the end of March 2003 (Grant Thornton recommendation 14); one is on schedule to be completed by the agreed date of end March 2003 (Grant Thornton recommendation 32); and one has been found to be impracticable as there is no software available for our current systems (recommendation 62).

Tax Rises

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, what estimate he has made of the annual cost to businesses of tax rises announced in the last Budget. [92750]

Dawn Primarolo: Budget 2002 introduced measures to modernise the corporate tax environment, providing longer-term stability and the best possible environment for investment. A series of targeted measures, such as tax credits for R&D and an exemption for capital gains on substantial shareholding, were introduced; as well as cutting the starting rate of corporation tax to zero and a reduction in the small companies rate to 19 per cent.

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the annual cost to businesses of new tax rises announced in the last Budget. [92835]

Dawn Primarolo: Budget 2002 introduced measures to modernise the corporate tax environment, providing longer-term stability and the best possible environment for investment. A series of targeted measures, such as tax credits for R&D and an exemption for capital gains on substantial shareholding, were introduced, as well as cutting the starting rate of corporation tax to zero and a reduction in the small companies rate to 19 per cent.

Taxation

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the revenue yield of a 49 per cent. income tax rate on *(a)* taxable income and *(b)* gross incomes exceeding £100,000 per annum; if he will estimate in each case the (i) income tax and (ii) capital gains tax yield; and if he will make a statement. [92775]

Dawn Primarolo: The full-year yield in 2003–04 of making the changes are set out in the table.

The full-year yield in 2003–04

	(i) Income Tax yield £ billion	*(ii) Capital Gains Tax yield £ million*
(a) 49 per cent. rate for taxable incomes over £100,000	4.5	100
(b) 49 per cent. rate for gross incomes over £100,000	4.6	100

The Income Tax estimates are based on the Survey of Personal Incomes and are consistent with the November 2002 Pre-Budget Report. These estimates exclude any behavioural response to the tax change.

Capital Gains Tax estimates take into account the likely effect on yield of changes in the volume of disposals in a full year caused by taxpayers' behaviour.

Underspending

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what procedures are in place to ensure that revenue underspend by other Government Departments are *(a)* recognised by HM Treasury and *(b)* factored into decision making in future spending reviews. [92980]

Mr. Boateng: Spending is monitored by the Treasury. The End Year Flexibility (EYF) system allows Departments to carry forward unspent budgets within departmental expenditure limits. Departments' EYF entitlements are published every year in the Public Expenditure Outturn White Paper. Departmental allocations in the Spending Review take account of all relevant factors.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Closed Circuit Television

Mr. Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the cost has been of installing CCTV cameras in North Belfast for security purposes. [90161]

Jane Kennedy: The PSNI commenced installation of CCTV cameras at various interface locations in North Belfast in early summer 2002. The installation costs associated with this project are £681,400.

Mr. Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the cost has been of damage to CCTV equipment in north Belfast installed for security purposes. [90162]

Jane Kennedy: It is wholly regrettable that cameras and associated equipment installed to protect the local community have been attacked. The cost to date of replacing damaged CCTV equipment is £23,800. This does not include the costs to the PSNI (and the army) of supervising the replacement of damaged equipment.

WALES

Departmental Expenditure (Newsprint)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what the total expenditure of his Department was on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in 2002. [90540]

Mr. Touhig: The expenditure by the Wales Office in 2002 on newspapers, magazines and periodicals was £9,389.09.

Mining

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will ensure that the Welsh mining industry is provided with financial assistance on a basis similar to the English Partnerships National Coalfield Programme; and if he will make a statement. [84189]

Mr. Touhig: I understand that there are no plans to establish a Welsh equivalent to the English Partnerships National Coalfield Programme in Wales.

However, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust in Wales was allocated £3.462 million over three years by the UK Government since its launch in late 1999.

The next tranche of funding for the Coalfield Regeneration Trust in Wales, which will be funded by the National Assembly for Wales, has been agreed and will be spread over 2002 to 2005 as follows:

	£ million
2002–03	1.157
2003–04	1.420
2004–05	1.420

The funding for 2003–05 is conditional on the Coalfields Regeneration Trust reaching agreed operational targets.

Public Spending

Mr. George Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what his estimate is of public spending per head from all sources in Wales in the last year for which figures are available, originating from *(a)* local councils, *(b)* devolved Government and *(c)* central Government. [90008]

Peter Hain: The latest estimates of public expenditure for Wales were published in the annual Treasury publication "Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses 2002–03". The next edition of this publication is expected in the spring of this year.

Table 6.9 shows local authority expenditure in Wales for 2000–01 as £4,414 million, equivalent to £1,520 per head of Wales' population.

Table 8.7 shows total identifiable expenditure by the National Assembly for Wales in 2000–01 as £7,980 million, equivalent to £2,748 per head of Wales' population.

Table 8.7 also shows identifiable expenditure by other central Government Departments in 2000–01 of £7,642 million, equivalent to £2,632 per head of Wales' population.

In addition there is £40,436 million of non-identifiable expenditure where it is not possible to allocate the expenditure to a specific country of the United Kingdom.

Welsh Office Expenditure

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what his estimate is of total spending by the Welsh Office in each year from 1999–2000 to 2005–06; and if he will make a statement. [89960]

Mr. Touhig: Estimated Wales Office spending for the years in question:

Year	*£000*
1999–2000	1,485
2001–01	3,011
2001–02	3,526
2002–03	3,696
2003–04	4,196
2004–05	4,196

The figure for 1999–2000 is for expenditure after the establishment of the Wales Office in its present form on

1 July 1999. These figures are spending on the Wales Office and do not include the payments made to the National Assembly for Wales to fund its budget.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Annual Report

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much producing her Department's latest Annual Report cost; how many copies were printed; how many copies of it were sold at its cover price; to whom copies of the report have been provided free of charge; and how many copies were provided free of charge. [90881]

Alun Michael: The Defra Departmental Report 2002 cost Defra £17,512.00 plus VAT. This cost was for designing, typesetting and proofing the report.

The printing of the document was handled by The Stationary Office Limited. They bore the full cost of printing and publishing of the document.

Defra does not have information on how many copies were printed while the Stationary Office is not obliged to give us this information. I understand that the Stationary Office has sold 404 copies of Defra's Departmental Report.

Defra has distributed 750 copies free of charge. The bulk of these have been made available to our staff, 25 sent to our International Relations and Export Division, 25 to the Forestry Commission and seven to the Office of Water Services.

Bovine TB

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent assessment she has made of the incidence of bovine TB in cattle in Cornwall. [92826]

Mr. Morley: At the end of November 2002, the most recent date for which we have raw data, some 493 or 13 per cent. of the cattle herds in Cornwall were under TB movement restrictions. Of those around 380 were placed under restrictions in 2002; disease has been confirmed in 218 of these herds. This number will certainly rise as culture results come through over the next few months. Statisticians have advised that the backlog of overdue TB tests will have to reduce further before conclusions can be drawn about the changes in TB incidence between 2000 and 2003. This likely to be in summer of 2003.

Health and Safety

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) whether her Department and its agencies have met the commitment arising from Action Point 13 of the June 2000 strategy statement on Revitalising Health and Safety to summarise health and safety performance and plans in annual reports from the year 2000–01 onwards; [89511]

(2) what information she has collated on the application to her Department and its agencies of the checklist, circulated by letter by Sir Richard Mottram, referred to under Action Point 12 of the Revitalising Health and Safety strategy statement; and if she will make a statement; [89513]

(3) which senior officials within her Department and its agencies take responsibility for health and safety at board or equivalent level; and where their names are publicised. [89512]

Alun Michael: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr. Nicholas Brown) on 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column. 86W.

Livestock Movements

Tony Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she will abolish the 20 day rule. [92882]

Mr. Morley: I announced earlier today that we intend to reduce the whole farm standstill to six days from 4 March, subject to satisfactory further consultation with the livestock industry on a package of measures to improve biosecurity and disease surveillance.

New Forest National Park

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her estimate is of the cost of the public inquiry into the creation of a New Forest National Park. [91695]

Alun Michael: Defra has allocated £1.2 million for the costs to the Countryside Agency and Planning Inspectorate of the New Forest National Park inquiry. We do not expect an overspend. Other parties at the inquiry are bearing their own costs.

Organic Produce

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what percentage of *(a)* fruits and *(b)* vegetables sold in the UK were organic, in the last year for which figures are available. [91000]

Mr. Meacher: Figures published by the Soil Association[1] estimate that the organic market accounted for 1 per cent. of the total food and drink market in the UK in 2001–02. Defra estimates that the organic market for fruit and vegetables accounted for approximately 2 per cent. of the total market for fruit and vegetables in the UK, in the same period. Detailed information on retail sales figures for organically produced fruit and vegetables is not currently available, however, to enable such a comparison to be made.

The collection, collation and publication of information on the production, manufacture and wholesale and retail marketing of organic foods on a sector by sector basis is one of the many initiatives being further developed under the Organic Action Plan, published on 29 July 2002.

[1] Soil Association organic food and farming report 2002

Plastic Carrier Bags

Mr. Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the Government policy in relation to taxation of plastic carrier bags. [89830]

Mr. Meacher: Taxation is a matter for my right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. As was announced in the Pre-Budget Report on 27 November 2002, the Government currently does not have any plans to introduce a plastic bag tax, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer is still considering the use of economic instruments for the better waste management of this and other items in the waste stream.

Recycling

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps she has taken to promote the recycling of plastic bottles. [89808]

Mr. Meacher [*holding answer 22 January 2003*]:We have set all local authorities statutory performance standards to increase recycling and provided additional funding to deliver these standards. It is for local authorities to decide whether to focus on particular parts of waste stream such as plastic bottles. However, I would expect increasing numbers of local authorities to put in place a collection infrastructure for these as standards increase.

The Producer Responsibility Regulations we have in place require relevant businesses to recover and recycle packaging waste including plastic. That framework also generates income that is used for collection capacity, end use markets and reprocessing capacity.

The Government has also established the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) to create more stable and efficient markets for recycled materials and products, and to tackle the barriers to increased reuse and recycling. WRAP has identified plastics as a priority area in its business plan to 2003–04 and one of its aims is to achieve a 20,000 tonne increase in the mixed plastics processing for industrial products by 2003–04.

WRAP has completed a research project on plastic bottle recycling, funded regional workshops on plastic recycling and has announced that it is considering whether to part fund an automated plastic bottle recycling plant.

Stray Dogs

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her policy is on the obtaining of temporary kennels for stray dogs collected by local authority dog wardens from *(a)* local police forces and *(b)* other sources when temporary police kennels are not available. [92589]

Alun Michael: Section 149 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 requires every local authority to appoint an officer to deal with stray dogs. In addition, under section 3(8) of the Dogs Act 1906, the local authority officer, police, or any other person having charge of a stray dog, are required to feed and maintain a dog until the owner has been given a reasonable opportunity to claim it back. Also, under the Protection of Animals Act it is an offence to cause any unnecessary suffering to a captive or domestic animal. It is therefore for local authorities to decide how they will meet the statutory requirements placed upon them.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND

Departmental Expenditure (Newsprint)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Advocate-General what the total expenditure of her Department was on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in 2002. [90522]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland, *Official Report*, 23 January 2003, column 491W.

CABINET OFFICE

Paper Supplies

Sue Doughty: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office who the suppliers are of his Department's *(a)* paper and *(b)* paper products. [91898]

Mr. Alexander: Cabinet Office operates framework agreements with the Stationery Office Ltd. and Hewlett-Packard Ltd. for the supply of all standard photocopier and printer paper. The Cabinet Office is also party to framework agreements with the James McNaughton Group, the Robert Horne Group, the Howard Smith Paper Group and the Premier Paper Group for the provision of paper for printed publications. Self-adhesive message notes are provided under a framework agreement with Guilbert UK Ltd.

Further information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Lottery

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on the amount raised through the National Lottery for good causes in Northern Ireland; and if she will list those good causes. [92943]

Mr. Caborn: To date the National Lottery has raised over £13 billion for the good causes. Over £137 million of this has been raised for distribution by the Northern Ireland Arts and Sport Councils, and additional amounts have been made available to Northern Ireland through the six UK wide distributors. At 31 December 2002 over £371 million of Lottery funding had been awarded to projects in Northern Ireland.

The National Lottery etc. Act 1993 established five good causes to benefit from the Lottery: these are sport; the arts; heritage; charities and projects to mark the year 2000 and the beginning of the third millennium. The National Lottery Act 1998 Act introduced a new good cause of health education and the environment.

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, what the total value of National Lottery ticket sales in Northern Ireland has been since its inception; and what analysis has been undertaken as to the social class of those buying tickets. [92944]

Mr. Caborn: The total value of National Lottery ticket sales in Northern Ireland since 1994 to date is £991 million. Research carried out by the National Lottery operator in 2001–02 indicated the following breakdown, taking the adult population of the United Kingdom as a whole who play the National Lottery regularly.

Percentage

	Saturday players	*Wednesday players*
AB	17	16
C1	29	28
C2	26	28
DE	27	27
Male	45	49
Female	54	50

Entertainment

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what her estimate is of the total spending of his Department on entertainment in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if she will make a statement. [92395]

Dr. Howells: The following table shows expenditure on entertainment by my Department. The figures do not include the Department's agencies and NDPBs.

All expenditure on official entertainment is made in accordance with published departmental guidance on financial procedures and propriety, based on principles set out in Government Accounting.

£

	DCMS expenditure
1994–95	14,967
1995–96	25,563
1996–97	41,000
1997–98	17,230
1998–99	28,688
1999–00	32,533
2000–01	50,891
2001–02	28,657
2002–03 spend todate	35,990

Focus Groups

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps she has taken to implement the findings from the focus groups research run by her Department since June 2001; and what recent discussions and representations she has had with stakeholders and industry to deliver policies arising from those findings. [92719]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 22 January 2003]:* Since June 2001, the Department has made use of focus group research in two cases.

(1) Research into consumer attitudes to digital television

The findings from the three focus groups conducted as part of this MORI research have been fed into the work of the Digital Action Plan task groups. The Technical and Equipment Group, which have consumer representation including the RNIB and RNID, has identified key areas in which blind/partially sighted viewers and deaf/hard of hearing viewers can benefit from digital television and made recommendations to increase universal user accessibility. The group is taking these findings forward, and will also work with the Independent Television Commission on the "Easy TV" project which is aimed at making the new interactive facilities offered by digital TV easy to use and accessible by all viewers. Ministers are in regular contact with stakeholders and industry through the steering board of the Digital Action Plan.

(2) Regional Data Framework Project

The findings of the focus groups, which were run during 2002, were incorporated into the report and user guide documents. The framework is now being tested by stakeholders so that comments on content and usability can be built into the final version of this guidance documentation on data sources and methodologies.

Health and Safety Regulations

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what discussions she has had with local authorities on the effect of the proposed licensing bill on health and safety regulations; and if she will make a statement; [92333]

(2) what discussions she has had with local authorities on the *(a)* implementation, *(b)* monitoring, *(c)* effect and *(d)* fee-setting of the proposed entertainment licences; and if she will make a statement. [92334]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 21 January 2003]*: Ministers and officials have discussed all aspects of licensing reform with the local authority associations. We are continuing this discussion as the Bill undergoes Parliamentary scrutiny. The Local Government Association and the Association of London Government are represented on the Advisory Group on the Bill.

Under the proposed reforms there will no longer be a separate entertainment licence. Instead a single premises licence for each place where licensable activities are to take place will set out the activities that are permitted there, including entertainment.

Heritage Assets

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what sales of heritage assets and antique assets have been made by her Department since May 1997; and if she will list such assets; and if she will estimate the total sales proceeds. [92396]

Dr. Howells: The Department has made no sales of heritage assets or antique assets since May 1997.

Sport (Community Access)

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans she has to enable greater community access to school and local authority sports facilities and equipment; and if she will make a statement. [89994]

Mr. Caborn: As part of its £1 billion commitment to investment in sport and physical activity, the Government are allocating £750 million across the UK—including £581 million in England—from the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) to support projects designed to bring a step change in the provision of sporting facilities for young people and for the wider community. This funding has been provisionally allocated to local education authority areas, and each LEA was invited to be the lead organisation for its area and work with schools and other partners, including community organisations, to determine the priorities for spend in their areas and submit a balanced portfolio of projects. Initial revenue funding is being made available from the allocations to support the development and promotion of the facilities for wider community use. Space for Sport and Arts, a joint DCMS-DfES initiative providing £130 million towards creating new, and rebuilding existing, primary schools, is also paying particular attention to developing facilities that can also be used by the community out of school hours.

Local authorities are key providers of sport and recreation and play a central role in the delivery of sport in and for the community. The majority of local authorities continue to recognise good value for money represented by spending on sport and recreation for people of all ages in the communities they serve, and they have made considerable progress in investing in quality sports facilities after so many years of neglect in that area. This Government have embarked on an unprecedented investment in sport and recreation across the board, and has to date, through the National Lottery, invested over £660 million into improving local authority sports facilities in England.

Sports Clubs

Mr. David Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what Government funds are available for modernisation of sports clubs; and by what means she channels modernisation funds to sports clubs. [91915]

Mr. Caborn: The Government is making available £60 million over the next three years to enhance sports clubs' facilities. The programme will commence on 1 April this year. Its aims are to create a sustainable and viable sports club infrastructure in England that meets the needs of local communities particularly in deprived areas, to provide appropriate support and pathways for identifying and developing talented individuals and to increase club membership amongst young people, women, ethnic groups and people with disabilities.

The Programme will be managed by Sport England and overseen by a Project Board comprising representatives of the Department, Sport England and the national governing bodies of sport. Funding will be distributed to the national governing bodies, against bids to Sport England, who will manage a portfolio of projects with individual clubs. The governing bodies for football, cricket, tennis and rugby union have been given indicative allocations of £9.3 million each over the three years and 11 other governing bodies will be able to submit bids for awards from a £20 million fund over the three years.

DEFENCE

Amport House

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the *(a)* infrastructure and *(b)* training costs of Amport House were in each of the last five financial years. [92678]

Dr. Moonie: The infrastructure and training costs of Amport House in the last five financial years are as follows:

Amport House infrastructure and training costs

£ million

Financial year	*Infrastructure*
1998–99[1]	1.847
1999–2000[1]	0.857
2000–01	0.599
2001–02	0.633
2002–03[2]	0.628
Training	
1998–99	*0.515*
1999–2000	0.547
2000–01	0.656
2001–02	0.673
2002–03[2]	0.764

[1] Costs include capital works funding for new Chapel.

[2] Forecast of expenditure.

Amport House Conferences

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many chaplains have attended each conference at Amport House in each of the last five financial years; [92674]

(2) how many personnel were employed at Amport House in each of the last five financial years, broken down by *(a)* service personnel, *(b)* civilians and *(c)* rank and grade. [92677]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many conferences were held for chaplains at Amport House in each of the last five financial years. [92679]

Dr. Moonie: The information requested is shown in the table:

FY	*Number*
1997–98	17
1998–99	18
1999–2000	20
2000–01	7
2001–02	18

The Armed Forces Chaplaincy Centre (AFCC), based at Amport House supports all three services and all three of the major ecclesiastical groupings (Church of England (CofE), Roman Catholic (RC) and Church of Scotland and Free Churches (CSFC)) and other faith groups. The above figures include conferences, lectures, structured discussions and Continuing Ministerial Education (CME) as mandated by the sending church authorities, which areattended primarily by service chaplains. It does not include other courses or training activities held at the AFCC which service chaplains may also attend.

British Army of the Rhine

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the size is of the British Army of the Rhine; what its size was in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1993 and *(c)* 1983; and what British forces remain in Germany. [91854]

Mr. Ingram: As a result of the drawdown of British troops in the early 1990s the British Army of the Rhine was disbanded on 1 April 1994. The present establishment of British Army (Germany) is 22,500.

In the period between the years 1983 and the commencement of the drawdown of the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) in 1992 there was little change in the establishment figure. In 1983 it would have been approximately 59,000.

Following the commencement of the drawdown this figure had reduced to 35,000 by the end of 1993 and to 23,500 by 1997.

In addition to the British Army (Germany) establishment, there are a small number of Royal Navy and Royal Air Force personnel currently stationed in Germany.

Call-out Notices

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many call-out notices have been issued in 2003; what percentage of those fit for active duty this represents; and if he will make a statement. [92138]

Dr. Moonie: As at 21 January 1,909 call-out notices had been issued. This represents 0.85 per cent. of the total number of volunteer and Regular Reserves available. At any one time it is not possible to state how many members of the Reserve Forces will be fit for active duty because their state of health will change from day to day. This will only become apparent either when the Reservists report for service or if they make an application for revocation, exemption or deferral of call-out based on their health. This is one reason why we issue a larger number of call-out notices so that we can ensure that we achieve the number of Reservists that we require.

Challenger

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made with the desertisation of Challenger II tanks; when he expects the work to be complete; and if he will make a statement. [91047]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence to the hon. Member for Newark (Mr. Mercer) on 10 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 218W.

Clansman

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what medical equipment is *(a)* possessed by his Department and *(b)* being shipped to the Gulf; and if he will make a statement. [92139]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence holds a vast range of medical equipment, ranging from pharmaceutical items through to mobile operating theatres. To list all the medical equipment held by the MOD, and that which is currently being moved to the Gulf, would be impracticable and could be done only at disproportionate cost. Sufficient medical equipment would be deployed to provide the level of medical support required in the event of military action against Iraq.

Continuous Attitude Surveys

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the responses given by naval personnel to questions no. 30 and 31 of the most recent Royal Navy Continuous Attitude Survey; how many personnel responded to questions 30 and 31; and what percentage of respondents to the survey this represents. [92799]

Dr. Moonie: Details of the responses to questions 30 and 31 of the Royal Navy's most recently published Continuous Attitude Survey report are provided as follows.

Q30—Please indicate your own morale in the service (morale in this context is a combination of contentment, motivation and a sense of well being)

	Number
Very Good	69
Good	328
Average	344
Poor	170
Very Poor	41
Total	952

The number responding to this question, 952, represents over 99 per cent. of the 957 responses to the survey as a whole.

Q31—Having now had the opportunity to give your views on various aspects of service life, please give your overall view of your conditions of service.

	Number
Very satisfied	40
Satisfied	417
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	229
Dissatisfied	230
Very dissatisfied	33
Total	949

The number responding to this question, 949, represents 99 per cent. of the responses to the survey as a whole.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the next continuous attitude surveys for the *(a)* Army, *(b)* Navy and *(c)* Air Force will be *(i)* conducted and (ii) published; whether the questions to be asked will differ in any way from those asked in the last survey; and if he will make a statement. [92800]

Dr. Moonie: The next continuous attitude survey for the Royal Navy will be issued at the end of January with a report expected at the end of May. For the Army the next survey is scheduled to be sent out in June with a report scheduled for publication in September. For the RAF the next questionnaire will be issued on 3 February and the report will be published in August.

The questions in the Royal Navy and the RAF surveys are the same as those asked in the last surveys. For the Army some of the questions will be slightly different from last time. All of the Army surveys have common themes but, within each theme, the type and number of questions is re-examined on each occasion. For the forthcoming survey in June the existing diversity and discipline sections will be re-balanced against a different subject, yet to be decided.

Defence Bodies

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the *(a)* names and *(b)* employers of the members of the *(i)* National Defence Industries Council, (ii) National Defence Industries Council Research and Technology Group, (iii) National Defence and Aerospace Systems Panel, (iv) Research and Technology Task Force and *(v)* Defence Task Force. [91918]

Mr. Ingram: The membership details, both from industry and Government, are as follows:

National Defence Industries Council (NDIC)

Membership	*Industry*
Sir Richard Evans	Chairman. Defence Industries Council and BAE Systems plc
Mr. David Singleton	Defence, Intellect
Mr. Martin Jay	Society of Maritime Industries
Sir David Lees	GKN plc
Mr. Nick Prest	Defence Manufacturers Association
Mr. Gordon Page	Society British Aerospace Companies
Mr. David Marshall	Defence Industries Council
Mr. Simon Frost	Claverham Group
Mr. Alex Dorrian	Thales Defence Ltd
Government	
The right hon. Mr. Geoffrey Hoon MP	Secretary of State for Defence

National Defence Industries Council (NDIC)

Membership	*Industry*
Lord Bach of Lutterworth	Under-Secretary of State and Minister for Defence Procurement
The right hon. Mr. Adam Ingram MP	Minister of State for the Armed Forces
Mr. Alan Johnson MP	Minister of State for Employment Relations, Industry and the Regions, DTI
Sir Kevin Tebbit	Permanent Under-Secretary
Sir Robert Walmsley	Ministry of Defence Chief Executive Defence Procurement Agency
Air Chief Marshal Sir Malcolm Pledger	Ministry of Defence Chief Defence Logistics
Professor Sir Keith O'Nions	Ministry of Defence Chief Scientific Adviser
Mr. Alan Garwood	Head of Defence Export Services
Mr. David Gould—DTI Director TBC	Defence Procurement Agency

National Defence Industries Council Research and Technology Group (NDIC R&T)

Membership	*Industry*
Mr. David Marshall	Society of British Aerospace Companies Ltd
Mr. Andrew Sleigh	QinetiQ
Dr. Andy Low	Thales UK
Mr. Derek Marshall	Defence Industries Council
Mr. Lambert Dopping Hepenstal	BAE Systems
Mrs. Linda Pike	Defence Industries Council
Brigadier Louis Wilkes (Ret'd)	Defence Manufacturers Association
Mr. Ken Maciver	National Defence and Aerospace Systems Panel
Mr. Mike Steeden	Society of British Aerospace Companies Ltd
Mr. Bill Bardo	AMS
Mr. Phillip Goddard	Westland Helicopters Ltd
Mr. Ric Parker	Rolls-Royce
Mr. Robert Limmergard	Intellect
Professor Terry Knibb	BAE Systems
Government	
Mr. Graham Jordan	Chairman. Ministry of Defence
Dr Dai Morris	Ministry of Defence
Mr. David Way	Department of Trade and Industry
Ms Fiona Strens	Ministry of Defence
Mr. Mike Markin	Ministry of Defence
Mr. Nick Helbren	Defence Science and Technology Laboratories
Cdre Nigel Raby RN	Ministry of Defence
Richard Westgarth	Ministry of Defence (Seconded from QinetiQ)
Mr. Robert Beckham	Ministry of Defence

National Defence and Aerospace Systems Panel (NDASP)

Membership	*Industry*
Mr. W. K. (Ken) Maciver, CBE	Chairman
Mr. Ric Parker	Vice Chairman. Rolls-Royce plc
Dr. David Clark, OBE	EPSRC
Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, CBE, FRA	Department of War Studies—Kings College London
Mr. Phil Goddard	Consultant to Westland Helicopters
Mr. Iain Gray	Airbus UK
Professor Terry Knibb	BAE Systems
Professor Philip Lawrence	Aerospace Research Centre
Mr. Andrew Little	Royal Aeronautical Society
Mr. David Marshall	Society of British Aerospace Companies Ltd
Mr. Alan Sharman, CBE	Defence Manufacturers Association
Mr. Andrew Sleigh	QinetiQ
Mr. Adrian Smith	SciSys
Mr. Paul Wrobel	Thales Naval Systems
Government	
Mr. Mike Markin, OBE	Ministry of Defence
Professor Damien McDonnell, OBE	Ministry of Defence
Dr. Graham Coleman	Defence Science and Technology Laboratories
Mr. David Way	Aerospace and Defence Technology, DTI

National Defence and Aerospace Systems Panel (NDASP) Research and Technology Task Force

Membership	*Industry*
Mr. Ric Parker	Chairman. Rolls-Royce plc
Mr. Geoff Byham, MBE	Westland Helicopters Ltd
Mr. Andrew Bourne	EPSRC
Mr. Ian Risk	Airbus
Professor Cyril Hilsum, CBE	
Professor Terry Knibb	BAE Systems
Mr. Andrew Little	Royal Aeronautical Society
Professor Jim McGuirk	Department of Aeronautical and Automotive Engineering, Loughborough University
Dr. John Tunnicliffe	QinetiQ
Mr. Paul Vangasse	BAE Systems
Government	
Mr. Nigel Chew	Ministry of Defence
Dr. Graham Coleman	Defence Science and Technology Laboratories
Dr. Ray Kingcombe	Aerospace and Defence Technology Business Group, DTI

National Defence and Aerospace Systems Panel (NDASP) Defence Task Force

Membership	
Mr. Paul Wrobel	Chairman. Thales

Depleted Uranium

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the use of ammunition containing depleted uranium by British armed forces. [92711]

Mr. Ingram: United Kingdom forces have two types of depleted uranium (DU) ammunition; 120 mm anti-tank rounds (CHARM 3), fired by the Army's Challenger tanks, and 20 mm rounds used by the Royal Navy's Phalanx Close-in Weapon System (a missile defence system).

DU rounds are the most effective kinetic energy penetrators against armour and the British Army will use them if the need arises.

The Royal Navy's Close-In Weapon System does not require anti-armour properties and in recent years, a new tungsten round has been developed for it. Since 1996, all replacement ammunition for the Phalanx system has been of the tungsten variety. Some ships still carry the 20 mm DU round, however, and would fire it should the need arise.

Discharges

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many soldiers subject to manning control in the last 10 years submitted a redress to the Army Board against being discharged; and how many were *(a)* discharged and *(b)* retained after the redress. [92699]

Dr. Moonie: Central records for those who have submitted a Redress of Complaint to the Army Board have only been maintained since 1997.

Since then there have been two applications for Redress of Complaint relating to the Manning Control Point policy, which were resolved before submission to the Army Board. In these cases, manning control action was terminated and the individuals concerned continue to serve on their original engagement.

Infantry Soldiers (Discharges)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many infantry soldiers who were subject to manning control in the last five years were discharged. [92698]

Dr. Moonie: The number of infantry soldiers subject to manning control in the last five years who were discharged under Queen's Regulations 9.413 cNot required for a full Army career', is shown in the following table:

	Yearly totals
1998	46
1999	40
2000	55
2001	44
2002	2
Total	187

Iraq

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the security of supply for armed forces equipment and munitions should forces be committed to military action in Iraq. [92035]

Mr. Ingram: Security of supply is one of the many factors taken into account in the procurement of equipment and munitions. We maintain a close dialogue with our key contractors and international partners to ensure the early identification of any difficulties that may arise so that we can address them accordingly.

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proportion of munitions released over Iraq were precision guided in each of the last five years. [92534]

Mr. Ingram: All of them. RAF aircraft have employed only precision guided munitions when forced to defend themselves while monitoring the No Fly Zones.

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to the answer of 9 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 293W, on Iraq, when figures for ordnance released over Iraq for the whole of 2002 will be published. [92517]

Mr. Ingram: Between 5 and 31 December 2002 RAF aircraft released 11.8 tonnes of ordnance while responding in self defence to attacks from Iraqi air defences. The total released in 2002 was 67.6 tonnes.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much has been spent by the UK in enforcing the no-fly zone over Iraq in each year since its introduction. [91530]

Mr. Ingram: Our records do not separately identify expenditure incurred in maintaining the no fly zones. However, the following table sets out the overall additional expenditure incurred by the Ministry of Defence as a direct result of operations in the Gulf from 1992–93 onwards.

Year	*£ million*
1992–93	551
1993–94	179
1994–95	58
1995–96	14
1996–97	6
1997–98	16
1998–99	35
1999–2000	28
2000–01	25
2001–02 (estimate)	[1]22
2002–03 (estimate)	[1]26

[1] Denotes figure calculated on a resource basis; all previous figures are cash-based

I will write to the hon. Member concerning expenditure in 2001–02 and 2002–03.

Medical Reservists (NHS)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions he has had with Health Ministers about the removal of medical reservists from NHS hospitals for service in *(a)* RFA Argus and *(b)* other Royal Fleet Auxiliary or Royal Navy vessels in the next 12 months. [89879]

Dr. Moonie: Currently, there is no requirement for the employment of medical Reservists in Royal Fleet Auxiliary Argus or other Royal Fleet Auxiliary or Royal Navy vessels over the next 12 months. However, if such a requirement arose, the Ministry of Defence would liaise with the Department of Health and, together, we would work closely with the NHS Trusts concerned to minimise any disruption as far as possible.

Operational Deployments

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the last three operational deployments and the length between each has been for *(a)* 1 Para, *(b)* 2 Para, *(c)* 3 Para, *(d)* 7th Armoured Brigade, *(e)* 1st Armoured Brigade and *(f)* 161 Ambulance Regiment RLC; and how many personnel have been medically downgraded in each. [92140]

Dr. Moonie: Details of the last three operational deployments of each of the units listed, and the length between each of those deployments, are shown in Table 1. 1st Armoured Brigade does not exist. The details for 161 Ambulance Regiment RLC have also been excluded as the unit was disbanded last year, and no longer exists. 161 Ambulance Regiment RLC was a specialist TA unit, and never deployed as a formed unit.

Table 1

Unit	*Date*	*Location*	*Interval (months)*
1 PARA	June-August 1999	Kosovo	-
	May and August 2000 (two short deployments)	Sierra Leone	9
	January-June 2001	Northern Ireland	4
2 PARA	September-October 2001	Macedonia	-
	January-March 2002	Afghanistan	2
	September 2002-March 2003	Northern Ireland	6
3 PARA	September 1997-March 1998	Northern Ireland	-
	January-June 2000	Northern Ireland	21
	January-June 2002	Northern Ireland	18
7 Armd Brigade	April-October 1997	Bosnia	-
	May-November 2000	Kosovo	31
	May-November 2001	Kosovo	6

The details of those personnel classed as Non-FE, as at 1 December 2002, are included in Table 2. Non-FE status signifies some form of temporary medical downgrading, although it should be noted that while an individual is considered to be medically downgraded, they may still be liable for deployment, depending on the reason for the downgrading, the nature and location of the deployment, and medical advice.

Table 2

Unit	*Non-FE total*	*Establishment total*	*Percentage of establishment*
1 Para	30	620	4.8
2 Para	20	687	2.9
3 Para	30	687	4.3
7 Armd Brigade	350	6,576	5.3

Overstretch

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the Government's definition is of overstretch. [89277]

Mr. Ingram: There is no formal definition of overstretch. It has however been referred to in the past as that operational loading of military formations or individuals which is excessive.

Royal Naval Vessels

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the Royal Naval vessels which have entered service in each of the past five years. [92962]

Mr. Ingram: Details of Royal Navy vessels entering into service in each of the past five years are:

1998

HMS Raider

HMS Tracker

1999

HMS Ocean

HMS Pembroke

HMS Penzance

2000

HMS Grimsby

HMS Vengeance

HMS Bangor

HMS Kent

2001

HMS Ramsey

HMS Portland

HMS Blyth

2002

HMS Shoreham

HMS St. Albans

Royal Ordnance

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is supplied from each of the ROD sites in the UK. [92033]

Mr. Ingram: Royal Ordnance Defence (ROD), part of BAE Systems, supply a variety of munitions to the Ministry of Defence under the terms of the MOD/ROD Framework Partnering Agreement. This work is undertaken by ROD at five main sites: Radway Green, Cheshire (supplies Small Arms Ammunition and manufactures components for 20mm and 30mm ammunition for other RO sites); RO Birtley, Co Durham (manufactures metal components); RO Bridgwater, Somerset (produces explosives); RO Chorley, Lancashire (produces a variety of components such as Small Arms Primers, Tube Vent Electric L4 and other initiating devices); and RO Glascoed, Gwent (undertakes assembly, fill/ pack activities and supplies finished munitions to the Department, including 20mm and 30mm ammunition, tank ammunition, 4.5 inch Naval shells, 105mm and 155mm Artillery rounds).

S-type Contracts

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to his answer of 8 January 2003, *Official*

Report, column 226W, on S-type contracts, what the rank is of those soldiers serving on S-type contracts. [92702]

Dr. Moonie: The breakdown by rank of those soldiers who are employed on an S-type engagement following termination of their notice or open engagement after a manning control review, is shown in the following table.

	Pte	*LCpl*	*Cpl*	*Sgt*	*Army total*
Rank totals	82	76	162	31	351

SA80

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many modified SA80 rifles are *(a)* issued to personnel and *(b)* held in stock; and if he will make a statement. [92141]

Mr. Ingram: The modified SA80 is being issued to units at a rate of 4,000 weapons each month, in order of operational priority. 50,000 weapons have been issued to units to date. Weapons are issued to units as they become available following modification; consequently no modified weapons are currently held as stock.

Sea Harriers

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what provision his Department has made to fill the capability gap which will result from the withdrawal of the sea harriers. [92899]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Baillieston (Mr. Wray) on 5 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 930W. This provided an update to the answers I gave on 26 September 2002, *Official Report*, column 328W, and on 21 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 164W, to the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock).

Service Chaplains

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the ratio is of *(a)* uniformed and *(b)* civilian chaplains to service personnel, broken down by service. [92675]

Dr. Moonie: The ratio of chaplains to service personnel is as follows:

	Ratio of service chaplains to service personnel	*Ratio of civilian chaplains to service personnel*[1]
Royal Navy	1:594	1:1318
Army	1:746	1:665
RAF	1:725	1:697

[1] The ratio of civilian chaplains to service personnel has been calculated on the basis that chaplains are in full time employment. However, there are no full time officiating chaplains in the Royal Navy and RAF. Officiating chaplains are local clergy employed on a part time basis (usually half day a week) to assist with duties in the absence of a service chaplain.

Note:

Ratios are based on January 2003 strengths, with the exception of the Army figures which are as at 1 December 2002

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* uniformed and *(b)* civilian chaplains there are in each of the three services, broken down by denomination. [92680]

Dr. Moonie: There are currently 293 service chaplains and 275 civilian 'officiating' chaplains serving with the armed forces. The table provides a breakdown by denomination.

	Royal Navy[1]		*Army*[2]		*RAF*[3]	
	Uniformed	*Civilian*[4]	*Uniformed*	*Civilian*	*Uniformed*	*Civilian*
Church of England	39	10	88	98	48	19
Roman Catholic	11	12	24	26	10	29
Church of Scotland	9	3	20	23	5	[5]—
Methodist	6	5	11	12	7	[5]—
United Reform Church	1	1	—	—	—	[5]—
Baptist	4	1	—	—	2	[5]—
Presbyterian	1	—	—	—	1	[5]—
United Board	—	—	6	8	—	[5]—
Total	71	32	149	167	73	76

[1] As at 20 January 2003.

[2] As at 1 December 2002.

[3] As at 1 January 2003.

[4] Figures include both officiating and honorary officiating chaplains.

[5] 28 various denominations (breakdown of figures not readily available).

The term civilian chaplain is misleading. Support to serving chaplains in the Royal Navy and RAF, and on many Army units, is provided by 'officiating chaplains'. These are not full-time ministers but local clergy who in addition to their parochial duties will provide part-time support to military units without a chaplain, cover when the serving chaplain is deployed, and help and advise members of other denominations when a suitable commissioned chaplain or representative of the appropriate denomination is not available.

Service Discharges

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to his answer of 27 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 324W, what was the breakdown by rank of those discharged under QR9.413 in the last 15 years. [92701]

Dr. Moonie: The breakdown by rank of those discharged under Queen's Regulations 1975 Paragraph 9.413 'Not required for a full Army career' in the last 15 years is shown in the following table.

Year	*Rank*			
	CPL + above	*LCPL*	*PTE*	*Year total*
1988	69	174	249	492
1989	97	130	240	467
1990	34	49	57	140
1991	28	25	47	100
1992	116	128	87	331
1993	47	45	65	157
1994	1	0	13	14
1995	0	0	7	7
1996	58	83	61	202
1997	85	93	53	231
1998	67	57	51	175
1999	33	35	25	93
2000	11	24	31	66
2001 and 2002	5	14	31	50
Total	651	857	1,017	2,525

Due to the low numbers involved, the figures for 2001 and 2002 have been combined and the information is not broken down by rank above Corporal (Cpl.), because this could identify individuals and breach disclosure and confidentiality policy.

Service Personnel (Discharges)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many soldiers subject to manning control in the last 10 years then elected their right to discharge and were discharged under QR9.373. [92700]

Dr. Moonie: The number of soldiers who were subject to manning control, then elected their right to discharge, and were subsequently discharged under Queen's Regulations, paragraph 9.373 'By right having given the appropriate notice' is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Storm Shadow

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when Storm Shadow will enter service with the RAF. [91034]

Mr. Ingram: Due to technical problems experienced in the development of Storm Shadow we are reviewing the programme's timescales with MBDA.

We are working hard with MBDA to ensure that the RAF gets this important capability into service as soon as possible, while not jeopardising the long-term performance of the system.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Affordable Housing (Infrastructure Provision)

Helen Southworth: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what action he is taking to ensure that planning of the siting of affordable housing takes into account infrastructure provision with special reference to *(a)* transport, *(b)* schooling *(c)* medical and *(d)* other local service needs of the residents. [93003]

Mr. McNulty: Planning Policy Guidance Note 3: "Housing" (paragraph 31) advises that in deciding which sites to allocate for housing, local planning authorities should assess their potential and suitability for development having regard to a number of matters such as the capacity of existing and potential infrastructure, including public transport, and social infrastructure (such as schools and hospitals); and the ability to provide sufficient demand to sustain appropriate local services and facilities.

Brent Cross Shopping Centre

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he expects to make a decision on the planning issues concerning the proposed extension of Brent Cross shopping centre; and if he will make a statement. [93072]

Mr. McNulty: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister is currently considering the responses received to his reference back letter of 29 November 2002 and hopes to issue a decision shortly.

Container Ports

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what his policy is on approving the development of non-brownfield sites for container port use. [91698]

Mr. McNulty: The general policy of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in respect of development for which planning permission is necessary is to encourage the use of previously developed land for development in preference to building on greenfield land. Each planning application has, however, to be considered on its merits and there may be circumstances in which the use of brownfield sites for container port use is not appropriate.

Departmental Expenditure Limit

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what reasons underlay the technical adjustment of £1,000,000 to correct the treatment of an Ordnance Survey interest payment in his departmental expenditure limit. [92510]

Mr. McNulty: This adjustment was to correct an inputting error in the budgeting treatment for Ordnance Survey in the Main Estimates 2002–03. It did not reflect any alteration to scheduled net interest transactions made by Ordnance Survey in 2002–03. These were in respect of:

interest receivable from the National Loans Fund in respect of Ordnance Survey's cash deposits there;

interest payable by Ordnance Survey to the National Loans Fund, on its deemed loans. These loans were in respect of 50 per cent. of net assets on the vesting of Ordnance Survey as a trading fund on 1 April 1999, repayable over the period 1999–2012.

I refer the hon. Member to Notes 5 and 12 on pages 63 and 67 of Ordnance Survey's Annual Report and Accounts 2001–02, which refers to these transactions for the two previous years. The Ordnance Survey's Annual Report and Accounts 2001–02 have been placed in the Libraries of the House

Empty Homes (Select Committee Report)

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he expects to have completed his evaluation of the report in the previous session of Parliament of the Transport, Local Government and Regions Select Committee on Empty Homes. [92646]

Mr. McNulty: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister sets out our evaluation of the Select Committee's report on Empty Homes in our response which were presented to Parliament in May 2002 (Cm 5514), copies of which were placed in the Library.

We are taking forward a number of recommendations made in the report as part of our programme of work.

Environmentally Protected Sites (Planning Permission)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what criteria he applies in deciding to overrule public inquiry reports refusing permission for industrial development of environmentally protected sites. [91696]

Mr. McNulty: Decisions on every planning application are made on their merits, taking account of the facts of the application, national planning policy, development plans, the recommendations of a public inquiry inspector and any other material considerations.

Fire Station Equipment

Mr Clifton-Brown: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will take up the offer from Mike Bennett of Vantage Point, Mitcheldene, Gloucestershire, to make available fire station premises with two modern fully-equipped red fire engines. [85182]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is very grateful for all offers of assistance during the current fire dispute. We understand that in December officers from Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service and the Army examined Mr. Bennett's fire appliances but decided not to use them. Since then two members of the Fire Service College have examined the appliances, with a view to using them in training, to replace appliances from the college that are currently being used by those providing emergency fire cover.

Geographic Information

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what assessment the Intra Governmental Group on Geographic Information has made of the size of the geographic information market in the UK. [92511]

Mr. McNulty: The Intra Governmental group on Geographic Information (IGGI) has made no estimate of the size of the UK Geographic Information market.

Green Belt

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what steps he has taken to address the concerns about the protection of green belt land from speculative development expressed in Early Day Motion 1236 in the previous Session of Parliament. [92648]

Mr. McNulty: Government policy on the green belt is set out in Planning Policy Guidance Note (PPG) 2, which states that protecting the countryside from encroachment is one of the main purposes of including land in the green belt. In addition to the usual strict controls on development in the countryside, in green belts there is a "general presumption against inappropriate development", which is by definition harmful to the green belt and conflicts with the purposes of including land in it.

The Government reaffirmed their commitment to the protection and enhancement of the green belt in my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister statement on sustainable communities, housing and planning in the House of Commons on 18 July 2002.

Housing (Stock Transfer)

Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister which local authorities have taken forward large scale voluntary transfer, broken down by party control; and what assessment he has made of the benefits of Large Scale Voluntary Transfer. [92010]

Mr. McNulty: The list shows local authorities that have completed large scale voluntary transfers of their housing stock broken down by current party control. My right hon. Friend The Deputy Prime Minister will shortly announce the Government's comprehensive long term programme for sustainable communities. This will include an outline of how the Government sees stock transfer as contributing to the delivery of the decent homes target.

Local Authorities That Have Completed LSVT Broken Down by Current Party Control

Conservative

Chiltern
Sevenoaks
Swale
Broadland
Mid Sussex
East Dorset
South Bucks
Christchurch
Suffolk Coastal
Tunbridge Wells
London Borough Bromley
Surrey Heath
Breckland
Hambleton
Havant
Hart
Hertsmere
Wychavon
Mid Beds
Cherwell
Malvern Hills
Maldon
Kennet
Rushmoor
Spelthorne
East Hampshire
Wyre
Stratford
South Staffs
Lichfield
West Somerset
Rother
South Hams
London Borough Enfield
Huntington

Test Valley
London Borough Richmond
Horsham
East Northamptonshire
Torbay
Chichester
West Oxfordshire
Shrewsbury and Atcham
Mid-Bedfordshire
Derbyshire Dales
East Hertfordshire
Reigate and Banstead
Carlisle

Labour

Thanet
Hastings
Manchester[1]
London Borough Bexley
London Borough Merton[1]
London Borough Tower Hamlets[1]
London Borough Hackney[1]
London Borough Brent[1]
Tameside[1]
London Borough Hammersmith and Fulham[1]
Telford and Wrekin
London Borough Greenwich[1]
Allerdale
Birmingham[1]
Burnley
Coventry
East
Staffordshire
Sunderland
Blackburn with Darwen
Vale Royal
St. Helens
Redcar and Cleveland
Knowsley

Liberal Democrat

Newbury[2]
East Cambs
Vale of Whitehorse
Eastleigh
West Wiltshire
Liverpool[1]
South Somerset
Worthing
London Borough Islington[1]
North Devon

No overall control

Bedford
Medina[3]
Rochester[4]
South Wight[5]
Tonbridge and Malling
Ryedale
West Dorset
South Shropshire
Leominster[6]
South Ribble
Penwith
North Dorset
Basingstoke and Deane
Royal Borough Windsor and Maidenhead
North Wiltshire
Walsall
Cotswold
South Oxfordshire
London Borough Lambeth[1]
Congleton
Oldham[1]
Kerrier
Basildon[1]
Stoke-on-Trent[1]
Tewkesbury
Wirral[1]
West Devon
Bath and North East Somerset
Preston Borough Council[1]
West Lindsey
Boston
Tynedale
Newcastle Under Lyme
Restormel
Weymouth and Portland
Fylde
Chester
Staffordshire Moorlands
Calderdale
Mendip
Chelmsford
St. Edmundsbury
London Borough Waltham Forest
London Borough Harrow
Herefordshire

Independent

Epsom and Ewell
Eden
East Lindsey
Elmbridge
Wyre Forest

Notes:

[1] Includes Estates Renewal Challenge Fund transfers
[2] Now West Berks
[3] Now Isle of Wight
[4] Now Medway
[5] Now Isle of Wight
[6] Now Herefordshire

Islington

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what discussions he has had with Islington council on the disposal of the freehold of buildings which house Government-funded regeneration programmes; and if he will make a statement. [92326]

Mr. McNulty: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has held no discussions with Islington council on the disposal of the freehold of buildings which house Government-funded regeneration programmes.

London Ambulance Service

Dr. Cable: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many cycle response units are in service with the London

Ambulance Service; in which London boroughs they are situated; how many are due to be introduced in 2003; and if he will make a statement. [91654]

Mr. Hutton: I have been asked to reply.

The London Ambulance Service has one cycle response unit comprising three cycles staffed by a team of up to six technicians or paramedics.

At this time the unit covers only the highly pedestrianised and congested area around Covent Garden and Leicester Square. There are no current plans to introduce cycle response units elsewhere in London.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many vacancies there are within the London Ambulance Service for frontline paramedics; and if he will make a statement. [91676]

Mr. Hutton: I have been asked to reply.

The London Ambulance Service (LAS) has 2,181 staff in post, out of an establishment of 2,298. There are therefore 117 vacancies. The LAS is training staff to reach the establishment figure. The LAS is on target with its recruitment programme for 2002–03, made possible by an increase in funding from commissioners.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what percentage of frontline London ambulance staff have been issued with anti-stab vests; and if he will make a statement. [91677]

Mr. Hutton: I have been asked to reply.

The London Ambulance Service (LAS) has taken the decision to equip all front line staff with stab vests, given the very real threat of violence towards staff. Extensive trials have taken place and a suitable vest has now been selected. The LAS anticipates that all front line staff will have been issued with a personal made to measure stab vest by June of this year.

Planning Appeals

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what plans he has to introduce the same rights of appeal for objectors and applicants within the planning system. [92710]

Mr. McNulty: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has no plans to introduce a right of appeal for objectors against the decision of a local planning authority in determining an application for planning permission. The views of interested parties are taken into account in drawing up development plan policies and when reaching decisions on individual planning applications. The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill contains measures which will make the planning system more accessible and transparent, and give greater opportunities for local residents and third parties to participate more effectively in the planning process as a whole.

Planning Guidance

Helen Southworth: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what action he will take to ensure that the PPG 3 sequentiality guidance is effectively applied to protect greenfield sites in the light of the judgment in the Court of Appeal in Rowlinson *v.* Warrington Borough Council. [93004]

Mr. McNulty: Planning Policy Guidance Note 3: "Housing" makes clear the Government's commitment to meet the country's future housing needs in the most sustainable way, by giving priority to re-using previously-developed land within urban areas, bringing empty homes back into use and converting existing buildings, in preference to the development of greenfield sites.

It is normally for local planning authorities to determine planning applications made to them. In doing so they are required to take account of all considerations which may be material, including the guidance in PPG3.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is not convinced that it is necessary to take any further action in the light of the decision in Rowlinson *v.* Warrington, which was determined on the facts of the case.

South East Region

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many people are employed by *(a)* SEEDA, *(b)* SEERA, and *(c)* GOSE; and what has been the annual budget of each organisation since its inception. [91694]

Mr. Leslie: People currently employed (full and part-time):

GOSE: 267

SEEDA: 185

South East Regional Assembly: 23

Year	*GOSE*	*SEEDA*	*South East England Regional Assembly*
1995–96	8.3	[1]—	[1]—
1996–97	8.4	[1]—	[1]—
1997–98	8.5	[1]—	[1]—
1998–99	8.6	[2]0	[1]—
1999–2000	8.7	5.2	0.3
2000–01	9.0	6.3	0.4
2001–02	9.7	7.1	1.0
2002–03	10.8	[3]11.2	1.3

[1] Organisations not in existence

[2] Set up costs were incurred by GOSE and therefore came out of GOSE budgets

[3] Forecast spend from single capital pot allocation

Thames Crossings

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will list the proposals for new Thames river crossings east of Tower Bridge; what their current status is; what the timetable is for consideration; and which public authorities will be responsible for promoting and determining each case. [92086]

Mr. McNulty: Proposals for new East Thames River Crossings within the London boundary are a matter for the Mayor of London and Transport for London. These are:

Thames Gateway Bridge, at Galleons Reach linking Barking and Thamesmead—two lanes each way for general traffic and one lane each way dedicated for use by public transport vehicles; a business case is being prepared for the scheme; the Mayor of London and Transport for London are responsible for timetabling and promotion.

Silvertown Link—a road bridge or tunnel between the Greenwich peninsula and Silvertown; Transport for London are continuing to develop the scheme as part of their river crossings package; the Mayor of London and Transport for London are responsible for timetabling and promotion.

Docklands Light Railway extension to Woolwich; a draft Transport and Works Act Order for the DLR scheme has been deposited; the Mayor of London and Transport for London are responsible for timetabling and promotion.

In addition, the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL) Thames Tunnel, a twin-bore railway tunnel between Swanscombe and West Thurrock, is currently under construction and is due to open with the rest of CTRL Section 2 in 2007.

There are no other formal proposals for new crossings at this time.

Transfer of Undertakings

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what plans he has to extend TUPE regulations to local authorities who transfer staff to contractors following contractual agreements. [92546]

Mr. Leslie: Clauses 101 and 102 of the Local Government Bill will confer new powers on the Secretary of State and the National Assembly of Wales to require best value authorities in England and Wales, when engaged in contracting-out exercises, to deal with staff matters in accordance with directions. It is intended that the direction-making powers will be used to ensure that contracting exercises are conducted either on the basis that TUPE will apply or, in circumstances where TUPE does not apply, that staff involved should be treated no less favourably than had the regulations applied, unless there are exceptional circumstances. The clauses also ensure that TUPE transferees from local authorities will be offered either retention of the Local Government Pension Scheme or a broadly comparable scheme.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Education Staff (Herefordshire)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many *(a)* secondary school teachers, *(b)* primary school teachers and *(c)* classroom assistants are employed in Herefordshire. [91735]

Mr. Miliband: The following table provides full-time equivalent (FTE) January 2002 figures for maintained schools in Herefordshire.

Full-time equivalent (FTE) January 2002 figures for maintained schools in Herefordshire

	Nursery/primary	Secondary
Regular teachers FTE	690	630
Teaching assistants FTE[1]	100	50
Other non-teaching staff FTE[2]	250	130

Notes:

Includes nursery assistants, special needs support staff, minority ethnic pupil support staff and non-teaching assistants.

Includes administrative staff, technicians and other education support staff, and child care staff in boarding schools.

All figures are rounded to the nearest 10.

Source:

Annual 618G Survey of Teachers in Service (teacher numbers) and Annual School's Census (non-teaching staff).

Examination Papers

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what actions he has taken to ensure that examination papers are marked and returned on time to schools and colleges. [92012]

Mr. Miliband: On 3 December, we announced to the House that we were making an additional £6 million available to QCA to support the public examination system in 2003. The money will be spent on ensuring that the 2003 examinations are delivered accurately and effectively and particular attention will be paid to ensuring that there are sufficient examiners. The Examinations Task Force, chaired by the QCA with representatives from the awarding bodies and the teaching profession, will oversee delivery of the examinations.

Excluded Pupils

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many and what percentage of children excluded from mainstream schooling were in an alternative form of education in the last period for which figures are available. [90913]

Mr. Miliband: All local education authorities were committed to offering a full timetable to permanently excluded pupils from September 2002. In targeted schools in 34 local authorities, provision is also being made for those excluded on a temporary basis. These arrangements will be extended to a further 27 local authorities in the coming year.

The most recent information on type of provision for permanently excluded pupils is for September 2001 and is shown in the table.

Distribution of mode of provision of education for permanently excluded pupils—England, September 2001[1]

Key Stage of pupil	*Key Stages 1 and 2*[2]		*Key Stage 3*[3]	
	Number of pupils excluded	*Percentage of the total number of exclusions*[4]	*Number of pupils excluded*	*Percentage of the total number of exclusions*[4]
PRU	289	44.7	1,057	51.0
Home tuition	199	30.8	421	20.3
Voluntary Sector	0	0.0	17	0.8
FE college	—	—	2	0.1
Work related	—	—	2	0.1
Mixed provision	33	5.1	99	4.8
Other provision	72	11.1	186	9.0
No provision	53	8.2	288	13.9
Total	646	100.0	2,072	100.0

Key Stage of pupil	Key Stage 4[5]		Total	
	Number of pupils excluded	Percentage of the total number of exclusions[4]	Number of pupils excluded	Percentage of the total number of exclusions[4]
PRU	2,452	46.6	3,798	47.6
Home tuition	504	9.6	1,124	14.1
Voluntary Sector	78	1.5	95	1.2
FE college	671	12.8	673	8.4
Work related	268	5.1	270	3.4
Mixed provision	393	7.5	525	6.6
Other provision	402	7.6	660	8.3
No provision	489	9.3	830	10.4
Total	5,257	100.0	7,975	100.0

[1] Based on replies from 146 out of 150 local education authorities.

[2] Generally ages 5–10 at the start of the school year.

[3] Generally ages 11–13 at the start of the school year.

[4] The number of exclusions expressed as a percentage of the total number of exclusions within that Key Stage.

[5] Generally ages 14–15 at the start of the school year.

Source:

Education of Permanently Excluded Pupils 2001 survey

Leadership Incentive Grant

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what estimate he has made of the number of new consultants needed to assess applications for the Leadership Incentive grants; and if he will make a statement. [91524]

Mr. Miliband *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* We have offered each partnership formed for the purposes of the Leadership Incentive Grant the cost of 5 days of consultancy to facilitate collaborative working between groups of schools receiving the Leadership Incentive Grant. The number and composition of collaboratives of schools receiving the Leadership Incentive Grant will be determined according to local circumstances, but we estimate that there will be some 200 collaboratives. It will be possible for a Leadership Consultant to facilitate up to three collaboratives.

There is no requirement for schools to complete an application for the Leadership Incentive Grant. Leadership Collaboratives will be required to produce a collaborative plan to be submitted to the Secretary of State for approval. Plans will be assessed within the Department, using existing resources.

Literacy and Numeracy Strategies

David Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will make a statement on the development of the literacy and numeracy strategies.[R] [92988]

Mr. Miliband: The literacy and numeracy strategies, which have helped teachers to deliver the highest ever standards in English and maths, will remain at the heart of our continuing drive to raise achievement in primary schools within a broad and enriched curriculum. We will continue to develop the strategies' approach to teaching and learning in the light of good practice and in consultation with schools.

Non-governmental Organisations

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, pursuant to his answer of 26 November 2003, *Official Report,* column 189W, on non-governmental organisations, if he will list the voluntary and private organisations to which the Department makes grants directly. [89334]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Department's current accounting system does not distinguish between payments made as grants and those made through contractual arrangements, nor does it identify the status of the organisation to which payments have been made. We have explored how this information could be held centrally and have taken action to include this type of information in the design of the Department's future accounting system, which is planned to be in place from April 2004.

The information could, therefore, be provided in the form requested only at disproportionate cost. I have, however, placed in the Libraries a list of organisations that either received a grant or to whom the Department made a contract payment from programme funds during 2001–02. Specific details of what is covered by the list are set out in the material placed in the Libraries.

Paper Supplies

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills who the suppliers are of his Department's *(a)* paper and *(b)* paper products. [91901]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: The Department has three suppliers of paper and paper products:

Banner Business Supplies (via the Stationery contract)

Alphagraphics (via the personalised printed business stationery contract) and

Dixon and Roe (via the bulk paper contract).

The Government's policy is that all public procurement of goods and services is to be based on value for money, having due regard to propriety and regularity. Each Department is responsible for its own procurements.

School Spending

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much money per *(a)* secondary and *(b)* primary school pupil is allocated in the local government education spending formula as a top-up to reflect additional costs for recruitment and retention of staff in *(i)* Staffordshire and (ii) other shire counties, for the year 2003–04. [91886]

Mr. Miliband *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* Staffordshire is not amongst those shire counties which will receive this top-up in 2003–04. The Area Cost Adjustment is given to those areas whose average wages are above a threshold. The average amount per pupil that shire counties will receive to reflect the additional costs of recruitment and retention through the Area Cost Adjustment is £57 for primary pupils and £72 for secondary pupils.

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much money per *(a)* secondary and *(b)* primary school pupil is allocated in the Local Government Education spending formula as basic entitlement in *(i)* Staffordshire and (ii) other shire counties, for the year 2003–04. [91887]

Mr. Miliband *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* The amount allocated for each secondary and primary pupil as the basic entitlement in 2003–04 is the same for all authorities. For a primary pupil it is £2,006 and for a secondary pupil it is £2,659.

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much money per *(a)* secondary and *(b)* primary school pupil is allocated in the Local Government Education spending formula as a top-up to reflect deprivation among pupils in *(i)* Staffordshire and (ii) other shire counties, for the year 2003–04. [91888]

Mr. Miliband *[holding reply 21 January 2003]:* The additional amount allocated for each secondary and primary school pupil in deprived circumstances is the same for all authorities—in 2003–04 it is £1,300 per pupil.

Taken as an average over each category of pupil, whether they are deprived or not, the average additional amount for deprivation for each pupil in 2003–04 is as follows:

£

	Primary	*Secondary*
Staffordshire	40	39
Shire counties average	43	41

The average for Staffordshire is lower than that for all shire counties because Staffordshire has a lower proportion of pupils in deprived circumstances than some other counties.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Access (Children)

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many representations he has received from UK nationals who are being prevented from making contact with their children in Germany and in other EU nations [illegible]wing divorce settlement in the UK which gave them the entitlement to have regular contact with their children; and if he will make a statement. [93066]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There are five UK nationals who have contacted the FCO because they are experiencing difficulties in getting access to their children in other EU nations, following divorce settlements in the UK which entitled them to regular access. Two of these cases are in Germany, two are in France and one case is in Finland. I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) on 6 November 2002, *Official Report*, columns 624–25W, which outlined cases we have dealt with in Germany in the last 5 years.

All EU nations are signatories to the Hague Convention on International Child Abduction, which the Lord Chancellor's Department (LCD) leads on. If a parent contacts us for advice on a child abduction case in a Hague Convention country we refer them to LCD. We can also offer practical help and support through our Posts overseas, such as providing lists of English speaking lawyers, attending court hearings etc.

Afghanistan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the interim Government of Afghanistan on human rights. [92854]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary last discussed human rights with the Afghan Transitional Administration when he met President Karzai at the Bonn talks on Afghanistan in December 2002. I raised human rights with Vice-President Khalili when we met in London today.

Bangladesh

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Bangladesh concerning the violation of human rights and persecution of religious minorities in Bangladesh. [92658]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Our High Commission in Dhaka monitors closely reports of human rights abuses in Bangladesh. We are concerned by reports of mistreatment of detainees, including deaths in custody, associated with "Operation Clean Heart". We have urged the Bangladesh Government to follow the due process of law in all cases. We have raised allegations of attacks against minorities on several occasions with the Bangladesh Government, both at a senior level in Dhaka and with regional government officials, encouraging them to investigate all allegations fully.

Departmental Refurbishment

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many offices in his Department have been refurbished in the last three years, and what has been the cost to public funds. [86727]

Mr[illegible]mmell: In the FCO home estate the only office building refurbished within the past three years is the Old Admiralty building. The cost was £63 million and the project was part of the FCO's strategy to concentrate its London staff into two buildings in order to reduce home estate running costs by 50 per cent.

The FCO has committed approximately £300,000 per annum for the past three years (2000–01, 2001–02, 2002–03) to the refurbishment of its offices that form part of the UK estate. This refurbishment covers routine works to general office space, corridors and common parts together with fine rooms and conference rooms.

In the overseas estate major office refurbishments were completed in Riga (£918,000) Tehran (£977,000), Tel Aviv (£384,000), Istanbul (£557,000), and Rangoon (£280,000).

Other, smaller, projects will have been completed through funds devolved to overseas posts. We maintain no central record of these and it is not possible to obtain full details without incurring disproportionate cost.

Dubai

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on how many occasions in the past 12 months the Government has made an approach to the Government of Dubai in relation to specific cases of Britons imprisoned there who may be considered for amnesty. [90028]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: In the last year our consular officers in Dubai have forwarded, but did not support, two pleas for clemency to the Dubai authorities on behalf of relatives and MPs of convicted British nationals.

Health and Safety Strategy

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which senior officials within his Department and its agencies take responsibility for health and safety at board, or equivalent level; and where their names are publicised. [89494]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: As with all Departments, the Permanent Under-Secretary takes overall responsibility for health and safety. At departmental board level, the Director General for Corporate Affairs has been given particular responsibility and is designated the FCO's Health and Safety 'Champion'. New entrants to the FCO are notified of the DG Corporate Affairs' responsibility during their induction. His role is also identified in the new health and safety policy statement, soon to be issued.

Special Advisers/Press Officers

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many *(a)* special advisers and *(b)* press officers have been employed by his Department in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and at what cost in each year. [92440]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office employs two special advisors at any one time, the full cost of which is listed in the table[1]. All press officers employed are civil servants whose salary is appropriate to their grade.

	£
1997–98	76,762
1998–99	86,992
1999–2000	89,188
2000–01	94,697
2001–02	138,593
2002–03	131,062

[1] It was not possible to ascertain the cost prior to 1997 without incurring disproportionate costs.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those countries which intelligence indicates may be in possession of weapons of mass destruction. [93101]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Under exemption 1*(a)* of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, it is not generally our policy to publish intelligence information.

However, under the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the United States, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom are legally entitled to possess nuclear weapons.

Additionally, India and Pakistan have tested nuclear devices. We continue to urge Israel to resolve international concerns about its nuclear status by acceding to the NPT as a non-nuclear weapons state. We also know that Iraq has significant biological and chemical weapons capabilities and, were UN sanctions to be lifted, we believe it could develop a nuclear weapon within five years. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has admitted to US officials that it has been pursuing a programme for the enrichment of uranium. We believe that they have the capability to use this material to manufacture nuclear weapons. We also believe that they have previously diverted sufficient such material to manufacture at least one nuclear weapon.

There are four States Party to the Chemical Weapons Convention (the US, Russia, India and one other State Party) that have declared possession of chemical weapons. They are currently in the process of destroying them in accordance with their obligations under the Treaty.

In the past there have been public statements of concern about reports that Iran, Libya and Syria pursuing programmes to develop WMD and the means for their delivery.

Zanzibar

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) when his Department was first informed of the increased threat to visitors to Zanzibar; [92169]

(2) when the British high commission in Dar es Salaam responded to the increased terrorist threat to visitors to Tanzania, especially Zanzibar; and what action was taken; [92170]

(3) what reports his Department received from the *(a)* Russian and *(b)* US authorities concerning the increased terrorist threat to visitors to Zanzibar, and when. [92172]

Mr. Straw: We learnt that the US were changing their travel advice for Zanzibar on the evening of 10 January. Our existing advice already gave a robust warning to British travellers of the risks involved in going to Tanzania—including Zanzibar. Following discussions between missions locally and between FCO officials and the US State Department on why they had changed their travel advice and an assessment of the latest available intelligence, we amended our travel advice for Tanzania on 15 January. I cannot, of course, comment on the specifics of intelligence matters. However, the Agencies receive a large number of reports on a daily basis from a range of foreign liaison services. Relationships with these liaison services, which include the Americans and the Russians, are strong and positive.

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department updated the FCO travel advice concerning the increased terrorist threat to visitors to Zanzibar; and if he will make a statement. [92171]

Mr. Straw: The FCO travel advice for Tanzania, which includes Zanzibar, was last up-dated on 15 January 2003.

The Travel Advice notice already gave appropriate warnings to British travellers of the risks involved in going to Tanzania—including Zanzibar. The revised advice included additional information about the risks on Zanzibar but did not change the advice.

Our advice throughout this period has been in line with that of both the Americans and the Australians—all of us warned that there were dangers in travelling to east Africa in general and to Zanzibar specifically; none of us advised against travel. Australia up-dated its advice on 16 January in line with changes in UK and US advice. The French amended their advice on 17 January.

HEALTH

Acute Services

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made comparing the level of provision in services at acute hospitals and the recommendations of the Royal colleges about minimum volumes of service for different kinds of acute services to maintain professional standards. [88287]

Mr. Hutton: New evidence about safety and quality of services is emerging all the time. Levels of provision in different services are reviewed from time to time in the light of new evidence, including the recommendations of Royal colleges.

Where evidence between volume and outcome is clear, appropriate action will be taken; for example, through the development of particular standards as part of a national service framework.

Alzheimer's Disease

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the availability through the NHS of drugs to combat Alzheimer's disease. [91415]

Jacqui Smith: The three main drugs available through the national health service for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease are donepezil (Aricept), rivastigmine (Exelon) and galantamine (Reminyl). They are available on the NHS to all who meet the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) criteria and NHS bodies are under a statutory obligation to provide funding.

In addition, memantine (Ebixa) was launched in October 2002. While it is available for prescription on the NHS, NICE has yet to assess it for clinical and cost effectiveness, so for the moment, NHS bodies across the country have to access the publicly available evidence about this new drug and determine local policies for its use.

Ambulance Station, Stacksteads

Janet Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received on the future of the ambulance station in Stacksteads, Rossendale, Lancashire; when a decision was taken that it is surplus to NHS requirements; and who took that decision. [91860]

Jacqui Smith: According to our available records, there have been no representations on this issue. The approved estates strategy of Lancashire Ambulance Service National Health Service Trust have confirmed that the ambulance station at Stacksteads is functionally unsuitable and that options should be explored for its relocation to an alternative site in the locality. However the trust has not declared the existing site surplus to requirements.

Cancer Waiting Times

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the audit of cancer waiting times recommended in the report of the working group on cancer waiting times was undertaken; and if he will place a copy in the Library. [89648]

Ms Blears: A cancer waiting times survey was undertaken by the health services management centre at the University of Birmingham in April/May 1998.

The survey looked at cancer waiting times between general practitioner referral and first outpatient appointment and GP referral and first treatment of all cancers diagnosed in October 1997.

The findings were reported in the British Medical Journal, 320: 838–839 25 March 2000.

Child Protection

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance is given to health and social services professionals regarding the retention of unsubstantiated allegations on child protection issues. [92292]

Jacqui Smith: "Working Together to Safeguard Children" (1999), the Government's guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, includes guidance to agencies and professionals in relation to record keeping.

"Working Together to Safeguard Children" states that, in cases where child protection inquiries do not result in the substantiation of referral concerns, case notes should be retained in accordance with agency record retention policies. These policies should ensure that records are stored safely and can be retrieved promptly and efficiently.

Children in Care

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the answer given to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham on 13 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 499W, on looked after children, how many of the 920 children who went missing from their usual place of residence are still missing; and what action has he taken to *(a)* reduce the numbers of runaways and *(b)* trace those runaways who have still not returned to local authority care. [92599]

Jacqui Smith: Of the 920 children who went missing from their usual place of residence at any time during the year 2000–01, 190 were absent from their agreed placement on 31 March 2001. Data on children missing from care during the year ending 31 March 2002 will be available at the end of March 2003.

The Department issued guidance on 28 November 2002, "Children Missing from Care and Home—a guide to good practice", alongside the Social Exclusion Unit's report, "Young Runaways", which makes recommendations on:

- prevention of running away
- ensuring the safety of those that run away
- ensuring that there is appropriate help on return
- co-ordinating responsibilities at local and national level

This guidance requires that where young people are missing from care, local authorities must demonstrate commitment to their safety and welfare and act to ensure that they are found as soon as possible:

- each children's home and foster carer should have written procedures that must be followed where a child is missing
- service managers must monitor patterns of absence from individual children's homes
- and foster carers

reports about patterns of absence must be available to senior managers and to the National Care Standards Commission.

Clozaril

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health by what date he expects the drug clozaril to be available across all PCTs in England and Wales for the treatment of schizophrenia. [92552]

Jacqui Smith: The technology appraisal of the use of atypical antipsychotics in schizophrenia was published by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) in June 2002 and included recommendations concerning clozapine (Clozaril).

From 1 January 2002, the national health service has had three months from the date of publication of each technology appraisal guidance to provide funding, so that clinical decisions made by doctors involving NICE recommended treatments or drugs can be funded.

Cot Deaths

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his Department's strategy to prevent cot death. [92545]

Jacqui Smith: Our strategy is based on expert advice on the avoidance of factors associated with the tragedy of cot death. These are particularly related to position and environment during sleep. This advice is promulgated through leaflets and literature on the care of babies. It is also the subject of discussion between families and the primary health care team.

There is, however, need for further research relating to the precise sleeping environment of infants who die unexpectedly, and this is being undertaken.

Data Protection Act

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to enforce compliance by individual health trusts in supplying information required under the Data Protection Act 1998. [92186]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answer 21 January 2003]*: The responsibility for compliance with the Data Protection Act rests with individual national health service trusts. Enforcement is undertaken by the Information Commissioner.

The Department supports the NHS in meeting data protection requirements through the provision of guidance and through performance management arrangements.

Hospitals (Management)

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether *(a)* the Secta Group Ltd., *(b)* Quo Health and *(c)* Sema Health have managed a hospital before. [89542]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 13 January 2003]:* The independent panel set up by the National Health Service Appointments Commission assessed the general ability of each private sector organisation to run a hospital trust.

The expertise and experience of every organisation which tenders for a national health service franchise and individuals leading any bid on behalf of that organisation will be thoroughly and rigorously assessed before any contract is awarded.

Inventures

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what basis the Miller Group was selected as the preferred bidder for the property and trading arm at NHS Estates, Inventures. [92540]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answer 21 January]:* A consortium of Miller Ventures and Bank of Scotland was selected as preferred bidder for the property and trading arm at NHS Estates because, following a comprehensive bid evaluation process, its bid was considered to offer best value.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what terms were offered by Miller Group and the William Pears Group in bidding for Inventures; and what assessment was made of the value of proposed clauses relating to claw-back profits on future land sales. [92541]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answer 21 January]:* Both bidders offered a fixed price for Inventures, payable on completion. In relation to the property estate both bidders offered to make a substantial initial payment followed by"overage" or claw-back payments when the sites in the property portfolio obtain planning consent, or are sold.

Overage payments were ascribed an estimated present value (on the same basis for each bid) by reference to risk factors including likelihood of obtaining planning permission, estimated value of the sites with or without planning permission, time at which overage payment is likely to be triggered, percentage overage offered and other relevant factors.

In addition, both bidders also offered to explore ways of introducing a new element of claw back payment by entering into joint venture arrangements with house builders, the effect of which would be to include some development profit in the sums to be clawed back. Whilst this willingness to seek ways to include further sums into claw-back arrangements was assessed as being preferable to a refusal to contemplate such schemes, the degree of uncertainty surrounding this element of the proposals was such that bid evaluation was concentrated upon the standard contractual claw-back arrangements.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the chief executive of Inventures and other senior staff were told about incentive arrangements likely to be offered in the event of a successful bid from one or other of the final round bidders for Inventures. [92542]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answer 21 January 2003]*: The management and staff of Inventures, which is being sold as part of the National Health Service Estates public-private partnership project, were not made aware of the contents of any bid in relation to incentives offered by the bidders.

NHS Estates rules for bidders involved in the project also prohibits un-chaperoned meetings between the management team and bidders and, to the best of our knowledge and belief, no such meetings have taken place.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether he has launched an internal investigation into the bidding process for Inventures; and what discussions he has held with the National Audit Office over the bidding process for Inventures. [92543]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answer 21 January]:* During the evaluation period, a review was undertaken in real time by an independent firm of consultants who concluded the process was satisfactory.

A subsequent review by the private finance unit of the Department of health concluded that the bid evaluation process was properly conducted and the preferred bidder selection was correct.

Following a complaint by an unsuccessful bidder, the National Audit Office is also reviewing the process, but this review has not yet been completed and so its conclusions are notavailable at the current time.

Mental Health Bill

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans his Department has to publish the responses to the draft Mental Health Bill consultation. [92579]

Jacqui Smith: The consultation responses received in respect of the draft Mental Health Bill will be made available to the public before introduction of the Bill, except where respondents have asked for confidentiality.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will provide a right to assessment of mental health needs for any individual making a reasonable request for such assessment in the new Mental Health Bill. [92580]

Jacqui Smith: The purpose of the Bill is to provide a legal framework for the treatment of someone with a mental disorder without their consent; it is not about rights to services. It does, however, create a duty to assess whether the conditions for compulsion are satisfied in individual cases, which may be triggered by any reasonable request where the conditions appear to be met. Once under compulsion, every patient must have a written care plan of treatment.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he plans to adopt the Joint Committee on Human Rights recommendation that the Code of Practice in the draft Mental Health Bill be given statutory force. [92581]

Jacqui Smith: We are pleased that the Joint Committee on Human Rights has welcomed the major improvements to the safeguards for patients' human rights proposed in the draft Mental Health Bill.

We are currently considering very carefully all the recommendations contained in their Report on the draft Bill.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy that no person will be deemed as suffering from a mental disorder under the provisions of new mental health legislation solely for the purpose of preventing commission of illegal or disorderly acts. [92582]

Jacqui Smith: This already is the policy. The Bill will not allow the use of compulsory powers on any person solely to prevent them from offending. The powers of the Bill may only be used where the conditions are met. This means that there must be a diagnosis of mental disorder, and that there must be appropriate treatment available for the patient. Once under compulsion, every patient must have a written plan of treatment.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the proposals contained in the draft Mental Health Bill relate to the Government's strategy on alcohol. [92583]

Jacqui Smith: The proposals in the draft Mental Health Bill will remove the existing exclusion for alcohol dependency found in the Mental Health Act 1983. This will mean that there is no barrier to people being treated under compulsory powers when this is necessary because the conditions in the Bill are satisfied.

The Bill will provide a legal framework for compulsory treatment, which will be compatible with developments in mental health services and other health implementation frameworks. This includes the Government's commitment to implementing the national alcohol harm reduction strategy by 2004. The recent consultation on the strategy included questions about the relationship between alcohol misuse and mental health problems and sought views on how services could be best provided. The consultation period ended on 15 January and an interim analysis will be published by the Cabinet Office strategy unit in the spring.

Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus

Andrew Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what change there has been in the rate of death certificates showing methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus and related diseases as a cause of death since 29 March 2001. [92734]

Ms Blears: Information concerning methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) on death certificates is not currently available from routine mortality statistics and has to be obtained by special research studies. The latest available figures for England and Wales cover 1993 to 1998 and were published in the British Medical Journal in December 2002.

April 2001 saw the introduction of national mandatory surveillance of MRSA blood stream infections. The results for the first year of this scheme for every NHS Acute Trust in England were published in the Communicable Disease Report (CDR) Weekly on 20 June 2002. These data are available on the Public Health Laboratory Service's website www.phls.co.uk/publications/cdr/PDFfiles/2002/cdr2502.pdf.

Mexico

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he next plans to visit Mexico; and how many Memoranda of Understanding have been signed between the UK Government and other governments since 1997. [83326]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 25 November 2002]:* I visited Mexico between 4–6 December to participate in the Third Ministerial Meeting on Health Security and Bio-terrorism involving G7 nations and Mexico.

The Department of Health has signed Memorandums of Understanding with the following countries:

Indonesia, signed June 2002
China, signed May 2000
Mexico, signed November 2002.

NHS Pensions Agency

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many *(a)* nurses and *(b)* health care workers applied to the NHS Pensions Agency for permanent injury benefit for a disorder in the year from April 2001 to March 2002; and how many were successful at *(i)* their first application and (ii) subsequent appeal; [89108]

(2) how many *(a)* nurses and *(b)* health care workers applied to the NHS Pensions Agency for permanent injury benefit relating to muscular skeletal disorders in the year from April 2001 to March 2002; and how many were successful at *(i)* their first application and (ii) subsequent appeal. [89109]

Mr. Hutton *[pursuant to his answer, 9 January 2003, Official Report, c. 330W]:* Information in the format requested is not readily available. The number of nurse and "other" permanent injury benefit applications in the financial year 2001–02 was:

	Number
Total applications	575
Nurse applications	183
Others	392

The number of applications accepted or rejected in the financial year 2001–02 was:

	Applications	*Accepted*	*Rejected*	*On-going*	*Withdrawn*
Nurse	183	69	76	36	2
Other	392	137	195	58	2
Total	575	206	271	94	4

The number of nurse applications relating to muscular skeletal conditions decided in the period 1 January 2002 to 31 March 2002 was:

	Number
Applications	67
Accepted	25
Rejected	42

NSF for Older People

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will publish the information about the progress in achieving NSF for Older People milestones. [89978]

Jacqui Smith: We hope to publish the information shortly.

Nursing Vacancies

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his estimate is of the vacancy rate for nurses in each quarter in *(a)* each English health authority and *(b)* each English health trust in each year from 1996 to 2003; and if he will make a statement. [92560]

Mr. Hutton: Annual three month vacancy rate informatiion between 1999 and 2002 has been placed in the Library.

The Department of Health's survey of vacancies lasting three months or more has been collected only since March 1999, and is available on an annual basis.

The three month vacancy rate was 3.1 per cent. in March 2002, a fall from 3.4 per cent. in March 2001 and the second successive fall in vacancies for qualified nursing staff.

Paediatric Pathology

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health's recommendation of a nationally accepted information and consent form for hospital post mortem examinations. [92547]

Mr. Lammy: Following a recommendation by the Chief Medical Officer in 2001, we have consulted on and piloted consent forms and information leaflets for use throughout the national health service.

We intend to issue the forms shortly as part of a broader package of measures to improve the handling of issues relating to the removal, retention and use of human organs and tissue. This will include a code of practice on families and post mortems.

Public Service Pensions

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether, under the Government's proposals for public service pension reform, a male doctor over 60 years of age and with 40 years' service, who decides not to retire before 2005, would still be able to retire before the age of 65; what rewards would accrue to him for working beyond the age of 60; and whether his accrual rate would move from to per year after 2005. [91861]

Mr. Hutton: The Green Paper sets out, for consultation, wide-ranging proposals for pensions and saving for retirement. We will want to consider its implications for the national health service scheme carefully and consult fully on proposals for change. In doing so, we shall take account of the work recently published in the stock-take report, "Pension Scheme Modernisation: A Millennium Health Check for the NHS Pension Scheme".

Clearly, it will take some time to review the current scheme in the light of the Green Paper and the associated tax consultation document. The pace of change will depend on introducing new regulations, and changes for new entrants are likely to be in place before amending arrangements for existing members. However, the Green Paper makes no reference to retrospective age-related restrictions for a member already at age 60.

Redundancy Payments

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the *(a)* total and *(b)* average cost to the NHS was, over the last 12 months for which figures are available, of redundancy payments to managers and administrators in *(i)* primary care trusts and (ii) strategic health authorities. [91554]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 21 January 2003]*: Information on national health service redundancy payments is not collected centrally.

Specialised Health Services

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library a copy of the Department's survey on Arrangements for Commissioning Specialised Services in 2002–03. [82781]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 25 November 2002]:* The survey on arrangements for commissioning specialised services in 2002–03 was an internal exercise designed to inform policy. However, a summary of the survey will be made public, and will be included in the forthcoming report on commissioning arrangements for specialised services consultation.

Terrorism

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many protective suits are available to NHS staff and ambulance crews in the event of a terrorist attack using chemical and biological agents. [88385]

Mr. Hutton: The Department has funded the provision of 360 mobile decontamination units and 7,250 national specification personal protective equipment (PPE) suits, which allow the ambulance service and accident and emergency departments to treat people contaminated with chemical, biological, radio-active and nuclear material.

Training Support Funds

Tony Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures are being taken to ensure the take-up of increases in training support funds resourced from the Department of Health to local authorities; and how these funds are being targeted towards the voluntary sector. [92883]

Jacqui Smith: We are establishing two new ring-fenced grants linked to training for 2003–04—the National Training Strategy Grant and the Human Resources Development Strategy Grant. These were announced in the Local Authority Social Services Letter LASSL(2002)11. We will shortly consult with representatives of the statutory, private and voluntary sectors on the conditions and allocations for both grants.

The National Training Strategy Grant is to be used to support the training of social care staff in all sectors, with the majority of the fund being spent on developing National Vocational Qualifications in social care.

The Human Resources Development Strategy Grant will be used to support social care employers in all sectors as they develop the social care work force.

Treatment Targets

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what methods are used to measure progress against the targets for increases in capacity of the equivalent of treatment for *(a)* 100,000 patients in

2002–03 and *(b)* 200,000 in 2003–04; and what assessment he has made of progress towards these targets. [85343]

Mr. Hutton: The priorities and planning framework for 2002–03 required the national health service to make sure that plans were in place to achieve the major objectives of the NHS Plan. Data collection systems to monitor delivery are in place and in the first two quarters of 2002–03, elective activity increased by 4.9 per cent. compared to the same period the previous year. For future years Improvement, Expansion and Reform: The Next 3 Years for 2003–06, outlines the delivery programme and the planning requirement. Delivery of these programmes will be detailed in local delivery plans.

West Midlands Hospitals (Military Treatment)

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of armed forces personnel likely to be treated in hospitals in the West Midlands (South) Strategic Health Authority area in the event of conflict in Iraq; and what assessment he has made of the consequences for the continuing provision of health services to the resident population. [90346]

Mr. Hutton: No specific estimate of the possible impact on individual strategic health authorities has been made. The national health service has a responsibility to ensure that any military casualties are appropriately treated and cared for. If the need does arise, the service will meet this obligation in full while continuing to serve the local population.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Criminal Records Checks

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations his Department has received from *(a)* NGOs, *(b)* social services, *(c)* members of the public and *(d)* hon. Members regarding the financial implications for organisations of delays in Criminal Record Bureau checks. [91202]

Hilary Benn: The Criminal Records Bureau has received a number of communications from members of the public, employers, Registered Bodies and other organisations drawing attention to this matter, some of which have had the support of Members of Parliament. Some have sought compensation for individual applicants and others for employers.

Prison Suicides

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what measures are being taken by his Department to ensure a decrease in the numbers of suicides by inmates of prisons in England and Wales; [90492]

(2) how many suicides by inmates of prisons in England and Wales there were for the period January 1992 to December 2002 broken down by prison; and what estimate he has made of the numbers of suicides for the period January 2003 to December 2013. [90491]

Hilary Benn: The following table covers the 762 apparently self-inflicted deaths between 1 January 1992 and 31 December 2002.

Table showing the number of self-inflicted deaths in prison establishments in England and Wales between 1 January 1992 and 31 December 2002

	Calendar year											
Establishment	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*	*Total*
Acklington	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Albany	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Altcourse	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	3	—	—	1	6
Ashwell	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2
Aylesbury	—	—	—	1	—	2	—	3	2	—	1	9
Bedford	—	—	1	2	—	—	—	1	1	—	3	8
Belmarsh	—	1	—	2	—	4	1	1	1	—	1	11
Birmingham	1	—	1	2	1	1	2	2	3	3	—	16
Blakenhurst	—	—	—	1	2	—	—	2	1	—	2	8
Blundeston	—	—	—	2	—	—	1	—	1	—	—	4
Brinsford	1	—	1	—	1	—	—	2	3	2	—	10
Bristol	1	2	—	1	1	1	3	2	1	2	2	16
Brixton	1	1	3	—	1	2	1	4	2	2	2	19
Brockhill	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1	2	1	—	5
Buckley Hall	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Bullingdon	1	—	—	1	1	1	—	—	1	—	3	8
Bullwood Hall	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1	—	2
Canterbury	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1	3
Cardiff	—	—	2	—	—	1	4	1	1	3	1	13
Castington	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1	—	1	3
Chelmsford	—	—	—	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	9
Dartmoor	—	1	1	—	2	2	1	—	—	1	—	8
Deerbolt	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Doncaster	—	—	2	2	1	—	5	1	5	—	2	18
Dorchester	1	—	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	3	—	6
Dovegate	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	4	4
Dover	—	—	—	1	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	2
Downview	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Durham	2	1	—	—	1	2	2	3	1	—	6	18

Table showing the number of self-inflicted deaths in prison establishments in England and Wales between 1 January 1992 and 31 December 2002

	Calendar year											
Establishment	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*	*Total*
Eastwood Park	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3	1	1	5
Elmley	1	—	1	—	—	—	2	—	1	—	—	5
Erlestoke	—	—	—	2	—	—	—	1	—	1	—	4
Everthorpe	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Exeter	—	4	1	2	1	1	1	—	2	2	3	17
Featherstone	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	1	—	1	3
Feltham	2	—	—	—	1	2	—	—	1	1	—	7
Forest Bank	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Frankland	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	2
Full Sutton	—	1	—	1	1	1	—	—	—	1	1	6
Garth	—	—	2	1	—	3	1	1	—	—	1	9
Gartree	1	—	—	—	1	1	—	—	—	—	—	3
Glen Parva	1	—	—	—	2	1	2	1	1	1	—	9
Gloucester	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	2	1	3	1	8
Grendon	—	—	2	1	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	4
Haverigg	—	—	—	1	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	2
High Down	—	1	—	4	2	3	—	—	—	—	1	11
Highpoint (Men)	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	2
Highpoint (Women)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1
Hindley	1	1	—	—	—	2	1	1	—	—	1	7
Holloway	1	1	—	2	1	—	1	2	1	1	1	11
Holme House	—	2	—	—	1	2	—	3	1	—	5	14
Hull	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	—	1	1	4	18
Kingston-Portsmouth	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1	—	1	3
Kirkham	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Lancaster	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	1
Latchmere House	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Leeds	2	2	1	1	1	1	4	5	3	1	3	24
Leicester	1	3	3	1	1	—	—	3	4	2	1	19
Lewes	1	1	—	1	1	2	2	3	1	3	5	20
Lincoln	—	3	1	2	2	—	2	—	—	—	—	10
Lindholme	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Littlehey	1	—	—	—	—	1	1	1	—	—	—	5
Liverpool	1	2	5	1	3	5	1	—	2	2	2	24
Long Lartin	1	1	1	1	2	—	—	—	—	1	—	7
Low Newton	—	—	2	2	—	1	1	—	—	—	—	6
Maidstone	1	—	—	—	—	1	1	—	—	1	—	4
Manchester	—	2	2	—	4	—	4	8	1	1	1	23
Moorland	—	—	3	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1	5
The Mount	—	—	—	1	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	2
New Hail	—	—	1	—	—	—	1	1	1	—	2	6
Northallerton	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	2	3
Norwich	2	2	—	4	1	1	5	2	1	2	1	21
Nottingham	—	1	—	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	2	17
Parc	—	—	—	—	—	1	3	1	—	2	2	9
Parkhurst	1	1	2	—	1	—	—	—	1	—	—	6
Dentonville	4	—	—	2	2	—	—	1	1	3	1	14
Portland	—	—	1	—	1	—	—	1	—	1	—	4
Preston	—	—	1	1	2	3	2	3	2	1	2	17
Prescoed/Usk	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Ranby	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Reading	—	—	—	—	—	—	3	—	—	1	—	4
Risley	—	—	1	—	1	2	—	1	—	—	1	6
Rochester	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Shepton Mallet	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Shrewsbury	—	—	1	—	1	—	1	—	1	—	—	4
Stafford	1	—	—	—	—	—	1	2	1	—	—	5
Stocken	—	—	—	—	1	—	1	1	—	—	—	3

Table showing the number of self-inflicted deaths in prison establishments in England and Wales between 1 January 1992 and 31 December 2002

	Calendar year											
Establishment	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*	*Total*
Stoke Heath	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1	2
Styal	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1	2	5
Swaleside	1	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	—	4
Swansea	—	—	1	1	—	1	—	—	—	1	—	4
Swiften Hall	—	—	—	—	2	1	—	—	—	—	—	3
The Verne	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Wakefield	1	3	1	1	—	—	1	2	—	—	1	10
Wandsworth	—	2	4	—	1	—	2	—	7	1	2	19
Wayland	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Wealstun	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	2
Wellingborough	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	2
Wetherby	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	1	1	1	—	4
Whatton	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	2
Whitemoor	—	—	—	1	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	2
Winchester	—	1	1	—	2	2	5	2	4	3	1	21
Wolds	—	1	—	1	1	—	—	1	1	—	1	6
Woodhill	—	1	1	—	—	1	2	1	—	2	3	11
Wormwood Scrubs	1	—	4	—	1	—	—	1	1	1	1	10
Wymott	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1	—	—	2
Escort Custody	—	—	—	—	1	2	—	5	—	1	—	9
Total	41	47	61	59	64	68	83	91	81	73	94	762

There are no forward estimates of the number of prisoner self-inflicted deaths. The Government aim to reduce suicides in prisons as in the community generally. The Department of Health's National Suicide Prevention Strategy for England, which aims to support the 'Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation' target of reducing the death rate from suicide in the community by at least 20 per cent. by 2010, includes a target for the Prison Service of such a reduction (to 112.8 self-inflicted deaths per 100,000 prisoners) by April 2004.

The Prison Service recognises that it has a duty of care for all prisoners. This is reflected in current policy and procedures in respect of identifying prisoners at risk of suicide and self-harm, and providing the subsequent care and support for such prisoners, and support for the staff who care for them. Prison Service Instructions make clear that it is the responsibility of all staff to initiate the self-harm at-risk procedures whenever they believe a prisoner is at such risk. These procedures ensure those caring for the at-risk prisoner consider the appropriate level of supervision, location and support for that prisoner. Each at-risk prisoner has an individual support plan drawn up by a multi-disciplinary review team, which will also involve the prisoner themselves.

The general prison population contains a large number of prisoners with a combination of psychiatric disorders, alcohol and drug dependency, family background and relationship problems, histories of self-harm and previous abuse, all of which raise their risk of suicide. Good care and support from staff saves many lives but such instances go largely unreported.

The Prison Service's approach, in close partnership with outside organisations such as the Samaritans, is to identify and better support those who seem at greatest risk and focus on staff/prisoner relationships and the physical environment. The Prison Service's suicide prevention and self-harm reduction programme includes a series of inter-related projects to improve pre-reception, reception and induction arrangements; inter-agency information exchange; prisoner care; detoxification; prisoner peer support, and the learning from investigations into deaths in custody.

Piloting of these projects is focused on six establishments—Wandsworth, Feltham, Eastwood Park, Leeds, Winchester and Birmingham—although others are involved in aspects of the work. An investment of £21.69 million over the three year programme from April 2001 is allowing physical improvements to be made at these six sites, for example to reception and induction areas, and through the installation of more first night centres, safer cells, crisis suites and gated cells that enable staff to watch at-risk prisoners closely. The programme will be subject to an independent quantitative and qualitative evaluation.

Wing staff will be increasingly supported in the work by in-reach mental health teams and by the establishment where possible of dedicated drug detoxification units. Between August 2001 and June 2002 new health care screening procedures have been piloted at six adult male remand prisons (Leeds, Wandsworth, Holme House, Liverpool, Manchester and Durham) two female remand prisons (Eastwood Park and New Hall) and two young offender institutions (Feltham and Glen Parva). The two female prisons include both adults and women aged 16–21 years. An evaluation of the pilot project supported implementation of the new reception screening arrangements across the estate, and a rolling programme is planned commencing in April 2003.

Prisoner Demographics

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many males and females were in prison serving sentences of over four years in *(a)* June 1991 and *(b)* June 2002. [89545]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* On 30 June 1991, there were 14,616 males and 498 females serving sentences of four years and over in prisons in England and Wales.

On 30 June 2002, there were 26,283 males and 1,335 females serving similar sentences.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners were given life sentences in *(a)* June 2002, *(b)* in 1998 and *(c)* in 1992. [89546]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* In June 2002, 35 prisoners were received into Prison Service Establishments, with life sentences. In the whole of 1998, 413 prisoners were received with a life sentence, and in the whole of 1992, 236 prisoners were received with life sentences.

Youth Crime

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many juveniles held in young offenders institutions in England and Wales have *(a)* been previously excluded from school and *(b)* have a level of educational attainment below level 1 basic skills. [90486]

Hilary Benn: We do not collect information centrally on how many juvenile offenders in custody have been excluded from school. Early in 2001 the Howard League for Penal Reform found from a sample of 84 15 year olds in custody that 83 per cent. had been excluded. More recently—as part of its audit of education and training provision within the youth justice system (published in November 2001)—the Youth Justice Board interviewed 160 offenders aged between 15 and 18 and found that 45 per cent. had been permanently excluded.

Basic skills screening of juvenile offenders received into custody between April and November 2002 indicates that 42 per cent. are below level 1 in reading, 51 per cent. in spelling, 59 per cent. in writing and 43 per cent. in numeracy.

Investment so far in staff and buildings in the juvenile estate—particularly the appointment of a Special Needs Co-ordinator to each establishment and one Learning Support Assistant for every 10 juveniles—is already having a positive impact on achievement, as is the piloting of innovative teaching strategies. In the first half of 2002–03, juveniles in custody gained around 2,000 basic skills qualifications, almost three quarters of which were at entry level or level 1. And we expect achievement to improve further as a result of our enhancements.

The Youth Justice Board is investing £40 million over this year and next in education and training across the 13 juvenile facilities, including £10 million in new buildings. These resources will enable implementation of the new National Specification for Learning and Skills, introduction of the PLUS literacy programme, and enhanced staffing. They will also address the recommendation in the Social Exclusion Unit's report Bridging the Gap that 16 to19 year olds should receive 30 hours per week of education, training and personal development.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

European Documents

Mr. Austin Mitchell: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission how many demand forms for European printed papers were issued in 2002; and how many documents or papers were included in them, broken down by types or category of the papers listed. [92925]

Sir Archy Kirkwood: Forty-eight demand forms for European printed papers were issued in 2002.

The numbers of documents or papers included, broken down by types or category of papers listed are given in the table.

Type or category	*Total number*
Official Journals	1,195
Tenders	52
Working Documents	737
Bulletins	275
Draft Legislation	1,159
Explanatory Memoranda	901

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Members' Biographical Details

David Winnick: To ask the Chairman of the Information Committee what progress is being made by the Library to bring out biographical details of hon. and right hon. Members in book form to replace Stanton and Lees publications; and what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the provision of *(a)* funding and *(b)* personnel for this purpose. [92994]

Michael Fabricant: The hon. Member will recall that I wrote to him on 24 January 2002, following consideration of this matter by the Information Committee. As subsequent progress is an operational question for the Library, I have asked the Librarian to write to the hon. Member.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Departmental Budget

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of her Department's budget remained unallocated at the end of the last financial year. [92659]

Clare Short: DFID's budget was fully allocated last year. Our initial budget for 2001–02 included a modest Contingency Reserve. This reserve was allocated to specific programmes during the course of the year.

Global Fund

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what donations to the Global Fund *(a)* have been received and *(b)* are expected, broken down by donor country. [92657]

Clare Short: Total pledges to the fund to date (including disbursements already made) total US $2.157 billion. Donations received so far by the Global Fund (up to the end of 2002) amount to US $855.9 million and donations pledged specifically for 2003 amount to $605.5 million.

The UK has pledged £138 million to the fund and has already paid in £50 million. A further £25 million will be contributed in calendar year 2003, depending on performance.

A full breakdown of donor pledges is available at the Global Fund website and can be found at www.globalfundatm.org.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Civil Servants

Mr. Flook: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many civil servants have *(a)* been tested and *(b)* will be tested using psychometric testing in the last five years. [92602]

Ms Rosie Winterton: All staff recruited on the Fast Stream Development Programme undergo some element of psychometric testing as part of the selection process. Records show a total of 39 new appointments under this programme since 1999. The table shows the breakdown on a year by year basis.

Psychometric testing has also been used to help fill a number of senior and other civil service posts, both in external recruitment and internal selection campaigns. This statistical information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

My Department has also used, and continues to use, psychometric exercises in support of its leadership development programme. These exercises are not used to support selection, but are a development tool to assist managers at all levels in developing their leadership skills.

HEODs appointed 1999 to current date

Year	*Total*
1999	4
2000	10
2001	16
2002	8
2003	1
Total	39

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Laws: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what his estimate is of the total expenditure by his Department on ministerial travel *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* abroad, in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92430]

Ms Rosie Winterton: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley, South (Mr. Alexander) on 22 January 2003.

PRIME MINISTER

Carlyle Group

Norman Baker: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions and correspondence *(a)* he and *(b)* his Office has had with representatives of the Carlyle Group since 1 May 1997. [91529]

The Prime Minister: Ministers and Government officials have meetings with a wide range of organisations and individuals. As with previous Administrations it is not the Government's practice to provide details of all such meetings, under exemptions 2 and 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Iraq

Mr. Austin Mitchell: To ask the Prime Minister what proposals he has for the development of a common European Union approach on the Iraq issue, in respect of *(a)* removing the threat of weapons of mass destruction, *(b)* regime change and *(c)* use of military force. [92927]

The Prime Minister: The European Union is united on this issue, as demonstrated most recently by the Declaration on Iraq agreed by the Copenhagen European Council on 13 December. This underlined the full and unequivocal support of the European Council for United Nations Security Council resolution 1441 and stated that the goal of the European Union remains the disarmament of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction in accordance with the relevant UN Resolutions. It also pledged the European Union's continuing full support to the efforts of the UN to ensure full and immediate compliance by Iraq with resolution 1441, and its full support for the inspection operations of UNMOVIC and the IAEA.

I, my Ministers and officials continue to discuss Iraq frequently with all our EU partners.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Laws: To ask the Prime Minister what his estimate is of the total expenditure by his Department on mininsterial travel *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* abroad in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92418]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 22 January 2003.

SCOTLAND

Departmental Assets

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will list each asset of the Scottish Office valued at £50,000 or more; and if she will make a statement. [90380]

Mrs. Liddell: The only asset of the Scotland Office with a value of more than £50,000 is the lease of Dover House in London.

Departmental Expenditure (Newsprint)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what the total expenditure of her Department was on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in 2002. [90520]

Mrs. Liddell: Expenditure on newspapers, magazines and periodicals purchased centrally by the Department in 2001–02 was £12,968.

Dover House

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, who owns the Scotland Office headquarters at Dover House in Whitehall, what her latest estimate is of the total value of this building; and what her estimate is of its annual rental cost. [90378]

Mrs. Liddell: Dover House is owned by the Crown Estate and leased to the Scotland Office. The value of the building is a matter for the Crown Estate. The rental cost in 2001–02 was £10,500.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when and by whom Dover House, Whitehall, was valued for the purposes of the National Asset Register; what the latest valuation is; and if she will make a statement. [91699]

Mrs. Liddell: Dover House was re-valued prior to transfer by the former Scottish Office. On 31 March 1999, it was independently re-valued at £2 million by GVA Grimley, International Property Advisors, on the basis of Existing Use Value in accordance with the Appraisal and Valuation Manual of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors. Its current net book value (at 31 March 2002) is £1.675 million.

Fishing Industry

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what part she will play in the co-ordination of financial assistance packages to the Scottish fishing industry between the Government and the Scottish Executive. [92294]

Mrs. Liddell: I am regularly involved in discussions with Government colleagues and the Scottish Executive on a range of subjects, and these have recently included issues concerning the Scottish fishing industry.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

Tony Wright: To ask the Solicitor-General when the Crown Prosecution Service's autumn performance report for 2002 will be published. [93157]

The Solicitor-General: I refer the hon. Member to my previous reply, 21 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 231W.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many cases of suspected *(a)* housing benefit and *(b)* council tax benefit fraud have been discovered through a residency check, in each of the last five years. [91979]

Malcolm Wicks: The information requested is not available. Information held centrally on cases of suspected housing benefit or council tax benefit fraud does not identify the means by which the suspected fraud was detected.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when the new system of assessment by the CSA will become operable; whether those who have been waiting for assessment or reassessment by the CSA will be assessed as if they were new claimants; and what plans he has to clear the back-log. [92549]

Malcolm Wicks: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer I gave the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Peter Duncan) on 27 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 317W. The next Commencement Order to implement relevant provisions of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000 will set out the classes of case to which the new scheme will apply.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when he intends to reply to the letter to him dated 16 December from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Avril Curry. [92285]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 16 January 2003.

Employers' Liability

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on the employers' liability insurance review. [85271]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 12 December 2002]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the Written Ministerial Statement I gave on 12 December 2002, *Official Report*, columns 23–24WS.

Free School Meals

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list for each year since 1997 the percentage of children for each local authority eligible for free school meals. [91983]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: I have been asked to reply.

The available information is shown in the table.

Maintained nursery, primary, secondary and all special schools[1]: school meal arrangements

By local education authority, by Government office region	*Position in January each year* *Percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free meals[2]*					
	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
England	20.2	19.1	18.4	17.8	17.1	16.4
North East	25.8	24.9	24.1	23.4	23.1	21.4
Darlington[3]	[5]—	21.0	19.7	18.3	17.2	17.2
Durham[4]	21.3	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Durham[3]	[5]—	20.8	20.2	19.5	19.5	19.3
Gateshead	25.9	24.5	23.6	24.4	23.4	22.6
Hartlepool	30.9	28.6	26.6	26.8	25.6	24.7
Middlesbrough	35.2	34.5	32.1	32.1	32.0	31.8
Newcastle upon Tyne	34.9	33.4	32.2	31.1	30.7	28.9
North Tyneside	23.0	22.8	21.7	21.5	19.7	20.1
Northumberland	15.6	14.0	14.2	13.5	13.3	12.4
Redcar and Cleveland	28.2	26.1	26.6	25.4	23.5	23.8
South Tyneside	32.7	30.9	29.6	28.2	27.4	26.9
Stockton-on-Tees	25.1	23.8	22.4	21.9	20.7	19.6
Sunderland	28.4	29.3	29.3	28.4	31.1	20.7
North West	*25.1*	*21.6*	*20.7*	*22.5*	*21.4*	*20.6*
Blackburn with Darwen[3]	[5]—	[5]—	27.6	27.5	25.8	25.1
Blackpool[3]	[5]—	[5]—	26.0	25.3	24.6	24.4
Bolton	20.7	18.7	18.0	17.7	17.1	16.8
Bury	17.5	16.2	16.2	15.8	14.8	14.0
Cheshire[4]	16.0	15.5	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Cheshire[3]	[5]—	[5]—	12.0	12.4	11.3	10.9
Cumbria	15.9	15.4	14.3	14.6	13.7	13.1
Halton[3]	[5]—	[5]—	27.8	27.1	25.9	25.4
Knowsley	47.9	46.3	44.8	42.9	40.4	38.0
Lancashire[4]	22.2	21.5	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Lancashire[3]	[5]—	[5]—	18.8	16.9	16.0	15.5
Liverpool	41.7	40.3	38.7	38.4	37.1	34.8
Manchester	46.7	45.5	44.5	44.6	43.4	43.0
Oldham	26.0	24.5	23.5	24.2	23.0	22.9
Rochdale	28.2	26.9	27.1	25.8	24.5	24.4
Salford	33.2	31.6	30.2	29.7	28.7	27.2
Sefton	24.7	23.9	22.4	21.1	19.7	19.1
St. Helens	22.1	22.0	26.5	20.8	20.3	20.1
Stockport	17.3	16.5	14.9	14.3	13.7	13.3
Tameside	23.4	21.6	20.8	20.1	19.9	18.8
Trafford	20.1	18.1	18.4	18.0	15.2	12.6
Warrington[3]	[5]—	[5]—	12.7	11.5	11.0	10.5
Wigan	18.8	17.8	17.4	16.9	16.1	15.8
Wirral	28.7	27.1	28.5	29.2	28.9	27.7
Yorkshire and the Humber	*21.2*	*20.3*	*19.6*	*19.1*	*18.1*	*17.5*
Barnsley	25.8	25.2	24.7	24.2	23.0	21.3
Bradford	28.0	27.1	26.4	25.9	24.1	24.2
Calderdale	19.0	18.2	18.1	17.3	17.4	16.4
Doncaster	25.2	23.2	22.4	20.9	19.7	18.4
East Riding of Yorkshire	10.8	9.6	10.6	10.6	9.7	9.3
Kingston Upon Hull, City of	28.5	27.5	27.5	27.5	26.5	26.2
Kirklees	21.7	20.5	20.2	19.5	18.7	18.2
Leeds	21.5	20.9	20.1	19.9	18.8	18.5
North East Lincolnshire	23.0	22.8	21.6	22.8	22.6	21.3
North Lincolnshire	17.8	16.4	15.7	14.5	14.7	13.8
North Yorkshire	9.3	8.9	8.6	8.5	7.9	7.3
Rotherham	22.0	21.0	20.1	19.8	18.4	17.8
Sheffield	27.3	26.6	24.2	22.5	21.2	20.6
Wakefield	19.5	18.8	18.3	18.7	17.6	17.7
York	13.9	12.8	12.0	11.0	10.5	9.8
East Midlands	*16.0*	*15.1*	*14.3*	*14.0*	*13.4*	*12.8*
Derby[3]	[5]—	22.9	21.7	20.8	20.4	20.1
Derbyshire[4]	16.2	12.8	12.3	12.5	12.1	11.8
Derbyshire[3]	16.2	12.8	12.3	12.5	12.1	11.8
Leicester[3]	[5]—	24.9	23.7	23.5	23.6	23.7

Maintained nursery, primary, secondary and all special schools[1]: school meal arrangements

By local education authority, by Government office region	*Position in January each year Percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free meals[2]*					
	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
Leicestershire[4]	15.0	8.5	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Leicestershire[3]	[5]—	[5]—	8.3	7.9	7.6	7.0
Lincolnshire	9.8	9.4	8.1	7.8	7.7	7.3
Northamptonshire	12.7	11.9	11.6	11.4	10.5	10.2
Nottingham[3]	[5]—	[5]—	35.4	34.8	34.1	32.3
Nottinghamshire[4]	22.5	21.3	15.0	14.3	13.2	12.4
Nottinghamshire[3]	22.5	21.3	15.0	14.3	13.2	12.4
Rutland[3]	[5]—	6.4	6.2	5.4	5.0	4.5
West Midlands	*21.0*	*19.6*	*19.1*	*18.8*	*18.6*	*18.1*
Birmingham	35.6	34.3	33.7	33.1	33.1	32.7
Coventry	22.4	21.0	21.7	19.6	20.1	19.2
Dudley	18.0	16.9	16.2	15.9	14.9	14.6
Hereford and Worcester[4]	10.1	8.1	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Herefordshire[3]	[5]—	[5]—	8.1	7.3	8.1	7.5
Sandwell	26.6	24.9	23.2	24.4	24.0	22.9
Shropshire[4]	15.2	14.5	9.9	9.7	9.3	9.1
Shropshire[3]	15.2	14.5	9.9	9.7	9.3	9.1
Solihull	14.3	13.7	12.4	12.6	12.6	11.3
Staffordshire[4]	16.8	12.6	12.0	11.7	11.1	10.9
Staffordshire[3]	16.8	12.6	12.0	11.7	11.1	10.9
Stoke-on-Trent[3]	[5]—	26.9	27.3	27.7	27.2	25.8
Telford and Wrekin[3]	[5]—	[5]—	20.9	21.3	20.5	20.2
Walsall	23.8	21.3	19.8	19.1	18.0	17.6
Warwickshire	11.4	10.9	9.9	9.6	9.4	8.9
Wolverhampton	24.7	22.6	22.0	21.8	22.7	21.5
Worcestershire[3]	[5]—	[5]—	9.0	9.8	10.0	9.8
East of England	14.9	13.5	12.9	12.5	11.7	11.1
Bedfordshire[4]	19.4	12.5	11.7	11.2	10.8	10.5
Bedfordshire[3]	19.4	12.5	11.7	11.2	10.8	10.5
Cambridgeshire[4]	15.4	13.8	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Cambridgeshire[3]	[5]—	[5]—	10.1	9.5	8.9	8.2
Essex[4]	15.4	14.4	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Essex[3]	[5]—	[5]—	12.7	12.0	11.1	10.6
Hertfordshire	11.5	10.0	9.4	9.1	8.5	8.0
Luton[3]	[5]—	26.3	23.9	23.7	23.5	23.5
Norfolk	14.3	13.7	13.8	13.8	13.0	12.3
Peterborough[3]	[5]—	[5]—	22.2	21.4	20.2	18.6
Southend-on-Sea[3]	[5]—	[5]—	19.1	18.3	16.8	16.0
Suffolk	14.8	13.1	12.3	12.1	11.3	10.6
Thurrock[3]	[5]—	[5]—	17.7	16.9	15.4	15.0
London	*29.5*	*28.3*	*27.4*	*27.0*	*26.1*	*25.3*
Inner London	*45.3*	*43.3*	*41.6*	*41.2*	*39.8*	*38.4*
Camden	37.2	36.0	35.6	36.2	35.9	35.2
City of London	51.4	37.7	38.4	35.9	33.8	[6]—
Hackney	55.5	50.1	46.3	44.1	41.3	42.1
Hammersmith and Fulham	42.3	41.3	38.4	39.6	39.2	38.2
Haringey	41.0	40.0	39.5	39.4	38.2	36.1
Islington	52.3	44.5	45.4	44.2	42.8	40.5
Kensington and Chelsea	44.0	42.0	38.5	38.6	35.8	34.6
Lambeth	47.1	45.0	42.5	41.1	39.3	37.9
Lewisham	38.5	38.4	35.2	35.8	35.3	31.5
Newham	39.1	38.7	39.1	39.6	37.9	37.7
Southwark	48.9	44.8	43.5	43.2	41.0	39.8
Tower Hamlets	61.1	60.8	59.2	60.0	58.7	55.7
Wandsworth	36.1	34.9	32.2	29.7	28.6	28.0
Westminster	43.8	42.3	39.6	36.8	35.2	34.9
Outer London	*21.1*	*20.4*	*19.9*	*19.5*	*18.9*	*18.4*
Barking and Dagenham	26.5	26.3	25.3	25.5	24.3	23.9
Barnet	17.1	16.1	16.2	16.7	16.6	15.9
Bexley	15.6	14.8	14.9	14.1	13.6	12.9

Maintained nursery, primary, secondary and all special schools[1]: school meal arrangements

By local education authority, by Government office region	Position in January each year Percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free meals[2] 1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Brent	27.8	27.5	27.6	27.2	26.2	25.7
Bromley	16.7	15.7	14.3	13.6	13.1	12.7
Croydon	24.6	23.4	22.1	21.8	20.6	20.8
Baling	27.3	26.5	26.1	26.3	26.7	25.9
Enfield	21.8	21.4	21.5	22.5	21.5	21.3
Greenwich	39.3	38.2	37.3	36.4	35.2	34.2
Harrow	13.3	13.3	13.7	13.9	13.9	14.4
Havering	13.8	13.1	12.9	12.4	11.7	11.0
Hillingdon	13.6	14.3	14.0	13.6	14.7	13.9
Hounslow	25.1	24.8	24.1	22.4	21.2	20.9
Kingston upon Thames	8.6	8.2	8.3	7.9	8.1	8.1
Merton	19.5	18.5	17.6	16.8	15.7	15.7
Redbridge	19.0	18.2	17.7	16.7	15.7	15.6
Richmond upon Thames	15.5	14.5	13.8	13.0	12.6	12.2
Sutton	11.9	11.6	11.3	10.9	10.3	9.9
Waltham Forest	32.7	31.3	29.8	28.5	28.2	26.9
South East	*13.3*	*12.3*	*11.6*	*10.9*	*10.3*	*9.9*
Berkshire[4]	11.3	10.0	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Bracknell Forest[3]	[5]—	[5]—	7.2	6.8	6.2	5.8
Brighton and Hove[3]	[5]—	22.4	21.7	20.7	18.6	17.8
Buckinghamshire[3]	9.4	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Buckinghamshire[3]	[5]—	6.4	6.6	6.6	6.4	6.4
East Sussex[4]	19.6	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
East Sussex[3]	[5]—	16.6	15.2	14.8	14.3	13.3
Hampshire[4]	13.5	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Hampshire[3]	[5]—	9.6	8.9	8.5	8.2	8.2
Isle of Wight	21.5	20.6	19.7	19.2	17.8	17.2
Kent[4]	16.4	15.4	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Kent[3]	[5]—	[5]—	14.4	12.7	11.9	11.3
Medway[3]	[5]—	[5]—	14.1	12.9	11.7	11.2
Milton Keynes[3]	[5]—	14.4	13.7	13.7	13.2	12.2
Oxfordshire	10.5	9.6	9.4	9.5	9.5	8.9
Portsmouth[3]	[5]—	20.0	18.1	17.6	17.1	16.8
Reading[3]	[5]—	[5]—	15.5	14.2	14.5	14.3
Slough[3]	[5]—	[5]—	17.3	16.6	15.8	15.5
Southampton[3]	[5]—	22.5	21.7	21.8	20.7	19.9
Surrey	9.4	8.6	8.0	7.8	7.1	6.9
West Berkshire[3]	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	6.2	5.8	5.8
West Sussex	11.4	10.5	9.8	8.6	7.6	7.2
Windsor and Maidenhead[3]	[5]—	[5]—	6.7	6.6	6.4	5.9
Wokingham[3]	[5]—	[5]—	4.8	4.4	4.6	4.3
South West	*14.5*	*13.4*	*12.6*	*11.8*	*11.2*	*10.8*
Bath and North East Somerset	13.3	12.0	11.1	10.3	9.4	8.7
Bournemouth[3]	[5]—	13.9	13.0	11.1	10.5	10.1
Bristol, City of	26.4	25.5	24.1	22.5	22.2	22.4
Cornwall	17.8	15.0	14.3	13.6	12.8	11.9
Devon[4]	16.7	15.9	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Devon[3]	[5]—	[5]—	12.3	11.4	11.6	11.0
Dorset[4]	10.1	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Dorset[3]	[5]—	7.9	7.5	6.5	5.6	6.4
Gloucestershire	12.2	11.0	10.1	9.5	8.7	8.8
Isles of Stilly	11.3	6.4	4.4	5.1	6.4	3.4
North Somerset	12.5	11.2	10.3	9.8	9.2	9.0
Plymouth[3]	[5]—	[5]—	19.6	19.2	18.0	16.5
Poole[3]	[5]—	10.0	9.3	8.4	7.0	6.3
Somerset	11.4	11.6	10.8	10.6	10.1	9.5
South Gloucestershire	11.8	10.5	9.4	8.4	8.1	7.7
Swindon[3]	[5]—	14.5	13.4	12.5	11.6	11.4
Torbay[3]	[5]—	[5]—	20.2	19.1	17.1	16.9
Wiltshire[4]	12.1	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—
Wiltshire[3]	[5]—	9.2	8.7	8.2	7.9	7.4

[1] Includes Maintained and Non-Maintained special schools.

[2] Day pupils, excludes boarding pupils.

[3] After local government reorganisation.

[4] Before local government reorganisation

[5] Not applicable.

[6] Not available.

Pensions

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on how his Department can protect employees' pension schemes if their employer goes into administration or bankruptcy. [92732]

Mr. McCartney: If a salary-related occupational pension scheme starts to wind up as a result of its sponsoring employer going into administration or bankruptcy, the members of the scheme are protected by measures contained in legislation.

The Statutory Priority Order sets out how the assets of the scheme are to be applied towards meeting the scheme's liabilities for pensions and other benefits. It aims to ensure that scheme assets are divided among scheme members as fairly as possible.

The employer debt provisions place a debt on an insolvent company's estate to cover any deficiency in the pension fund. The calculation of the debt is based on an estimate of the costs of winding up the scheme, the notional costs of buying annuities for pensioners and cash equivalent transfer values for people who have not retired.

The independent trustee provisions require insolvency practitioners to make sure that schemes that are winding up have one trustee who is independent. Trustees are required to report their progress regularly to Opra, which aims to ensure that schemes are wound up as quickly as possible.

Additionally, a compensation scheme was established to provide compensation for losses caused by dishonesty where the employer is insolvent. The compensation scheme acts as a safety net for members if their scheme suffers from a reduction in assets through dishonesty and their employer is not around to make good the shortfall.

Nonetheless, we are still concerned about instances when the sponsoring employer becomes insolvent and the pension scheme winds up under-funded. We are aware of the impact this has, and are determined to protect the long-term security of pensioners and other scheme members in occupational pension schemes.

This is why the pensions Green Paper, "Simplicity, Security and Choice" (Cm 5677), published on 17 December 2002, includes proposals to further protect members' pensions, including proposals to share out scheme assets more fairly, introduce some form of insurance and strengthen protection for members whose solvent employer chooses to wind up its scheme.

We are seeking views on our proposals and additional suggestions, and are therefore holding a wide ranging consultation on the Green Paper.

Mr. Tynan: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what plans he has to simplify the overlap of stakeholder and additional voluntary contribution pension arrangements where a person's earnings are such to allow concurrent membership of an occupational and a stakeholder pension arrangement. [92315]

Ruth Kelly: I have been asked to reply.

On 17 December the Government published, for consultation, simplification proposals for the pension tax rules. The consultation paper, "Simplifying the taxation of pensions: increasing choice and flexibility", is available in the House of Commons Library. The consultation is to allow people the opportunity to put forward their views before final decisions are taken.

The consultation paper puts forward a proposed framework of general benefit rules. It is proposed that these rules would apply to all qualifying pension arrangements.

Post Office Card Account

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) how many personal invitation documents for post office card accounts have been issued; [92873]

(2) how many applications have been received for a post office card account; [92874]

(3) how many post office card accounts have been successfully processed. [92875]

Malcolm Wicks: As at 10 January, around 26,000 child benefit and veterans agency customers had requested a post office card account. The Government have decided to build up the number of benefit customers and pensioners that we pay through the post office card account gradually, starting from April 2003. This is to ensure that the systems supporting the post office card account are reliable and robust, and have proved themselves in live running, before we start to pay large numbers of customers through them.

The Department's current plans for issuing personal invitation documents—PIDS—meet our intention that, subject to acceptance of the card account service, we can start to pay some people through the post office card account from April 2003.

Accordingly, on current plans, the earliest date for PID issue will be 24 March 2003.

The only personal invitation documents issued so far have been to around 1,000 customers taking part in the card account pilots that Post Office Ltd. are currently undertaking. Detailed questions on the pilot are matters which fall within the day-to-day responsibility of Post Office Ltd. I have therefore asked the chief executive to reply directly to the hon. Member on this issue.

Public Sector Workers (Retirement)

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what his estimate is of the number of public sector workers who are obliged to retire at or before age 60; and if he will make a statement. [92554]

Mr. Boateng: I have been asked to reply.

Retirement policy is a matter for individual public sector employers and detailed numerical information is not held centrally. Government policy as set out in last year's pensions green paper, "Simplicity, security and choice: Working and saving for retirement (Cm 5677)" is to encourage people to work up to the age of 65 and beyond if they wish. Public service employers are reviewing their retirement policies to take account of that. In local government, the normal pension age is already 65 for new entrants. Longer serving staff may have rights to an earlier normal pension age, between 60 and 65, depending on their length of service.

As set out in the Green Paper, the Government proposes to increase the normal pension age from 60 to 65 for new entrants to pension schemes such the NHS, teachers and civil service. Some 75 per cent. of civil servants already have the option to retire at age 65 and the numbers able to serve beyond age 60 are expected to increase. NHS staff are generally encouraged to continue to work beyond age 60 and those retiring on age grounds typically leave well after age 60. In the state education sector, teachers can normally work until age 65 if they wish and they can work beyond 65 by mutual agreement between the individual and the employer.

In the armed forces, police and fire services the great majority of people leave before age 60 and pensions for those retiring are payable well before 60. There are a few posts in these services where individuals may be retained beyond age 60. There are a few posts in these services where individuals may be retained beyond age 60.

Statutory Instruments

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many Statutory Instruments subject to negative procedure made by his Department *(a)* came into force and *(b)* were considered by a delegated legislation committee in each of the last three sessions. [88033]

Maria Eagle: The details requested are in the table.

Session	*Number of negative statutory instruments that came into force*	*Number considered by delegated legislation committee*
1999–2000 (Department of Social Security)	68	2
2000–01 (Department of Social Security)	44	0
2001–02 (Department for Work and Pensions)	101	4

A further 14 instruments subject to the negative procedure came into force in the period between the end of the 1999–2000 session and the start of the 2000–01 session and a further three instruments subject to the negative procedure came into force in the period between the end of the 2000–01 session and the start of the 2001–02 session.

Where a Statutory Instrument has more than one commencement date, the first date has been used.

Welfare to Work

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what benefits and subsidies may be lost by the unemployed upon starting employment. [83173]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: We are taking a single approach to work and benefits to make work pay, make work possible and to support those who cannot work.

The national minimum wage together with our reforms of the tax and benefit system are helping to ensure that work pays at all levels of the labour market, and particularly for people on low incomes. Building on the success of the working families tax credit and the disabled person's tax credit, we will introduce the working tax credit from April 2003, extending in-work support to workers without children or disabilities.

We have also recently announced an improved package of financial measures to help people make the transition into work. From October 2004, we will be introducing a new job grant to help people moving into a job after at least six months on benefit. Single people and couples without children will receive £100. A higher rate grant of £250 will be paid to lone parents and to couples with children. This improved job grant will make a real difference in helping tide families over until their first wages are received.

On starting full-time employment a person ceases to be entitled to jobseeker's allowance or income support. There are a number of other benefits and subsidies available to people claiming income-based jobseeker's allowance or income support. These may be affected by a person's increased income on starting work or the person may lose entitlement to them. They include: housing benefit, council tax benefit, certain social fund grants and loans, free NHS prescriptions, eye tests and dental treatment, free school meals, and milk tokens.

Housing benefit and council tax benefit remain available to provide in-work support to help people meet their rent or council tax and are designed to guarantee that a person is better off in work than out of work. In addition, the NHS low income scheme ensures that working people on low incomes can continue to receive help towards the cost of most NHS services.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Aerospace Industry

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the *(a)* names and *(b)* employers of members of the *(i)* Aerospace Committee and (ii) Aerospace Innovation and Growth Team working groups. [91919]

Alan Johnson: The names of members of the Aerospace Committee and the Aerospace Innovation and Growth Team working groups and their respective employers have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Business Link

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many businesses there are in *(a)* the north-east Region and *(b)* Surrey; and what estimates she has made of the total income of Business Links in *(i)* the north-east region and (ii) Surrey in 2002–03 [92834]

Nigel Griffiths: At the start of 2002, there was an estimated 41,865 VAT registered businesses in the North East of England, and 43,525 in Surrey County (Source: VAT registrations and deregistrations: Business Start-ups and closures, published by the SBS in October 2002).

Projected total turnover (income) for the four Business Link Operators in the North East Region in 2002/03 is around £19.9 million.£6 million (30 per cent. of turnover) of this is in the form of a Core Services Grant from the SBS. Total turnover in the North East also includes £7 million (35 per cent. of turnover) of European funding.

Projected total turnover for Business Link Surrey in 2002/03 is around 5.8 million. £3.45 million (59.5 per cent. of turnover) of this is in the form of a Core Services Grant from the SBS. Business Link Surrey do not access any European funding.

Consumer Credit Act

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry pursuant to her answer of 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 79W, on the Consumer Credit Act 1974, which of the issues raised in the original question are covered by the consultations listed in her answer. [92716]

Miss Melanie Johnson: *[holding answer 22 January 2003]*: The question of how annual percentage rates are calculated as part of a consultation on the simplification of the regulations governing credit advertising. The consultation will then determine any reform of the statutory rules.

In preparation for that, my Department is in regular discussion with the credit industry and consumer bodies on the scope for a common format for the calculation and advertising of APRs on credit cards, and the provision for other key information.

Employment Rights (Information and Advice)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures she is taking to improve information and advice for businesses on employment rights. [92030]

Alan Johnson: I firmly believe that there is a strong need for clear, straightforward and easily accessible information and guidance for businesses on employment rights.

Businesses can obtain guidance on employment rights from a number of sources: I welcome Acas' planned expansion of their advisory work and the recent introduction of a national number for their helpline service. Information is also available on the Acas, DTI and Business Link websites. The Small Business Service (SBS) is developing a pack specifically for start up businesses to accompany its fact sheets and other services.

Even with the variety and high quality of these services I am aware of the need for continuous improvement to ensure we meet the needs of business. As part of this process my department is working with Acas and SBS and an advisory group of user organisations to improve the way information and guidance on employment rights is made available to the different groups of users, including the e-delivery of information.

Manufacturing Industry

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures she is taking to promote and support UK manufacturing. [92031]

Alan Johnson: The Government's Manufacturing Strategy, published in May last year, identified seven key areas of activity for Government and industry that are crucial for manufacturing success. We are taking action in all of those areas to help British manufacturers cope with very difficult global conditions.

For example, Regional Centres for Manufacturing Excellence were successfully launched in each of the nine English Regions and in Wales over the period April to November 2002 and are now proactively delivering the Manufacturing Advisory Service.

Post Office Card Accounts

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps she is taking to promote the use of the Post Office card prior to the introduction of direct payments of benefits in April. [92548]

Mr. Timms: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to my hon.Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire on 17 December 2002, column 738W.

Redundancy Payments Scheme

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment she has made of the reasons for the change in payments through the Redundancy Payments Scheme from 1999–2000 to 2002–03; and if she will make a statement. [91959]

Alan Johnson: The total amount paid out by the Redundancy Payments Service before any deductions for Income Tax and National Insurance Contributions in the financial year 1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000 was £200.0 million. The corresponding figures for the financial years April 2000 to March 2001 and April 2001 to March 2002 were £229.7 millions and £278.7 million, respectively, an increase of just over 39 per cent. About three quarters of the increase is attributable to an increase in the numbers of claims over the period. The remainder is mainly due to successive increases in the statutory limits that apply to redundancy and other payments from the National Insurance Fund.

Regional Assistance

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much was spent on *(a)* regional selective assistance, *(b)* regional development grants, *(c)* regional innovation grants and *(d)* regional employment premiums for *(i)* Scotland, (ii) England, (iii) Wales in each year from 1974–75 to 2001–02, and what the estimated figures are for (A) 2002–03, (B) 2003–04, (C) 2004–05, and (D) 2005–06, (1) in cash terms, and (2) at constant 2001–02 prices. [89824]

Alan Johnson: The figures for expenditure on Regional Selective Assistance, Regional Development Grants and Regional Innovation Grants are published in the Annual Report of the Industrial Development Act 1982.

The figures for the period 1990–91 to 2001–02 are summarised as follows and have been presented in cash terms and constant 2001–02 prices. Reference should be made to the Annual Reports for earlier information.

Regional grants 1990–91 to 2000–01

Cash terms	*1990–91*	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*
(a) Regional selective assistance					
Scotland	66.8	63.6	59.2	69	77
England	88.9	74.2	71.1	94.7	113.1
Wales	30.2	55.1	58.7	50.9	57
Total	185.9	192.9	189	214.6	247.1
(b) Regional development grants					
Scotland	42.1	12.2	8.9	2.7	0.4
England	65.3	33	11.1	2.9	0.3
Wales	22.1	14.8	5.7	4.7	0
Total	129.5	60	25.7	10.3	0.7
(c) Regional innovation grants					
Scotland	1.2	1.2	1.5	1.7	1.4
England	2.3	1.9	2.1	5.1	8.7
Wales	0.5	0.6	0.5	1.1	1
Total	4	3.7	4.1	7.9	11.1
Total	319.4	256.6	218.8	232.8	258.9
of which:					
Scotland	110.1	77	69.6	73.4	78.8
England	156.5	109.1	84.3	102.7	122.1
Wales	52.8	70.5	64.9	56.7	58
Total	319.4	256.6	218.8	232.8	258.9
GDP Deflator (HM Treasury)	72.956	77.406	79.91	81.886	82.972
Constant 2001–02 prices					
Scotland	150.9	99.5	87.1	89.6	95.0
England	214.5	140.9	105.5	125.4	147.2
Wales	72.4	91.1	81.2	69.2	69.9
Total	437.8	331.5	273.8	284.3	312.0

Cash terms	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
(a) Regional selective assistance						
Scotland	70.1	72.3	76.5	74.2	52	69.8
England	112.7	97.3	115.2	111.4	88.7	112.6
Wales	54.2	47.8	75.7	79.9	44.9	37.2
Total	237	217.4	267.4	265.5	185.6	219.6
(b) Regional development grants						
Scotland	0	0.2	0	0	0	0
England	0.6	0	0	0	0	0
Wales	0	0.1	0	0	0	0
Total	0.6	0.3	0	0	0	0
(c) Regional innovation grants						
Scotland	2.3	1.8	0	0	0	0
England	11	0.8	0	0	0	0
Wales	1.4	11	0	0	0	0
Total	14.7	13.6	0	0	0	0
Total	252.3	231.3	267.4	265.5	185.6	219.6
of which:						
Scotland	72.4	74.3	76.5	74.2	52	69.8
England	124.3	98.1	115.2	111.4	88.7	112.6
Wales	55.6	58.9	75.7	79.9	44.9	37.2

Cash terms	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Total	252.3	231.3	267.4	265.5	185.6	219.6
GDP Deflator (HM Treasury)	85.336	88.042	90.759	93.253	95.51	97.689
Constant 2001–02 prices						
Scotland	84.8	84.4	84.3	79.6	54.4	71.5
England	145.7	111.4	126.9	119.5	92.9	115.3
Wales	65.2	66.9	83.4	85.7	47.0	38.1
Total	295.7	262.7	294.6	284.7	194.3	224.8

The estimated annual figure for 2002/03 for Regional Selective Assistance in England is £115 million (£112 million at 2001/02 prices). Figures for future years will be published in the Department's Expenditure Plans Reports.

Information for Scotland and Wales for future years can be obtained from The Scottish Executive and the National Assembly for Wales respectively.

No information is available in relation to Regional Employment Premiums.

Small Business (Regulatory Burden)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures she is taking to reduce the burden of regulation on small businesses. [92029]

Nigel Griffiths: Independent reports from the OECD, Anderson growth plus and others show the UK in general to be a less regulated than most International Competitors. Since January 2000, the Government has put in place a number of measures to further reduce the burden of regulation on small businesses. The SmallBusiness Service now scrutinises newly proposed regulations for their likely impact on SMEs and encourages reform and rationalisation of wxisting regulation. It works closely with DTI's Better Regulation Team to help Departments develop alternatives to regulation.

Examples of measures taken include 485,000 businesses had their corporation tax bill cut or abolished through measures announced in Budget 2002, and 700,000 benefited from the flat rate VAT scheme. Overall around 9000,000 SMEs have benefited.

TRANSPORT

Aviation Fuel (Dumping)

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) how many *(a)* incidents of dumping of aviation fuel there were and *(b)* tonnes of aviation fuel were dumped in UK airspace in the last year for which figures are available; [92264]

(2) what regulations and guidelines there are on the amount of aviation fuel loaded onto aircraft at *(a)* UK airports and *(b)* military bases; and how this relates to the planned journey and flight time; [92261]

(3) what regulations exist to control the dumping of aviation fuel into UK airspace; and whether the regulations differ for civil and military aircraft; [92262]

(4) whether a pilot dumping aviation fuel is required to report the activity; and what records are maintained of incidents of the dumping of aviation fuel; [92263]

(5) what offence the dumping of aircraft fuel into UK airspace constitutes. [92266]

Mr. Jamieson: Article 56(3)*(b)* of the Civil Aviation Air Navigation Order 2000 permits the jettisoning, in cases of emergency, of fuel from an aircraft over the UK. Other than in an emergency, jettisoning would constitute an offence liable on summary conviction to a fine of up to £2,500, as provided for in Article 122(5).

As in any emergency, the pilot and the air traffic controller would normally report the circumstances under the Mandatory Occurrence Reporting Scheme. There were 19 such incidents in the UK in 2002. There were 1,666,000 air transport movements in the UK in 2001. Details of the amount of fuel jettisoned are not normally recorded as part of the Scheme, and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

As regards fuel loaded onto an aircraft, Article 6 of the Order referred to effectively requires the operator to ensure that the pre-flight calculation of usable fuel for a flight covers taxying, trip (take-off to landing), contingency (normally 5 per cent. of trip fuel), diversion to alternative destination, final reserve fuel (30 minutes holding), additional fuel if required by the type of operation (e.g. extended range twin engined operation) and any extra at the commander's discretion.

Questions about the regulations and procedures applicable to military aircraft are a matter for my right. hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Defence.

Pensioners (Free Travel)

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what discussions he has had with pensioner groups on the extension of free travel passes to all parts of the United Kingdom. [91335]

Mr. Jamieson: The Minister of State for Transport (John Spellar) has met representatives from the National Pensioners' Convention, and my Department has received many letters from pensioners (including some groups) on this topic.

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to make funds available for free travel for all pensioners. [91336]

Mr. Jamieson: From 1 June 2001 we have ensured that all pensioners have been entitled to a free bus pass allowing half-fare travel on local buses, as a minimum. Local authorities may also run more generous schemes if they wish. From 1 April 2003 travel concessions will also be extended to men aged between 60 and 65. Expenditure on concessionary travel schemes is covered by the contribution that the Government makes to local authorities through the annual grant settlement. We have no plans to make funds available for free travel for all pensioners.

UK-registered Vessels (Terrorism)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the threat of terrorist attack upon UK-registered vessels. [91236]

Mr. Jamieson: The Secretary of State receives advice from the Security Service who have responsibility for preparing and disseminating assessments on the terrorist threat to UK vessels. This process is ongoing and is the basis for the development of measures which provide an appropriate response.

Air Transport Consultation

Mr. John Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to initiate a new round of public consultation before publishing the Government's White Paper on airports. [91871]

Mr. Jamieson: The consultation period, throughout the UK, is on-going and has been extended until we have consulted on Gatwick runway options. We intend to issue a revised South East consultation document next month. The consultation period will then run for four months after the date of publication of the new material. Those who have already responded to the consultation will be able to amend, add to, or replace their original response having considered the new material, if they wish to do so.

Air Travel Organisers Licensing Regulations

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what measures he intends to take to protect individual airline passengers who have bought accommodation from a listed supplier against scheduled airline failure. [91324]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government have no plans to take legislative action on this issue.

Central Railway

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what relative weight the Government will give to representatives by *(a)* foreign governments and *(b)* elected representatives of UK communities in reaching its decision on whether or not to support the proposed Central Railway project; [92570]

(2) when he expects to make an announcement on Government policy on the proposed Hybrid Bill to promote Central Railway. [92647]

Mr. Jamieson: We have received the Strategic Rail Authority's advice on this proposal, as well as a number of representations from other parties. We are giving the proposals due and careful consideration and will respond to Central Railway in due course.

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will publish the reports he has received on the Central Railway project from the Strategic Rail Authority. [92608]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend, the Minister of State on 11 December 2002, Official Report, column 351W to the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley).

Coach Travel

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement about help available to pensioners with long-distance coach travel. [92308]

Mr. Jamieson: We are committed to the early introduction of a scheme under which the operators of scheduled long-distance coach services would offer those aged over 60, and disabled people, concessionary half-fares in return for the services becoming eligible for Bus Service Operators Grants from my Department. We are currently pursuing clearance of this proposal under European Union State Aid rules, and are in discussion with coach operators on the details of the scheme's introduction. We aim to introduce the scheme as soon as possible in 2003–04.

Coaches (Passenger Seat Belts)

Mr. Michael Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the *(a)* desirability and *(b)* level of use of seat belts for passengers on coaches. [91761]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government have for many years encouraged the wide use of seat belts, as they can significantly reduce injuries in many types of accidents. Indeed, since 1 October 2001, seat belts have been required in all new minibuses, coaches and buses—apart from those specifically designed for urban use with standing passengers. However, no assessment has been made by observation of the use of seat belts by coach passengers.

Mr. Michael Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what representations he has received from coach operators about the wearing of passenger seat belts; and if he will make a statement. [91762]

Mr. Jamieson: No such representations have been received from coach operators. However, the Confederation of Passenger Transport, which represents bus and coach operators, responded to an informal consultation by the Department in May 2001 for views on the proposals in the draft EU Directive on seat belt wearing.

Mr. Michael Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to strengthen the regulations governing the use of seat belts for passengers in buses and coaches; and if he will make a statement. [91765]

Mr. Jamieson: The terms of an EU Directive, presently under consideration, will require seat belts to be used in the rear of buses and coaches where they are provided. Seat belt wearing is already compulsory in the

UK for the drivers and front seat passengers in all vehicles, and in the rear of mini-buses under 2.54 tonnes unladen weight (roughly 16 seats).

Container Ports

Dr. Julian Lewis To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, what estimate he has made of likely container port capacity at existing container ports over the next *(a)* five years, *(b)* 10 years, and *(c)* 15 years. [91697]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to my reply to the hon. Member for Southampton Test (Dr. Whitehead) on 3 December 2002, *Official Report*, columns 661–62W. The paper, "Recent Developments at UK Container Ports", mentioned in that answer, explains why the Department has not made national forecasts on container capacity. Likely capacity depends partly on future decisions on planning applications for port developments.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he intends to reply to the letter to him dated 2 December from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mr. G. Sherriff. [92286]

Mr. Spellar: I wrote to my right hon. Friend on 11 December 2002.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he will reply to the question tabled by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, Ref.83261. [92585]

Mr. Jamieson: I have answered question ref. 83261 on 28 November 2002 and it was printed on 3 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 666W.

Disability Discrimination Act

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the impact of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 on the transport sector, with particular reference to the rail sector. [91757]

Mr. Jamieson: Before accessibility regulations were implemented for new trains, buses and coaches under the Disability Discrimination Act, we published full assessments of the costs to industry of compliance with the regulations. These assessments were made on the basis of extensive and detailed consultation with manufacturers and operators. Since implementation, we have continued to maintain a close dialogue with industry, as well as with disabled people, to ensure the regulations are working effectively.

Heathrow

Martin Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when the Heathrow (Runway Alternations) 6 am to 7 am trial will conclude. [92125]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given on 9 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 290W. It is not possible at this stage to forecast when the trial will conclude.

Illegal Minicabs

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to the answer given to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham on 7 January, *Official Report*, column 102W, on illegal minicabs what funding has been allocated to local enforcement authorities to publicise the undesirability of using unlicensed minicabs. [92586]

Mr. Jamieson: My answer on 7 January made clear that the enforcement of illegal minicabs is a matter for local enforcement authorities and the police. It is for them to decide whether they wish to spend any of their budget on publicising the undesirability of using unlicensed minicabs.

Liquefied Petroleum Gas Vehicles

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what discussions he has had with interested organisations on how to encourage more LPG fuelled vehicles. [92061]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department has regular discussions with organisations representing the LPG industry. The DfT have met with: vehicles manufacturers; fuel suppliers; the Energy Saving Trust, who manage the PowerShift programme, and the LP Gas Association.

These discussions centre on how to bring high quality LPG vehicles to market, looking at what measures can help to remove market barriers and ensuring that there is a nation-wide LPG refuelling infrastructure.

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what action he is taking to increase the number of LPG outlets in and around London. [92062]

Mr. Jamieson: There are now over 1,100 LPG refuelling outlets, giving good coverage across the UK, including the London area. The Government has supported the general development of the LPG market through fiscal measures including favourable duty rates, grants towards the premium cost of LPG vehicles and discounts for alternatively fuelled vehicles under the new Vehicle Excise Duty and company car tax regimes.

In addition Planning Policy Guidance note 13, indicates that local authorities "should look favourably at proposals" to provide LPG and other alternative fuel infrastructure, "in order to deliver wider environmental objectives".

London (Transport Access)

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate he has made of the proportion of the population of the United Kingdom living within an area which can access London SW1 by *(a)* public and *(b)* private transport by *(i)* 9.15 am and (ii) 11.30 am without starting their journey earlier than 6.00 am. [92642]

Mr. Jamieson: No such estimate has been made.

London Underground

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many attributable delays of 15 minutes or more there were on each London underground line in each year since 2000. [91067]

Mr. Jamieson: This is an operational matter for London underground. However, they have provided the information in the table showing by line, for financial years since 2000–01, the number of attributable delays of at least fifteen minutes that were within London underground's control.

London underground: Number of train delays of at least 15 minutes by line

Line	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*2002–03*[1]
Bakerloo	249	253	205
Central	376	378	172
District	303	431	286
Jubilee	176	227	121
East London	93	84	64
Northern	136	142	116
Piccadilly	189	248	183
Victoria	68	112	77
Metropolitan	351	444	328
Circle and Hammersmith	239	219	157
Waterloo and City	20	30	40
Total	2,200	2,568	1,749

[1] To 7 December 2002

The increase in delays between 2000–01 and 2001–02 is primarily a consequence of problems with aging assets, especially signalling, including a major problem on the Metropolitan line during 2001. This emphasises the urgent need for the major investment and renewal which our tube modernisation plans will deliver.

Marine Casualty Officers

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many marine casualty officers are employed to work within UK waters. [91768]

Mr. Jamieson: There are 10 marine casualty officers in the United Kingdom under the employment of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency.

Motorway Services (M65)

Janet Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport by whom the decision was made to name the services at junction 4 of the M65 motorway The Blackburn Services; and who was consulted before the decision was taken. [91934]

Mr. Jamieson: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency, Tim Matthews, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from T. Matthews to Ms Janet Anderson, dated 23 January 2003:

I have been asked by David Jamieson to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about the naming of the Motorway Services at Junction 4 of the M65 in Lancashire.

The developer of this service area initiated the name "The Blackburn Services".

The development was submitted to Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council for planning approval. When considering planning applications, the Council is required to undertake consultations with a standard list of consultees, which in the case of a proposed motorway service area includes the Highways Agency. When consulted, our considered view was that the proposed facility was in the interests of road users, and we therefore made no objection to the proposal. Once these consultations, required by the planning process, are complete, there is no requirement to consult further.

The Highways Agency would only have intervened in the naming of these services if we considered that road safety could have been compromised by the provision of misleading or confusing information on our road signs.

If you would like any further information about this matter, you may wish to contact the Agency's Route Manager for this section of the M65, Roy Wood, at Sunley Tower, Piccadilly Plaza, Manchester, MI 4BE (Tel 0161 930 5686).

Oil and Chemical Spills

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what specific funding is available to coastal local authorities for counter-pollution measures and clean-up operations for *(a)* oil, *(b)* diesel and *(c)* other spillages at sea; [91599]

(2) what steps he has taken to train local authority staff and staff of other interested organisations, in the management, containment and clearance of oil, chemical and diesel spillages at sea. [91598]

Mr. Jamieson *[pursuant to his answer, 20 January 2003, Official Report, c. 36–37W]:* In the last 24 months the MCA have trained over 150 people on the Oil Pollution, Contingency Planning and Response courses. The MCA will also run courses in Inverclyde, North East Scotland, North Devon, Humberside, the Isle of Wight and Dorset before April 2003.

Paper Supplies

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport who the suppliers are of his Department's *(a)* paper and *(b)* paper products. [91909]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department's printing paper is supplied by Robert Horne Paper Company, James McNaughton Paper Company, Premier Paper and Howard Smith Paper. Copier paper and other paper products are supplied by Banner Business Supplies Ltd.

Pollutant Spillage Courses

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the local authorities that have taken up pollutant spillage courses offered by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. [91767]

Mr. Jamieson: In the last 15 months the MCA have trained over 80 local authority delegates on six Oil Pollution, Contingency Planning and Response courses. These delegates have come from the following councils:

Denbighshire Council
Colchester Borough Council
Norfolk County Council
Swale Borough Council
Southampton City Council
West Somerset District Council
Exeter City Council
Torbay Council
North Devon District Council
Carrick District Council
Portsmouth City Council
West Dorset District Council
Poole Borough Council
Bournemouth Borough Council
Kent County Council
South Gloucester Council
Hampshire County Council
Neath and Port Talbot County Borough Council
Argyll and Bute Council
Aberdeenshire Council
Angus Council
South Ayrshire Council
Western Isles Council
The City and County of Cardiff
Vale of Glamorgan County
East Lindsey District Council
Lincolnshire County Council
Copeland Borough Council
Environment and Heritage Service
Hartlepool Borough Council
Waveney District Council
Havant Borough Council
New Forest District Council
Teignbridge District Council
North Somerset Council
Sedgewick District Council
Medway Council
Dorset County Council
Adur District Council

The MCA have also run two day hands-on training courses for county, unitary and district councils in the following areas since the summer of 1999: Suffolk, Lincolnshire, Merseyside, Hampshire, West Sussex, Cumbria, Somerset, Argyll and Bute, Fife, Kent, Pembrokeshire, Cornwall, Essex, Teeside, Highland, Humberside, Tyneside, Gwynedd and South Wales. Before April 2003 courses will also be run in Inverclyde, North East Scotland, North Devon, Humberside, the Isle of Wight and Dorset. When organising these courses the host council will always invite their neighbours. For example the Fife Council course was attended by all the councils surrounding the Forth and Tay estuaries.

Press Releases

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many press releases have been issued by his Department in each *(a)* year and *(b)* quarter from 1995–96 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92455]

Mr. Jamieson: The information requested is as follows:

(a) The number of press releases issued by each relevant Department excluding agencies, is set out in the table. Those on transport issues are included in overall totals for the former Departments of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) and Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR), as separate data is not held.

Number of press releases issued

	Number
Department of Transport	
1995—1996	422
1996—1997	401
April 1997—15 June 1997	38
Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (c)	
16 June 1997—1998	817
1998—1999	1,217
1999—2000	1,153
Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (c)/ Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (c)	
2000—2001	768
Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions	
2001—2002	488
April 2002—28 May 2002	73
Department for Transport	
29 May 2002—17 January 2003	121

(b) Quarterly information for Department for Transport, since its creation, is as follows:

Press releases issued by the Department for Transport

Quarter	*Number*
29 May to end of June 2002	17
July—September 2002	57
October—December 2002	43
1 January 2003—to date (17 January 2003)	4

Quarterly data for the former Departments is not available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Rail Services

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the request of the Western franchise to receive a subsidy from the Strategic Rail Authority to run services on the Swindon-Cheltenham line in place of Virgin Trains. [92070]

Mr. Jamieson: The Strategic Rail Authority has agreed that, from May 2003, Virgin Cross Country will no longer run services on this route, but First Great Western will provide an enhanced service.

The Authority has also invited proposals from Wessex Trains to run services on the route. It is currently considering these.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will carry out an investigation into the ability of train operating companies to cease fulfilling timetabled services. [92071]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* The minimum level of services which train operators are required to provide is prescribed in franchise agreements, primarily through the Passenger Service Requirement.

Martin Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what remedial action has been taken by train operating companies with passengers in excess of capacity as required by the terms of their franchise; how much funding is committed to this by Central Government; and how the money is distributed; [92128]

(2) how much has been spent on reducing overcrowding on trains in each of the last five years by *(a)* South West Trains, *(b)* Silverlink, *(c)* South Central, *(d)* Thameslink and *(e)* Railtrack; and if he will make a statement. [92127]

Mr. Jamieson: Investment by train operating companies and Network Rail (formerly Railtrack) is made for a variety of reasons including tackling overcrowding. It is not possible to ascribe particular amounts to a single objective. Nor is there a single amount committed by Central Government.

Where train operators breach their 'Passengers In Excess of Capacity' limit the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) can require an action plan to be produced. The SRA now publish information on these in the June edition of 'On Track'. This is placed in the Library of the House.

Road Deaths

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to his answer of 15 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 627W, on road deaths, whether his Department has specifically requested from the Netherlands *(a)* figures on accident reductions and *(b)* details of the effects on traffic flows and the behaviour of road users generally, where traffic lights have been removed. [92609]

Mr. Jamieson: The Department is in touch with the official responsible for the work in the Netherlands. Accident figures and the effects on traffic flows have been discussed in general terms and we have asked for any formal figures that may be available. It is important to note that a great deal of work has been done to change the appearance of the roads concerned and reduce vehicle speeds as part of influencing drivers' behaviour. More than just the removal of traffic signals is involved and this needs to be considered when looking at accident and traffic flow figures.

Roadworks (London)

Martin Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many reports of hazards to pedestrians have been *(a)* reported and *(b)* investigated by the Health and Safety Executive as a result of Transport for London road works in Wandsworth between 2001–02. [92126]

Mr. Jamieson: The information requested is not readily available. Reports to the Health and Safety Executive regarding hazards to pedestrians are normally recorded as complaints concerning the contractor actually doing the work, not the ultimate client. During the period 2001–02 HSE recorded a total of 18 complaints concerning public safety in the London borough of Wandsworth: in 14 of these it proved possible for HSE to carry out investigations. From a further search of available data there is no record of any of these complaints having concerned Transport for London roadwork's.

Rolling Stock

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when all Mark 1 rolling stock will be removed from service. [92622]

Mr. Jamieson: The Strategic Rail Authority is leading an industry wide Mark 1 Replacement Programme to ensure that all Mark 1 rolling stock is removed from the Network by 31 December 2004, as required in the 1999 Rail Safety Regulations. In the course of investigating this project, it has become clear that it may be necessary to provide for around 300 to 350 vehicles to operate on the network after December 2004, but the SRA expects these vehicles to be removed from the network in spring 2005.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many days were lost due to sickness absence in the Department in 2002. [90537]

Mr. Jamieson: The Department for Transport was established following machinery of Government changes in May 2002. The most recent 'Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service' published by the Cabinet Office and announced by Ministerial Statement on 19 December 2002 covered the calendar year 2001 for the predecessor Department, the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions and its executive agencies. Figures for 2002 will be announced in due course.

The Department is committed to managing sick absence effectively and to meeting its Service Delivery Agreement (SDA) target reductions in sick absence by the end of 2003.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many working days were lost due to illness in his Department in 2002. [90973]

Mr. Jamieson: The Department for Transport was established following machinery of Government changes in May 2002. The most recent "Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service", published by the Cabinet Office and announced by Ministerial Statement on 19 December 2002, covered the calendar year 2001 for the predecessor Department, the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions, and its executive agencies. Figures for 2002 will be announced in due course.

The Department is committed to managing sick absence effectively and to meeting its Service Delivery Agreement (SDA) target reductions in sick absence by the end of 2003.

St. Pancras Cemeteries

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, pursuant to his answer of 8 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 22W, on St. Pancras cemeteries, how many representations he received; what issues were raised in the representations; what response he made to each of the representations; what contacts he had with the contractors responsible for the work as a result of the representations he received; when the work of removing the graves will be completed; how many graves will be removed from the cemetery as a result of the work; how old the graves are which are being removed; what information he has collated regarding surviving relatives of those buried in the graves; and what action he has taken to ensure that the removal of graves is being carried out in conformity with the relevant regulations. [91328]

Mr. Jamieson: The Secretary of State has to date received nine written representations on this matter, which have raised concerns ranging from the retrieval and recording of archaeological information from the site to the method of working and removal of bodies. London & Continental Railways has continued to liaise closely with contractors and the ecclesiastical authorities, and the Secretary of State's advisers on the CTRL project have been closely involved as work has proceeded. The bulk of the exhumation work will be completed by the end of April. It is estimated that the remains of up to 8,000 bodies will be removed from the site, although not all of these are identifiable individuals. The cemetery closed in 1854 so all the burials pre-date that time. As the site had already been disturbed by 19th century railway construction, there is no identification on the surface of individual burials. Any information from the excavations is recorded by the specialist contractor carrying out the work, which is being done in accordance with legal requirements relevant to burial grounds from this period.

Thames Estuary Airport

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what discussions he has had with the Thames Estuary Airport Company regarding their proposals for a new airport; [91356]

(2) whether *(a)* he and *(b)* his departmental officials have had discussions regarding a proposal for a new airport situated in the Thames estuary on a site north-east of the Isle of Sheppey; [91349]

(3) if he will set out the timetable for public consultation on UK air transport. [91693]

Mr. Jamieson: The only contact between my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport and the Thames Estuary Airport Company Limited (TEACO) has been to receive their written response to "The Future Development of Air Transport in the United Kingdom (South East)". This included proposals for a new airport on an artificial island in the Thames Estuary. Officials have had a number of telephone conversations with representatives of TEACO, both before and after submission of their written response.

The consultation period, throughout the UK, has been extended until we have consulted on Gatwick runway options. The consultation period will run for four months after the date of publication of the new material. Those who have already responded to the consultation will be able to amend, add to, or replace their response having considered the new material, if they wish to do so.

Train Drivers (Sickness)

Ross Cranston: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the sickness rates were for train drivers in *(a)* 1991, *(b)* 1996 and *(c)* 2001. [92096]

Mr. Jamieson: This information is not held centrally.

Water Freight

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much freight was carried on water in the UK in *(a)* the year to May 1992, *(b)* the year to May 1997 and *(c)* the most recent year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [91759]

Mr. Jamieson: Statistics of freight traffic carried on UK waters are compiled on an annual basis only. Total waterborne freight traffic in years 1991, 1996 and 2001 (the latest available year), in terms of goods lifted (tonnage) and goods moved (tonne-kilometres), were as follows:

Year	*Goods lifted (million tonnes)*	*Goods moved (billion tonne-kilometres)*
1991	144.2	57.7
1996	142.1	55.3
2001	131.7	58.8

Working Time Directive

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the impact of the working time directive on services by *(a)* rail and *(b)* road. [91758]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department is consulting both sides of industry, on the likely impact of the adopted working time directive for mobile workers in the road transport sector (2002/15/EC). A regulatory impact assessment will be published later this year, alongside a consultation document on our proposals.

Rail and road workers will be subject to the original Working Time Directive (93/104/EC), as amended by 2000/34/EC, by August 2003. The Department of Trade and Industry published a draft impact assessment on 31 October 2002, which covers all the sectors excluded from the original directive, including rail workers and non-mobile workers in the road transport sector. The draft RIA may be revised following comments received at the close of the public consultation on 31 January.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 27 January 2003

TRANSPORT

Airport Security

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what recent discussions he has had with airport authorities regarding security at British airports. [92837]

Mr. Jamieson: My right hon. Friend meets regularly with airport management, and security issues are prominent amongst the topics discussed. There is in addition a very active dialogue at official level.

British Transport Police

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport whether it is his policy to increase the number of British Transport Police; and if he will make a statement. [91671]

Mr. Jamieson: The number of BTP officers has increased from 2,095 in 1998 to 2,123 in 2002. It is a duty of the BTP Committee, not of the Secretary of State, to secure the maintenance of an adequate and efficient police service and determine the number of persons of each rank in the force.

A180

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when the Habrough to Stallingborough section of the A180 will be resurfaced with low-noise material. [93310]

Mr. Jamieson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Tim Matthews, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from T. Matthews to Shona McIsaac, dated 27 January 2003:

I have been asked by the Transport Minister, David Jamieson, to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking when the Harborough to Stallingborough section of the A180 will be resurfaced with low noise material.

As I said in my letter of 28 November 2002, it is not possible to provide a better idea of timing until the review of the maintenance programme is complete. I shall write to you as soon as the results of that review are known.

If you require any further information, please contact Mick Spink, the Highways Agency's Area Manager for the A180. He can be contacted on 0113 283 5397 or by e-mail mick.spink@highways.gsi.gov.uk. For further information on resurfacing of concrete roads, visit our website at www.highways.gov.uk and use our search facility to find 'concrete roads'.

Airports

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on his policy on the public funding of airport infrastructure development. [93285]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government's approach to the funding of future airport development schemes is described in paragraph 15.3 of 'The Future Development of Air Transport in the United Kingdom: South East' consultation document. This states that the Government expects the current pattern of private sector financing to continue and that it does not expect to commit public funds to future airport developments.

Civil Servants

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many civil servants have been employed by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each of its agencies and non-departmental bodies in each year from 1994–95 to 2000–03; and if he will make a statement. [92385]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office, Mr. Alexander, on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 333–34W.

Coastal Shipping Freight

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what percentage of the freight carried by coastal shipping was in UK flagged ships *(a)* in the year to May 1992, *(b)* the year to May 1997 and *(c)* the most recent year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [91760]

Mr. Jamieson: Statistics of freight traffic carried by coastal shipping in UK flagged ships are compiled on an annual basis only. The percentages carried in UK flagged ships for years 1991, 1996 and 2001 (the latest available year), in terms of goods lifted (tonnage) and goods moved (tonne-kilometres), were as follows:

Year	*UK flag share (percentage of goods lifted)*	*UK flag share (percentage of goods moved)*
1991	36	24
1996	24	16
2001	13	9

Computer Misuse

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many cases of computer misuse there were in his Department in each of the last five years, broken down by each category of misuse; and how many of those cases resulted in disciplinary action. [93036]

Mr. Jamieson: Coinciding with the creation of the Department for Transport in May 2002, a new policy was introduced dealing with the use/misuse of the Department's ICT resources. This policy was brought to the attention of staff in a departmental Bulletin and is contained within the departmental Staff Handbook.

No cases of misuse have been raised since the introduction of the new policy. Similarly, there are no identifiable cases relating to the Department for Transport in the previous four years.

Congestion Charges

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what recent discussions he has had with *(a)* the Mayor of London and *(b)* the Metropolitan Police regarding the impact of congestion charging on traffic police; and if he will make a statement. [92836]

Mr. Jamieson: This is a matter between the Mayor of London, Transport for London and the Metropolitan Police.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will bring forward regulations under paragraph 11 of Schedule 23 of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 to extend exemptions from the Central London road user charge; and if he will make a statement. [93352]

Mr. Jamieson: Exemptions from the central London congestion charge are primarily a matter for the Mayor. We are committed to providing a uniform minimum standard of exemptions or concessions from local road user charges in England. In considering the scope of these we will take into account experience gained in London and Durham.

External Consultants

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body spent on external consultancy in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (planned); and if he will make a statement. [92248]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to my answer of 16 January, given to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), *Official Report*, column 698W.

Foreign Commercial Vehicles

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to his answer of 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 30W, on foreign commercial vehicles, what plans he has for implementing routine checks at ports of entry. [93212]

Mr. Jamieson: Each European member state is required by law to ensure that vehicles bearing its registration are covered by motor insurance. Routine checks on foreign vehicles at ports would be illegal. Random checks involving all vehicles, foreign and domestic, are allowed and are carried out, away from the ports, by police forces and vehicle inspectors.

Health and Safety Strategy

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport whether his Department and its agencies have met the commitment arising from Action Point 13 of the June 2000 strategy Statement on Revitalising Health and Safety to summarise health and safety performance and plans in Annual Reports from the year 2000–01 onwards. [89508]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Work on 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 85–86W, in respect of Revitalising Health and Safety.

In addition to including a section on health and safety issues in the Department's Annual Report, separate annual reports on Occupational Health and Safety have been produced for the past four years. These detail performance for the Department and each of its Agencies and identify key occupational health and safety issues for action in the following year.

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what information he has collated on the application to his Department and its agencies of the checklist, circulated by letter by Sir Richard Mottram, referred to under Action Point 12 of the revitalising health and safety strategy statement; and if he will make a statement; [89510]

(2) which senior officials within his Department and its agencies take responsibility for health and safety at board or equivalent level; and where their names are publicised. [89509]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Work on 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 85–86W.

Heritage Assets

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what sales of heritage assets and antique assets have been made by his Department since May 1997; if he will list such assets; and if he will estimate the total sales proceeds. [92387]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department came into being in May 2002. No heritage assets or antiques have been sold by my Department.

Investment Strategy

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when the Departmental Investment Strategy will be published. [93226]

Mr. Jamieson: We expect to publish our Departmental Investment Strategy, incorporating the latest detailed expenditure plans for the next three years, shortly.

Late Trains

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many trains were late in reaching their destination within (i) Railtrack's southern zone, (ii) the south-eastern network and (iii) Kent and Sussex in each month since November 1997. [93818]

Mr Jamieson: The Strategic Rail Authority publish performance statistics for all train operating companies every three months in "National Rail Trends" and every six months in "On Track". The figures for each operator are not broken down to route level. The most recent editions of each were published on 12 December. Copies of these publications are available in the Libraries of the House.

M6

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate he has made of the number of vehicles that use the M6 in Staffordshire each day. [93279]

Mr. Jamieson: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency, Tim Matthews, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Tim Matthews to Ms Joan Walley, dated 27 January 2003:

I have been asked by the Transport Minister, David Jamieson, to reply to your recent question about the number of vehicles that use the M6 in Staffordshire each day.

The annual average daily totals of vehicles using the M6 between Junctions 12 and 16 in Staffordshire for the period September to December 2002 were as follows:

Average daily totals of vehicles using M6 between junctions 12 and 16—September to December 2002

Junction	*Northbound*	*Southbound*
12 to 13	53,367	52,657
13 to 14	52,653	52,546
14 to 15	49,754	49,673
15 to 16	54,326	55,675

Note:

These figures are averaged over a seven-day week. The equivalent figures for a five-day (Monday to Friday) period would be approximately 3,000 above those shown.

I hope this is helpful. If you would like any further information, the Highways Agency's Route Manager for the M6, Godfrey Short, would be pleased to help. He can be contacted at our offices at Broadway, Broad Street, Birmingham B15 1BL, or by telephone on 0121 678 8135.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects work to start on widening the M6 in Staffordshire; and if he will make a statement. [93280]

Mr. Jamieson: At this stage it is too early to say when work on the M6 widening scheme will start. The Secretary of State announced his response to the Midlands to North West Multi-Modal Study on 10 December 2002. At the same time he asked the Highways Agency to carry out further detailed work on the implementation and timing of the widening between junctions 11A and 19 and to bring forward a scheme for inclusion in the Agency's Targetted Programme of Improvements in the first half of 2003.

Marinair

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate he has made of the costs of the Marinair scheme for a proposed new airport in the Thames Estuary. [93257]

Mr. Jamieson: A broad estimate of the costs of the former Marinair scheme, based on historical information, was made during the 'Preliminary Site Search of Options for New Airport Capacity to serve the South East and East of England'. No cost estimate has been made relating to the proposal for a new airport on an artificial island in the Thames Estuary, submitted by the Thames Estuary Airport Company Limited (TEACO) as a written response to the airports consultation.

MIDMAN Multi-modal Study

Ms Walley To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he will respond to the MIDMAN multi-modal study; and if he will make a statement. [93278]

Mr. Jamieson: Our response to five multi modal studies, including the West Midlands to North West (MEDMAN) study was announced on 10 December 2002 both in an Oral statement to the House of Commons and Press Notice.

The letter which we sent to the West Midlands Regional Planning Body concerning MIDMAN was copied to all constituency MPs in the West Midlands as part of the briefing pack covering the announcement. This letter is also available on the Government Office for the West Midlands website at: http://www.go-wm.gov.uk/static/gems/news/Midman.doc

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what his estimate is of the total expenditure by his Department on ministerial travel *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* abroad, in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92454]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, on Wednesday 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 334W.

Motor Cycling Strategy

Dr. Vincent Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the progress in drawing up a national motor cycling strategy; and when he expects it to be published. [93995]

Mr Jamieson: The Advisory Group on Motorcycling has established five Task Forces to consider integration and traffic management, vehicle safety and security, environmental and fiscal issues, research, and statistics.

Good progress is being made including the publication of guidance to assist local authorities in installing secure parking for motorcycles, the start of monitored trials of motorcycles in bus lanes, congestion studies and safety research.

Some of the key work streams including safety research, congestion research and environmental assessment, will not reach fruition until 2004. The Interim Report of the Advisory Group on Motorcycling published in April 2001 (and placed in the House Library) explained that when these results were available the Government would be able to determine its strategy for motorcycling.

Oil Spills

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what further assessment he has made of the possibility of the satellite tracking of oil spills around the coastal waters of the United Kingdom; what assessment he has made of the Maritime and Coastguard pilot experiment into such tracking; and if he will make a statement. [93624]

Mr. Jamieson: Trials and operational use of radar satellites in a number of countries, including the UK, have proved that this technology can be used to detect oil spills.

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) in conjunction with the Department of Trade and Industry completed several satellite trials last year. The report on the trials indicated that the integration of satellite images with routine flights of surveillance aircraft would increase visual detections of slicks and promote opportunities for evidence gathering on polluters.

During the next financial year the MCA will be using radar satellite technology operationally. In addition the MCA is working very closely with the EC and Bonn Agreement Members with a view to establish a collaborative approach to funding of such operations.

Private Hire Vehicle Regulations

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what role he had in approving the regulations under the Private Hire Vehicles (London) Act 1998 written by the Greater London Authority; and if he will make a statement. [92855]

Mr. Jamieson: None.

Private Tolls

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will place in the Library a copy of the consultation paper on the introduction of VAT on privately operated tolls. [93326]

Mr. Jamieson: I have arranged for a copy of the paper titled "The introduction of VAT on privately operated tolls" that has been sent to operators of privately owned statutory tolled undertakings to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Public Sector Workers (Public Transport)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will estimate the proportion of public sector workers who commute to work via public transport. [92669]

Mr. Jamieson: The Autumn 2001 Labour Force Survey showed that 13.4 per cent. of public sector workers usually travelled to work by public transport.

Rail Services (Shrewsbury)

Mr. Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the *(a)* punctuality, *(b)* reliability and *(c)* number of complaints for rail services running to and from Shrewsbury in each year since 1997. [93084]

Mr. Jamieson: The Strategic Rail Authority publish performance statistics for all train operating companies in their quarterly National Rail Trends publication and their six-monthly "On Track" publication. Figures giving the number of complaints by train operating company are included in "On Track". The figures for each operator are not broken down to route level, but reflect the performance of their services in aggregate. The most recent editions were published on 12 December. Copies are available in the Libraries of the House.

Road Safety

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Authority last carried out a spot check on road vehicles being unroadworthy and untaxed; what action was taken against the owners; and if he will make a statement on the co-ordination of effort between the DVLA and local enforcement authorities in tackling unroadworthy and untaxed vehicles. [92587]

Mr. Jamieson: DVLA co-operates closely with the police and other enforcement agencies in attending joint roadside checks to target untaxed and unroadworthy vehicles.

The Agency took part in 656 roadside checks in 2000–01, and 1,102 in 2001–02. The keepers of all unlicensed vehicles detected by these checks were pursued for using an unlicensed vehicle on the road. So far in 2002–03 the Agency has taken part in 842 checks, 79 of which were held in conjunction with vehicle excise duty campaigns involving the Agency's wheelclamping teams and the Stingray camera units. Any unlicensed vehicles detected in these checks were also clamped as well as being pursued for having no tax disc.

The last two roadside checks on untaxed cars were undertaken on Friday 17 January at Stratford in East London and the St. Paul's area of the City of London.

DVLA can only tackle instances of unlicensed use identified at roadside checks. The police pursue cases of unroadworthy vehicles. Other enforcement agencies involved in roadside checks include Vehicle Inspectorate, Customs and Excise, Benefits Agency and the Immigration Service.

Strategic Rail Authority

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what guidelines his Department has set for the Strategic Rail Authority on consultation with *(a)* hon. Members, *(b)* local authorities and *(c)* passengers' representatives in advance of proposed changes to and withdrawals of rail services; [93462]

(2) what consultations the Strategic Rail Authority undertook with *(a)* hon. Members, *(b)* local authorities and *(c)* passengers' representatives on the proposed withdrawal of Virgin train services from Blackpool North station; [93463]

(3) how his Department was consulted by the Strategic Rail Authority on changes to the May 2003 timetable; [93464]

(4) what assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the Strategic Rail Authority's consultation on changes to the May 2003 timetable. [93461]

Mr. Jamieson: The Directions and Guidance to the SRA state:

> "Section 206 of the Act requires the Authority, in formulating its strategies, to consult Scottish Ministers, the National Assembly for Wales, the Rail Regulator and such other persons as it thinks fit and paragraph 7.11 of these Directions and Guidance requires it to obtain the Secretary of State's consent. Subject to these specific requirements, the Authority will need to judge with whom and how it should consult. There is no general requirement to consult in relation to the exercise of the Authority's other functions .... Even where there is no specific

obligation to consult, the Secretary of State expects there to be the appropriate level of consultation with persons likely to be affected by the actions."

The timetable changes were driven by the need to improve performance urgently in the interests of passengers. In order to secure these improvements at the earliest opportunity, by incorporating the changes in the May 2003 timetable, the Authority had limited time for consultation. The Authority consulted Department for Transport officials and Ministers about the implementation of the timetable changes announced last week, and informed other parties including the relevant Rail Passengers Committees in relation to Virgin Cross Country services.

Traffic Calming (A49)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) if he will review the decision by the Highways Agency regarding traffic calming at the junction between the A49 and the Condover turning; [93078]

(2) what accidents have occurred in the last 10 years at or near the junction between the A49 and the Condover turning. [93079]

Mr. Jamieson: I am satisfied that the Highways Agency's decision not to extend the existing 30 mph speed limit on the A49 to include the Condover turning is correct. On the basis of the criteria that we use to decide appropriate speed limits, an extension would be very difficult to justify. In addition, West Mercia Police have confirmed that they would not support an extension in this case.

The Route Management Strategy for the A49 between Ross-on-Wye and Shrewsbury is looking at all existing speed limits along the route in the light of the criteria to ensure consistency. That work will include the Condover turning where there have been two personal injury accidents in the last 10 years. A report is due in the spring.

The introduction of speed limits is very carefully controlled as, to impose an inappropriate limit that would not appear reasonable to most drivers in the prevailing conditions could bring the national system of speed limits into disrepute and lead to greater non compliance.

Trains

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many trains broke down in each of the last five years, broken down by train operating company. [93164]

Mr Jamieson: That information is not held centrally.

Transport Infrastructure Projects

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the cost was of the largest transport infrastructure project in the United Kingdom constructed without recourse to public sector funding since 1973. [93281]

Mr. Jamieson: The Department for Transport does not hold information on the cost of private investments over this time period.

Transport Safety Statistics

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the cost of a life figure used is in cost benefit calculations relating to safety improvements in *(a)* rail, *(b)* road, *(c)* air, *(d)* pedestrian *(e)* cycling and *(f)* other modes of transport. [92620]

Mr. Jamieson: The value used for the prevention of a fatality in cost benefit analyses of all surface transport policies and schemes was published in DFT's "Highways Economics Note No. 1: 2001" which is in the Libraries of the House. There is no formal value set for measures affecting our passengers.

Transport Targets

Mr. George Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what targets the Government have for increasing *(a)* rail freight and *(b)* rail passenger use; and when he expects the targets to be met. [92947]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government published a report on its targets and progress in meeting them in relation to the 10 Year Plan on 17 December 2002. Copies are available in theLibraries of the House.

Mr. George Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what targets the Government have for reducing traffic *(a)* pollution and *(b)* congestion; and when he expects the targets to be met. [92948]

Mr. Jamieson: The Department's PS A targets and progress against the objectives in the 10 Year Plan are set out in 'Delivering Better Transport: Progress Report' which was published 17 December 2002, a copy of which has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Virgin Train Services (Blackpool)

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment his Department has made of the *(a)* economic and *(b)* other effects of withdrawing Virgin train services to and from Blackpool North station. [93460]

Mr. Jamieson: The Strategic Rail Authority made the changes to improve performance which had deteriorated with the introduction of Virgin's winter 2002–03 timetable. Frequent services will continue to be provided from Blackpool North to Preston from where passengers will be able to join Crosscountry and other main line services. This, by and large, was the position up to the end of the Summer 2002 timetable.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

BBC

Mr. Challen: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on her policy on the status of the BBC as a public sector, public service broadcaster in relation to the round of GATS negotiations. [91350]

Dr. Howells: Services supplied in the exercise of governmental authority are excluded from the scope of the GATS, provided they are supplied neither on a commercial basis nor in competition. The Government will not make commitments that could call into question the role of the BBC as a public service broadcaster.

Computer Misuse

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many cases of computer misuse there were in her Department in each of the last five years, broken down by each category of misuse; and how many of those cases resulted in disciplinary action. [93052]

Dr. Howells: DCMS has had 11 cases of computer misuse in the last five years, all occurring in one year, 1999.

Category: Accessing inappropriate material on the Internet:
2 cases
one final formal written warning issued
one resignation

Category: Inappropriate use of e-mail:
9 cases
1 instant dismissal
5 oral warnings issued
3 final formal written warnings issued

English Tourism

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport who was on the short list for the appointment of the Head of English Tourism. [93131]

Dr. Howells: In the interests of confidentiality, we do not release the names of those who apply for DCMS public appointments, including those who are shortlisted. Shortlisting is carried out in accordance with the requirements of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport who made up the board that has the responsibility to appoint the Head of English Tourism. [93132]

Dr. Howells: The appointment of the Chair of the relaunched tourism body is the responsibility of the Secretary of State, taking into account the advice of an interview panel. It is not our policy to publish the names of interview panel members, in order to avoid the risk of their being subjected to unwarranted pressure.

I can confirm that, in line with the Commissioner for Public Appointments Code of Practice, the interview panel included a senior official from DCMS and at least one independent assessor who is not connected with any of the Department's public bodies.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what qualifications the new Head of English Tourism has. [93133]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 10 January 2003 that Sir Michael Lickiss will be the new chairman of the relaunched tourism body from 1April 2003, this is a British Body. Sir Michael recently retired after four years as the first chairman of the South West England Regional Development Agency. From 2001 he was the lead spokesman for tourism on behalf of all RDA's. Before taking his last appointment in the south west, he was founder President of the Association of Accounting Technicians (1980–82), President of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (1990–91), Senior Partner of Grant Thornton (1991–94) and Chairman of the Business Technology and Education Council (BTEC; 1994–2000). He has worked in several countries around the world. He is a Governor of the London School of Economics and he was knighted for his services to his profession in 1993.

Free Television Licences

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many pensioners have claimed free television licences in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire in each year since 1997. [93080]

Dr. Howells: Free television licences for the over-75s were introduced in November 2000, but no free licences were available prior to that date. TV Licensing, who administer the free licence scheme as agents for the BBC, are not able to provide geographical breakdowns of the number of free licences issued. However, estimates based on the 1991 Census indicate that there were approximately 6,500 people aged 75 or over living in the Shrewsbury and Atcham constituency, and 23,800 in Shropshire.

Licensing Reform

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions she has had with church groups and religious leaders on the impact of the proposed licensing Bill on places of public religious worship; and if she will make a statement. [93287]

Dr. Howells: The White Paper "Time for Reform", published in April 2000 was the subject of a full public consultation. It was sent directly to 231 organisations and over 650 organisations produced responses. We received eight responses from religious organisations, including one from the Churches Main Committee. None of these were concerned with the proposal to licence public entertainment in churches and other places of religious worship. Since then, officials of my Department have had discussions with officials of the General Synod of the Church of England about a possible mechanism to exempt churches from licensing controls.

As I stated in the House of Commons on 16 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 517, the Government have made a commitment to reconsider their position on the licensing of churches and will announce their conclusions as soon as possible.

Lottery Awards

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much Lottery money Haltemprice and Howden received in 2002; and what the average amount of Lottery money awarded to constituencies was in 2002. [92913]

Mr. Caborn: According to the information supplied to us by the distributing bodies for the National Lottery awards database, £387,414 of Lottery funding has been awarded to Haltemprice and Howden during 2002. The average amount awarded to constituencies during 2002 was £1,644,892.

Production Quotas

Mr. Doran: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she plans to reform the independent production quota to make it a floor by ensuring that *(a)* the quota is calculated per channel, both by qualifying hours and spend and *(b)* exclusions to qualifying hours are minimised. [93104]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 23 January 2003]*: The Government responded to the ITC's UK Programme Supply Review on 15 January. In this response we indicated that we accepted all of the ITC recommendations in the area of support for independent production in the UK, and will be introducing the necessary amendments to the Communications Bill and BBC Agreement. These amendments will introduce binding codes of practice governing broadcasters dealings with independent production companies, give OFCOM the power to measure the independent productions quota by value as well as volume if necessary, apply the quota separately to BBC1 and BBC2 and strengthen OFCOM's powers to enforce and monitor the independent production requirements.

Sports Clubs

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proportions of the members of the governing bodies of sports clubs that receive funding from her Department are *(a)* male and *(b)* female. [91916]

Mr. Caborn: This information is not collected.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what information her Department collates relating to the composition of *(a)* sports clubs and *(b)* governing bodies of sports clubs in respect of (i) gender, (ii) ethnicity and (iii) socio-economic groups. [91917]

Mr. Caborn: Sport England collects information in respect of the affiliated members of governing bodies of sport in respect of gender, ethnicity, age and disability. Sport England, through its grants management system, also collects this information in respect of sports clubs membership. Applicants for awards from the Lottery Sports Fund in respect of community sports facilities and provision are asked to provide information on types of user by gender, ethnicity, age and socio-economic group against which applications are assessed.

Statutory Instruments

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many Statutory Instruments subject to negative procedure made by her Department *(a)* came into force and *(b)* were considered by a delegated legislation committee in each of the last three sessions. [88023]

Dr. Howells: The number of Statutory Instruments (including Orders in Council) subject to negative procedures made by the Department which came into force in each of the last three sessions are as follows:

Session	*Number*
2001–02	32
2000–01	4
1999–2000	15

All of the above Orders were copied to the delegated legislation committee for consideration.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Children's Commissioner

Mr. Wood: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what plans he has to create a children's commissioner for England. [89552]

Mr. Denham: The pros and cons of establishing a children's commissioner are under consideration.

Apprenticeships

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many people enrolled to begin advanced modern apprenticeship courses in each of the last three years for which information is available. [92635]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The numbers of starts on Advanced Modern Apprenticeships, in the last three years for which data are available, are as follows:

Date	*Starts on advanced modern apprenticeships*
29 October 2001 to 27 October 2002	[1]50,300
30 October 2000 to 28 October 2001	67,700
1 November 1999 to 29 October 2000	76,900

[1] Subject to revision. Data for this period is incomplete because not all the information has reached the database.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many asylum seekers sought education in Bedfordshire in each of the last five years. [92709]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: It is not possible to provide figures for each of the last five years because there is no requirement on local education authorities or the Learning and Skills Council to provide information on the number of asylum seekers in education.

Information from the local Learning and Skills Council suggests that, at the end of July 2000, 60 asylum seekers were known to have sought education within Bedfordshire. These figures include both children of compulsory school age and young people and adults aged over 16. In Luton over the past two years (2000–01 and 2001–02), an average of 130 pupils under 16 from both asylum seeking and refugee backgrounds were in education. The number of asylum seekers participating in further education institutions within Bedfordshire and Luton was 318 during 1999–2000 and 315 during 2000–01.

However, the high mobility of some asylum seekers and refugees makes any data collected unreliable.

Child Nutrition

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assessment he has made of the contribution breakfast clubs and the school joint scheme can make to reducing childhood obesity and poor nutrition; and if he will make a statement. [90784]

Ms Blears: I have been asked to reply.

Initial evaluation of breakfast clubs and the national school fruit scheme indicates that they have the potential to make an important contribution to improving children's diet, as do the compulsory nutritional standards for school meals. Measures to increase physical activity can also make a contribution to reducing childhood obesity. Further evaluation of breakfast clubs will be carried out under the food in schools programme. An assessment of the impact of the national school fruit scheme upon children's diets will be undertaken over the next two years.

Children's Fund

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much funding has been received by Sefton Council from the Children's Fund since its inception; how the funds were allocated, broken down by project; what posts have been funded and by how much; and in which organisations these posts arise. [89477]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 15 January 2003]:* Under SR2000 Sefton's Children's Fund partnership received a total allocation of £2 million up to March 2004 for its Children's Fund programme. The partnership has been paid £89,471.75 to date. A total of £66,107 was allocated in FY 2002–03 to personnel costs, of which £36,508 has been paid to date. Sefton experienced a shortfall in expenditure against profile in its first year of operation because of early recruitment difficulties and the impact this has had on service delivery. The partnership also received an allocation of £200,000 for activities undertaken as part of the Street Crime initiative from July 2002 to September 2004, and to date have been paid £25,000. The partnership has profiled to spend its full SR2000 allocation by March 2004.

The following table provides a full funding profile for Sefton Children's Fund partnership and a breakdown of its allocation by project.

Services and projects commissioned by Sefton Children's Fund partnership

Project name	*Lead agency*	*Funding committed 2002–04 (£)*	*Status*
A.B.S (Anti-Bullying in Sefton)	Behaviour Support and Reintegration Team (Sefton LEA) and Child and Family services)	243,500	Project due to commence January 2003
Children's Choices	Queens Road Neighbourhood Centre	67,812	Project commenced November 2002
Everyone Can Play	Fun 4 Kidz	45,902	Project commenced summer 2002
Young Carers Project	PSS Sefton Young Carers	48,340	Project commenced summer 2002
Inclusive Play Training Project	Sefton EYDCP	19,277	Project due to commence January 2003
Kindred Spirits II	Children With Disabilities Sub-group (Sefton Teaching & Educational Psychology)	13,200	Project due to commence March 2003
Empowering Parents in the Community (EPIC)	Merseyside Partners in Policy Making	40,900	Project commenced November 2002
Special Needs Toy Library	Sefton Social Services	37,817	Project commenced November 2002
Link Nurse Team for Children with ADHD and Autistic Spectrum Disorders	South Sefton PCT	94,950	Project due to commence January 2003
Support for children affected by domestic violence	SWACA	68,100	Project commenced summer 2002
Link Worker for children affected by parental substance misuse	Sefton Social Services	60,000	Project due to commence February 2003
Development of integrated service information systems	3TC	20,000	Project due to commence February 2003
Environmental Transformation post	Sefton CVS	18,120	Project due to commence January 2003
Going for Gold Plus	Sefton Education Business Partnership	17,613	Project commenced September 2002
Parent Support Project	Parenting 2000	38,500	Project due to commence February 2003
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services Co-ordinator	South Sefton PCT	23,000	Project due to commence January 2003
Multi-disciplinary Teams in Schools	Various agencies	165,000	Workshop/ conference planned for January to develop project in conjunction with local PCTs, schools, Sefton YOT
Approaches to supporting children and families from minority ethnic backgrounds	NW Ethnicities Project	21,000	Conference planned for March 2003. Programme Manager involved in planning meetings
Research into the needs of children from asylum seeking families	Sefton Social Inclusion Unit	4,000	Research to begin March 2003
Arts Inclusion Worker	Sefton Leisure Services	40,000	Project due to commence January 2003
JETSET 2003	Greater Merseyside SETPOINT	6,400	Project due to commence February 2003

Services and projects commissioned by Sefton Children's Fund partnership

Project name	*Lead agency*	*Funding committed 2002–04 (£)*	*Status*
Enhancing partnership working between Social Services and Sefton Children's Fund	Social Services	10,000	Research brief agreed and circulated to potential consultants
Centre of Excellence for Children and Families	Parenting 2000	28,000	Centre expected to open March 2003
Peel Road Youth Encouragement Programme	Peel Road Residents Association	22,500	Project due to commence January 2003
Services for Deaf Children and their Families	Merseyside Society for Deaf People	41,634	Project due to commence January 2003
Police and Youth Encouragement Scheme	Police and Youth Encouragement Scheme (PAYES)	15,000	Project due to commence January 2003
Healthy Schools Initiative	Sefton LEA	6,000	Project due to commence January 2003
Education Action Zone Manor Projects	EAZ Manor Partnership	6,810	Project due to commence January 2003
Thornton Summer Activities Programme	Edge Lane Community Association	937	Activities took place during summer 2002
PHAB Families Summer Activities	PHAB Families	340	Activities took place during summer 2002
Flexible Short Breaks Project	Sefton Carers Centre	61,000	Project due to commence February 2003
Out-of-Schools Project	TBC	40,000	Project proposals still under development
Adventures for All	Sefton Social Services	5,000	Project to take place during March 2003
Play Inclusion Worker	Sefton Leisure Services	15,000	Project due to commence February 2003
Healthy Lifestyles Projects	South Sefton PCT	7,000	Projects due to commence January 2003
Learning Their Language	Sefton Social Services	2,733	
CF Street Crime Initiative Projects	Sefton LEA and Parenting 2000	200,000	Project due to commence January 2003
Voluntary and Community Sector Support Worker	Sefton CVS	34,826	Project commenced January 2003
Children's Voices Project	Sefton CVS in conjunction with Social Services	54,000	Project commenced October 2002
Parent Participation Officer	Sefton CVS	37,000	Post to be re-advertised January 2003

Consultancy

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body spent on external consultancy in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (planned); and if he will make a statement. [92240]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The following table shows expenditure on administrative external consultancy by my Department.

£ million

	Actual expenditure	*Estimated outturn*
1996–97	9.14	
1997–98	4.54	
1998–99	5.21	
1999–2000	4.45	
2000–01	4.74	
2001–02	5.66	
2002–03		2.77

These figures exclude programme consultancy costs spent directly by the Department and its agencies, which are currently not collected centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. From April 2003 arrangements will be made to collect centrally expenditure information for programme consultancy costs spent directly by the Department. The table also excludes all consultancy spend for non-departmental public bodies, as they are not required to provide the Department with detailed information on consultancy expenditure.

Expenditure information for 1995–96 could not be readily obtained as information is not held electronically for that year.

Figures for 1996–97 to 2001–02 include consultancy spend incurred by central functions that subsequently transferred to Other Government Departments under Machinery of Government changes.

Dyslexia

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many people serving sentences in *(a)* prisons and *(b)* young offender institutes in England and Wales have been diagnosed as suffering from dyslexia, in each year since 1992; and what estimate he has made of the numbers serving sentences and suffering from dyslexia, in each year since 1992. [91824]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: We do not have robust data for the numbers of prisoners and young offenders diagnosed as suffering from dyslexia.

Many of the experts in this field hold differing views on whether or not the percentage of the prison population suffering from dyslexia is higher than that of the wider community. Some feel that what may appear to be indicators of dyslexia are in fact the result of a whole range of social factors that could include the effects of drug and alcohol abuse, physical injuries, interrupted schooling and lack of parental support. Conversely, others suspect that there is a high incidence of dyslexia among this specific group and that the frustrations arising from this learning difficulty have contributed to their offending behaviour.

Research has also provided conflicting results. In 1998 research from Cambridge University's Institute of Criminology, based on a survey of 323 prisoners at nine establishments, found that only around 4 to 6 per cent. of prisoners were dyslexic.

The most recent research (1999), from the Dyslexia Institute, is based on a survey of nearly 100 young offenders at HMYOI Feltham. This study, which measured cognitive ability as well as dyslexia, found that 17.5 per cent. screened positive against indicators for dyslexia.

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills which *(a)* prisons and *(b)* young offender institutes in England and Wales have facilities for (i) diagnosing dyslexia and (ii) providing education for inmates suffering from dyslexia. [91825]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: A survey carried out in 2001 indicated that around a quarter of establishments had staff trained to support learners with dyslexia. Under the Government's Skills for Life strategy, staff in all prisons and young offender institutions will have access to training so that they can identify indicators of dyslexia, know when to refer learners for specialist assessment, and provide appropriate educational programmes for them. This will be further enhanced in those young offender institutions caring for 15 to 17-year-olds by the appointment of special educational needs co-ordinators, and of learning support assistants on a ratio of one to every 10 learners.

New diagnostic assessments for prisoners, to be administered after initial assessment by a specialist teacher, will offer guidance on when to refer learners for a full dyslexia assessment with an educational psychologist or other appropriately trained person.

The majority of people with dyslexia do not require specialist teaching. They need high quality basic skills teaching which adopts a variety of inclusive strategies to support the needs of all learners. An inclusive learning handbook for all staff in prisons and YOIs to be published this spring will increase the understanding of the needs of those with dyslexia.

Empty Homes

Mr Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many empty homes his Department *(a)* had five years ago and *(b)* has now, by region; if he will establish an empty homes strategy within his Department; and if he will set a target for reduction in empty homes. [92923]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: The Department for Education and Skills has not had any homes, empty or otherwise, in the last five years nor does it intend to do so.

Entertainment

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what his estimate is of the total spending of his Department on entertainment in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92380]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: All expenditure on official entertainment is made in accordance with departmental guidance on financial procedures and propriety, based on the principles set out in Government Accounting. The following table sets out spending in £000s for DfES and its predecessors in the relevant years.

Year	*Department of Employment (including Employment Service)*	*Department for Education*	*Department for Education and Employment*	*DfES*
1994–95	32	86		
1995–96	28	77		
1996–97			24	
1997–98			21	
1998–99			31	
1999–2000			21	
2000–01			20	
2001–02				11
2002–03[1]				13

[1] Estimated outturn

Free School Meals

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills whether his Department has released free school meals figures for individual secondary schools to organisations for research purposes within the last 12 months. [92833]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: The Department has released free school meals figures for individual secondary schools to a number of organisations for research purposes within the last 12 months. Before doing so, the organisations signed confidentiality declarations which committed them to maintaining the confidentiality of the data and limited their use of this information to the stated research purpose.

Heritage Assets

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what sales of heritage assets and antique assets have been made by his Department since May 1997; if he will list such assets; and if he will estimate the total sales proceeds. [92381]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: The Department for Education and Skills have not held any heritage or antique assets during the period and therefore no sales have been made.

Higher Education (Armed Forces)

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) how many people who recently left the armed forces took up higher education courses last year; [84763]

(2) when he will reply to the question from the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, Ref 84763. [92578]

Margaret Hodge: The information is not held centrally.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what his estimate is of the total expenditure by his Department on ministerial travel *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* abroad, in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92446]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 334W.

Public Service Agreements

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Se[illegible] State for Education and Skills what assess[illegible] Department has made of the public service agree[illegible]ts targets it was set in the 1998 comprehensive spending review. [89295]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: There is ongoing assessment of progress against PSA targets, including those agreed as part of the 1998 CSR. We recently reviewed our targets in the context of the 2002 Spending Review. The Department publishes progress against all its PSA targets in its spring departmental report and also its autumn performance report, together with commentary where appropriate . The first autumn report was published in November 2002 and a copy is available from the House of Commons Library.

Publicity and Advertising

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body sponsored by his Department spent on (i) publicity and (ii) advertising in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement; [92239]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: Expenditure from the Department's central advertising and publicity budget is as follows:

	£000
1995–96	[1]n/a
1996–97	[1]n/a
1997–98	10,879
1998–99	13,426
1999–2000	9,902
2000–01	14,595
2001–02	11,688
2002–03[2]	14,172

[1] Not available

[2] Estimated

In addition to expenditure from this central budget, expenditure from budgets allocated to individual programmes will also include spend on publicity related activity. It is not possible, except at disproportionate cost, to separately identify all such publicity related expenditure. It is possible to identify separately expenditure on advertising, and this is as follows:

	£000
1995–96[1]	8,296
1996–97	7,538
1997–98	9,992
1998–99	15,673
1999–2000	11,900
2000–01	29,066
2001–02	20,489
2002–03[2]	12,215

[1] Employment Department and Department for Education

[2] Estimated

Information on expenditure by agencies and non-departmental public bodies is not held centrally.

Pupil Ethnicity

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills for what percentage of pupils their ethnicity has been *(a)* declared by parents or pupils and *(b)* determined by the pupil's school. [88888]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: The figures requested are not yet available.

New guidance was issued last year regarding the procedures schools should follow for the collection and recording of pupils' ethnic group. Schools should in the first instance seek information via parents, and any response (including a refusal to provide information) must be respected. However if there is no response at all to the school's inquiries it has the option of ascribing an ethnic group to the pupil based on its own best judgment. In this event various steps have to be taken in order to comply with data protection rules, and the fact that ascription has taken place must be shown alongside the ethnic group itself—both in the school's own records, and in any information passed on to the LEA or to the Department in the Pupil Level Annual Schools Census (PLASC). This year's PLASC returns from schools will reflect the ethnic group information which they have collected under the new guidance, including details of whether that was provided by parents or pupils or ascribed by the school. However these returns will not be received and processed until about April.

Research Projects

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will list the research projects (with duration and name of contractor) commissioned by his Department in each of the last five years; if he will indicate *(a)* the duration of each project and *(b)* the name of the organisation contracted to undertake the research; and what the aggregate cost was of research projects in each year. [92641]

Mr. Miliband: Details of the Department's research programme contracts and their value since the financial year commencing April 1998 are published in the Department's annual reports on research and research conference reports, copies of which may be found in the House of Commons Libraries.

Sector Skills Councils

Barbara Follett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) if he will define the term employer-led when applied to sector skills councils; [93246]

(2) what plans he has to make sector skills councils financially independent; [93247]

(3) if he will make a statement on the terms of ownership of the sector skills councils; and what the terms of ownership are of the retail skills council, Skill Smart. [93248]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: To meet the standard to become a Sector Skills Council, an organisation should be employer-led. This means it should be launched and led by employers but should also involve other important organisations in the sector, such as trade unions. We recognise that a component of many SSCs will be support from their trade association but the SSC, as an organisation licensed by Government and in receipt of public funds, must be wholly independent of it or any holding company. In the case of Skillsmart, we have made it clear that to become a fully licensed SSC it will need to be independent of the British Retail Consortium.

On the question of funding, my Department will meet part of the costs of an SSC (up to £1 million core contribution) to give capacity to allow SSCs to take a more strategic approach underpinned by proper research and avoid being compromised by commercial interests. But we have always expected our £1 million would lever significant additional private investment into skills and productivity development in the sector.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will give an update of progress on the foundation of Sector Skills Councils. [93293]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Five trailblazer Sector Skills Councils were announced in December 2001 covering audio visual industries: land based industries; apparel, footwear and textiles; oil and gas extraction, chemicals manufacturing and petroleum industries and the retail sector. There are nine further sectors in the final phase of developing Sector Skills Council proposals for consideration by the Sector Skills Development Agency. The trailblazer SSCs together with those in development cover over 50 per cent. of the workforce. We expect the first SSCs to be licensed early in 2003.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many days were lost due to sickness absence in the Department in 2002. [90549]

Mr. Stephen Twigg: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given on 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 160W.

Special Needs

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) what alternative provision he will put in place to meet the needs of people with special needs who are excluded from attending their clubs on attaining the age of 25; [92320]

(2) for what reason it was decided to set 25 as the age at which to exclude people with special needs from the clubs they had been attending; and if he will make a statement; [92323]

(3) whether it is his policy, with reference to the document "Resourcing Excellence in Youth Services", launched in December, that people with special needs should be excluded from youth services when they reach the age of 25; [92322]

(4) what provision he will make for people with serious learning difficulties to continue to be able to attend their clubs after reaching the age of 25; [92321]

(5) what his policy is on the exclusion of people with serious learning difficulties from youth and other clubs at the age of 25; and if he will make a statement. [92324]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Local education authorities (the statutory sector) and a range of voluntary organisations provide the Youth Service. The priority age group for the service is 13 to 19-year-olds but the target age group may extend to 11 to 25-year-olds in some cases.

Provision is usually in the form of youth clubs and centres, or through "detached" or outreach work aimed at young people at risk from alcohol or drug misuse, or of drifting into crime. There is an increasing emphasis on youth workers working with disadvantaged, disaffected, and socially excluded young people.

In December 2002 the Government launched the document "Transforming Youth Work Resourcing Excellent Youth Services" which provides a cross Government view of the key elements of a high quality, well managed and properly resourced Youth Service. The document underpins the Transforming Youth Work programme and the Government's commitment to work with local authorities to ensure the delivery of a high quality Youth Service for young people which is at the heart of the Connexions Service. The document emphasises that local authorities should ensure the delivery of a service which targets the 13–19 age range but may also be working at the margins with 11–13 and 19 to 25-year-olds. The document confirms this existing age range criteria for the Youth Service.

Under the Learning and Skills Act, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has a specific responsibility to help both young people and adults with learning difficulties and disabilities. The broad remit of the council enables it to fund a wide range of learning provision when considering their particular needs. This includes activities offering opportunities for non-formal types of learning, and learning which does not lead to a qualification. For adults, particularly those with special needs, this provision will be more suitable than a youth work curriculum provided by the Youth Service.

I do not intend making a statement at this time.

Sure Start

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) what the role of Early Years Partnerships will be in the new Sure Start programme; [87615]

(2) if the Sure Start advisors in the regions will be responsible for all Early Years initiatives within their region. [87616]

Maria Eagle *[holding answer 18 December 2002]:* To make life better for children, parents and communities, on 11 December we launched the new Sure Start Unit. This brings together at a national level responsibility for early education, child care and health and family support in one, cross-departmental unit. Drawing on best practice in early education, child care and Sure Start local programmes, the guiding principles of the new unit are:

Working with parents and children;

Services for everyone (responding to varying needs);

Flexible at the point of delivery;

Starting very early;

Respectful and transparent;

Community driven and professionally coordinated;

Outcome driven (core purpose—better outcomes for children);

These national changes will be reflected in some reorganisation of the local support the unit provides to ensure that mainstream services for children and parents are delivered in accordance with the unit's guiding principles. We are currently considering how best to achieve this.

This national change does not, however, alter the existing roles and responsibilities of Local Authorities and Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs). Local authorities will retain their significant responsibilities under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 for early years and child care. This includes setting up and maintaining EYDCPs to assist in preparing early years strategic plans and developing the local provision of child care.

At a national level, responsibility for Sure Start, early years and child care have been brought together in one cross-departmental unit (the Sure Start Unit). This unit led by Baroness Ashton who is a joint DfES/DWP Minister will continue to provide support to the local delivery of services through a network of regionally-based teams and advisors, ensuring that people with the most appropriate skills and experience are available to assist delivery of this important area of the Government's agenda.

Truancy

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what measures he is taking to reduce the number of children failing to attend school; and what discussions he has had with officials and Ministers in the Home Office regarding truancy from schools. [92013]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: On 12 December 2002, my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, set out his strategy to improve behaviour and attendance in all schools. In doing so, he underlined our commitment to the Public Service Agreement: by 2004, to reduce truancies by 10 per cent. compared to 2002, to sustain the new lower level, and improve overall attendance levels thereafter. To achieve this objective, we have introduced a range of initiatives, such as the co-ordination of national truancy sweeps, funding for electronic registration systems, the development of guidance for more effective prosecutions and a sustained publicity campaign aimed at parents and pupils. In addition, we are proposing a new package of support and sanctions, such as behaviour and attendance training and audits available to all secondary schools from September, fixed penalty notices for parents of persistent truants and the introduction of parenting contracts.

Ministers and officials in this Department and the Home Office are in regular contact on truancy issues, for example through the Government's Street Crime Initiative and in developing measures for the proposed Anti-Social Behaviour Bill.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Flooding Insurance

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the competition implications of discrimination against applicants for household insurance on the basis of postcodes as a proxy for flood risk. [93000]

Mr. Morley: Postcode rating is, I understand, the method used by insurers for all household insurance policies and not just for flood risk. Whether this method has a detrimental effect on competition is a matter for the Director General for Fair Trading, who can then consider any appropriate action.

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what discussions she has had with the Association of British Insurers about problems experienced by householders in the KT postcode areas in obtaining flood insurance since 3 January. [93001]

Mr. Morley: There has been no discussion since 3 January specifically about insurance in KT postcode areas. The Association of British Insurers and the Environment Agency are in regular discussion over provision of better flood risk information for England, taking into account flood defences, to enable insurers to understand the risk for particular areas. A meeting took place this week to consider the initial data provided in December 2002 and how best this can meet insurers' requirements in order that they can continue provision of insurance in line with their Statement of Principles.

Aircraft Fuel

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what studies she has evaluated on the effect of the dumping of aircraft fuel into airspace on *(a)* the ozone layer, *(b)* human and plant health and *(c)* water quality; and if she will make a statement. [92265]

Mr. Meacher: None. There is no evidence that this is a significant problem. Aviation fuel can only be legally jettisoned in an emergency, when Air Traffic Control would advise the pilot to do so, if at all possible, either over the sea or over 10,000 feet above ground level so that the fuel would vaporise. Emergencies are by definition rare occurrences. There is no incentive for jettisoning fuel illegally—it is an expensive commodity. If aviation fuel were to be jettisoned it would biodegrade readily and therefore would not be expected to have a long-term impact. As aviation fuel contains no more than the smallest traces of chlorine or bromine, it will make no contribution to ozone layer depletion.

Alternative Fuels

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent discussions she has had with the British Cement Association on the use of alternative fuels. [91847]

Mr. Meacher: Officials of the Department have occasional contact with the British Cement Association on a range of environmental issues. A meeting on 18 December 2002 included discussion in general terms of the potential for the cement industry to burn alternative fuels.

Animal Welfare

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many live sheep were exported from Dover to continental Europe on *(a)* 17 December 2002, *(b)* 20 December 2002 and *(c)* 8 January; when and where health certification was carried out in respect of the sheep, how many of the sheep were rejected as unfit for the intended journey (i) during inspection for health certification purposes and (ii) at Dover docks, and to where those sheep were taken; and what was the address of the final destination given on the route plan for each of the consignments. [90901]

Mr. Morley: The information requested is as follows:

Sailing date	*Total animals certified*	*Where consignments were certified*	*Animals rejected at certification*	*Animals rejected at Dover docks*	*Destination*
17 December	2,278	England and Wales	57	0	France
20 December	2,616	England, Wales and Scotland	74	0	France
8 January 2003	3,066	England and Wales	132	0	France
8 January 2003	479	England	0	0	Belgium

The sheep for the consignments listed above were certified within 48 hours prior to export. These consignments were fattening animals transported to holdings. The animals which were rejected at certification remained in Great Britain.

Commercial Whaling

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action the Government intend to take to discourage the resumption of commercial whaling by Iceland; and if she will make a statement. [93067]

Mr. Morley: We have written to the US Government, in its capacity as depositary for the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW), to object formally to Iceland rejoining the International Whaling Commission with a reservation to the moratorium on commercial whaling. A copy of this letter has also been sent to all IWC members.

The Government of Iceland have undertaken, while submitting its Instrument of Adherence to the ICRW, not to resume commercial whaling before 2006 at the earliest.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps she intends to take to persuade Norway to desist from catching whales; and if she will make a statement. [93069]

Mr. Morley: The UK Government takes every opportunity, both within the International Whaling Commission and in other relevant fora, to express its opposition to Norwegian whaling and to persuade Norway to cease its whaling activities.

Company Environmental Performance

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will place an updated list of FTSE 350 companies that report on their environmental performance in the Library. [93271]

Mr. Meacher: The Department conducted a survey last year of the progress made by companies in the FTSE 350 in voluntary reporting of their environmental performance. An account of the results of this survey was placed in the Library of the House in July 2002. The exercise has not been repeated since then, so the information from last July is the most up-to-date available.

Computer Misuse

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many cases of computer misuse there were in her Department in each of the last five years, broken down by each category of misuse; and how many of those cases resulted in disciplinary action. [93040]

Alun Michael: The Department seeks to ensure that all users of computer systems are fully aware of their responsibilities and legal obligations. This is done by a variety of methods such as through system training programmes, published user guides and usage policies together with general security policy guidance and advice. This material is subject to regular review and is easily accessible through the Departmental Intranet. Regular Office Notices also provide reminders of key points.

The Department does not maintain a central list of all cases of computer misuse because in the vast majority of instances these are correctly handled through the line management chain or local Personnel Units.

Since 9 June 200[illegible] the IT Directorate have assisted with providing information in a number of cases of suspected com[illegible] misuse. This has led to formal disciplinary action in five cases. The Department was formed on 9 June 2001 so figures are not available prior to that date.

Dolphins/Porpoises

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action the Government will take to discourage the killing of dolphins and porpoises by Japan this year; and if she will make a statement. [93068]

Mr. Morley: At this year's annual International Whaling Commission meeting, which takes place in Berlin from 16 to 19 June 2003, we intend to raise our concerns over the lack of regulation and the methods used in the hunts for small cetaceans that take place in Japanese waters and elsewhere.

Empty Homes

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many empty homes her Department *(a)* had five years ago and *(b)* has now, by region; if she will establish an empty homes strategy within her Department; and if she will set a target for reduction in empty homes. [92919]

Alun Michael: On 1 April 1998, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food had vacant dwellings at the following locations:

Three in Littlehampton, West Sussex.

One in Liscombe, Devon.

One near Lymington, Hants.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs currently has vacant dwellings at the following locations:

Two at Cawood, near Selby, north Yorks.

Two at Martyr Worthy, Winchester, Hants.

The Department already has a strategy for empty dwellings. If they are not any integral part of a bigger property such as a farm, they will be sold as soon as possible. If they cannot be sold, they will be offered for letting subject to any security considerations.

Arrangements are already in hand for the disposal of the dwellings which are currently empty. The sale of the Cawood properties should be completed by the end of March 2003 and the sale of the Martyr Worthy properties should be completed by or around the end of June 2003.

Energy Efficiency

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what proportion of buildings built as part of the Government's estate in *(a)* 2001 and *(b)* 2002 made use of the Government's design advice scheme on energy efficiency. [90240]

Mr. Meacher: The Carbon Trust runs the Action Energy programme (formerly Government's non-domestic Energy Efficiency Best Practice Programme), which includes the design advice scheme on energy efficiency.

Only two Departments, Ministry of Defence and Department for International Development, made use of the design advice scheme between 2001–02. However, the scheme is provided as a service package to Departments, and information is not collected on a building-by-building, or annual basis. Data are not maintained centrally on new builds on the Government estate.

Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent measures she has taken to encourage energy efficiency. [92000]

Mr. Morley: Since the publication of the UK's Climate Change Programme in November 2000, the following main actions have been taken to promote energy efficiency in the domestic, business and public sectors:

The Climate Change Levy, a levy on the business use of fuel, was introduced in April 2001. Receipts, forecast at £1 billion a year, are recycled back to business—including £50 million for business energy efficiency.

Climate Change Agreements have been reached with 44 sectors of energy intensive industry. Participants in these agreements pay a reduced rate of Climate Change Levy (20 per cent. of the full levy) in return for meeting challenging energy efficiency targets over a 10-year period.

The Carbon Trust was launched in April 2001, and receives two-thirds of its annual budget from recycled receipts from the Climate Change Levy, it encourages and promotes the development of low carbon technologies to support the transition to a low carbon economy. It offers an interest free loan scheme for small and medium-sized businesses and provides funding for the development of low carbon technologies through the Low Carbon Innovation Programme.

The Enhanced Capital Allowances Scheme enables businesses to claim 100 per cent. first year capital allowances on investments in a range of approved energy saving technologies.

The UK Emissions Trading Scheme was launched in April 2002. Companies in Climate Change Agreements can trade within the scheme to help meet their targets. Participants entering directly into the scheme can trade to meet emission reduction targets delivering 1.1 MtC by 2006. Energy efficiency measures help participants to meet their targets.

New requirements have been introduced for local authorities. Authorities have to know their buildings' energy consumption and carbon emissions. From 2002–03 they are required to benchmark their energy use in operational property and street lighting, and will set local improvement targets from 2003–04.

The Energy Efficiency Commitment for 2002–05 (EEC) places a challenging but realistic obligation on electricity and gas suppliers to promote improvements in domestic energy efficiency. Suppliers will achieve individual EEC targets by encouraging and assisting consumers to take up energy efficiency measures. It is expected to save 0.4 million tonnes of carbon a year by 2005. It will also help those on lower incomes—who spend a larger proportion of their incomes on energy—by focussing at least 50 per cent. of energy savings on consumers in receipt of benefits or tax credits.

Since its launch in June 2000, the new Home Energy Efficiency Scheme—which is now marketed as Warm Front—has helped over 400,000 households through the installation of a range of insulation and heating measures. Warm Front is the Government's main programme for tackling fuel poverty, aimed at the most vulnerable groups in the private sector in England.

The Community Energy Programme is a £50 million grant programme operational from 2002–04 aiming to promote community heating in the UK, primarily through the use of CHP. It will install and refurbish community heating schemes, benefiting people on low incomes while contributing to the Climate Change Programme by reducing carbon emissions by an estimated 0.15 million tonnes of carbon a year.

Part L of the Building Regulations covering energy efficiency provisions was revised in October 2001 and the changes came into effect in 2002. These require work on new buildings and the refurbishment of the existing stock to conform to higher energy efficiency standards including those relating to building insulation, air-tightness, lighting, space heating, hot water, boiler performance and replacement glazing. It is estimated that the package of measures introduced in October will reduce carbon emissions from the domestic sector by 0.8 million tonnes per year by 2010.

The Treasury introduced in the 2002 Budget, a VAT reduction on certain energy saving materials installed under grant schemes.

The Government have provided funding for the Energy Saving Trust (EST) to help individual households, local authorities and others improve domestic energy efficiency. Since 2000, EST has created the Practical Help advisory service, expanded its local authority support programme providing dedicated staff to 23 areas across the UK, introduced a new grant scheme for innovative projects and expanded its network of Energy Efficiency Advice Centres providing households with advice and support. EST has developed the Energy Efficiency Recommended (EER) labelling scheme (with energy efficiency manufacturers, retailers and installers) to provide easy identification of energy efficient products. EST has also developed EEI—the network of accredited installers in the insulation and heating industries.

Environment Agency

Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what advice she has given the Environment Agency about ethical and sustainable investment of its pension fund. [90143]

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what guidance she has given to the Environment Agency on the investments made by its pension fund. [90244]

Mr. Leslie: I have been asked to reply.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is responsible for the regulatory framework governing the Local Government Pension Scheme, to which the Environment Agency belongs. The investment practice of the agency's pension funds is a matter for their fund managers, supervised by the relevant investment committee, within the regulatory framework set out in SI 1998 No 1831 (the Local Government Pension Scheme (Management and Investment of Funds) Regulations 1998), as amended. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has no authority to offer specific advice or guidance on what individual investments should or should not be made.

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the cost of *(a)* setting up and *(b)* running the Environment Agency website, 'What's in Your Backyard' is; how many users on average it has attracted per month; and if she will make a statement. [92796]

Mr. Meacher: The Environment Agency spent £245,000 in setting up its 'What's in Your Backyard' site, and it incurs running costs of £215,000 per annum.

The website attracts an average of 35,000 users monthly.

Equids

Mr. Cameron: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations she has received about the proposed EU directive requiring all equids to have passports; and if he will make a statement. [91829]

Alun Michael: We consulted on implementation of the EU legislation on horse passports in summer 2000. The proposal for all horses to have passports received the support of the equine industry as represented by the British Horse Industry Confederation (BHIC).

We have received 16 representations from Members of Parliament on this subject and approximately 100 from horse owners and members of the Association of British Riding Schools.

We expect shortly to consult further on a proposed order implementing the EU legislation.

EU Rice Regime

Tony Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what account the European Commission took of the impact of a 50 per cent. cut in the price of rice on the economy of Guyana in its proposals for reform of the EU rice regime. [92725]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* The European Commission's proposals for reform of the EU rice regime were published in detailed form only on 22 January 2003. According to the Commission's own explanatory memorandum they are designed to correct current imbalances in the market and to prepare for the liberalisation of trade already agreed under the Everything But Arms initiative.

Bringing the internal EU rice price closer to world market levels may in the short term reduce the value of certain existing preferential market access arrangements to beneficiaries such as Guyana and others in the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group of countries. But in the longer term CAP reform should improve market prospects and opportunities for all developing country exporters.

We recognise the interests of the ACP countries in the proposals and will be exploring these issues further when negotiations begin.

Exmoor

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assistance she *(a)* has given and *(b)* plans to give to Exmoor following the foot and mouth epidemic. [88301]

Alun Michael: The Government has helped businesses adjust to the impact of foot and mouth disease and its aftermath through:

Setting up the £80 million Business Recovery Fund. This fund, administered by the regional development agencies, funded business improvements, training, and loan interest costs, together with local/regional tourism promotion and rural regeneration projects which helped bring visitors back to rural areas more quickly. The South West Regional Development Agency—covering Exmoor—benefited from an additional

£14 million from central Government and the RDA made a further £3 million available from their budgets for FMD-related business recovery measures.

Deferring tax, VAT and National Insurance payments, without interest charges, for businesses severely affected by foot and mouth disease (with a total amount deferred in excess of £250 million throughout England).

Helping local authorities defer rate payments and/or give hardship rate relief through the non-domestic rates system by increasing the central Government contribution towards local authority costs of providing relief to rural businesses. 151 rural local authorities could underwrite the cost of giving relief to businesses with properties under £12,000 rateable value generally, and properties under £50,000 rateable value in the 39 worst affected rural authority areas for the 2001–02 financial year, which includes the rural authorities that cover Exmoor. North Devon District Council granted over £240,000 of relief under the scheme; West Somerset District Council granted nearly £390,000; over 95 per cent. of the cost was met by central Government.

Fast tracking other measures to speed up rural regeneration, for example rapid introduction of mandatory rate relief for pubs, garages and other food shops in small settlements and extending the market towns programme to include towns badly affected by FMD;

Matching over £14 million in donations from the public to charitable organisations helping farmers and rural communities hit by FMD, including over £40,000 for the Exmoor Trust.

Providing £0.5 million for the Countryside Access Recovery Fund to promote access to and/or understanding of the countryside.

In addition, the Exmoor Environmentally Sensitive Area agreement holders, in 2002, collectively received in excess of £1.8 million in management payments and a further £1.44 million in capital grants for Conservation Plan works.

Farm Plastics

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what advice she offers to farmers in respect of the disposal of farm plastics. [91533]

Mr. Meacher: We will be addressing the question of how to deal with waste non-packaging farm plastics in the forthcoming consultation document on the application of the waste framework directive to agricultural waste, which is due to published in May 2003.

Farm Subsidy

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much subsidy was received directly by farmers in the last 12 months; and what the average subsidy received by *(a)* arable and *(b)* livestock farmers was. [82897]

Mr. Morley: Direct subsidies paid to farmers in the United Kingdom in the financial year 2000–01 totalled £2,348 million. The Farm Business Survey provides an estimate of average subsidy receipts by full-time farm businesses in England. The table shows average direct subsidies received by farm businesses of different types in 2001–02. Payments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were the responsibility of the devolved authorities in this period.

These figures include all production related payments, together with agri-environment and rural development payments. They do not include payments made to farmers during the FMD crisis for reasons of disease control or animal welfare. Farmers may also have benefited from payments of market support, though these are also available to traders.

Average direct payments for full-time farm businesses, England, 2001–02

£ per farm

	Direct subsidies
Livestock	14,300
Arable	36,800

Notes:

1. Average account year end February.

2. Full-time businesses are defined as those greater than eight European Size Units, an economic measure of size.

3. 'Livestock' farms cover the following farm type categories used in the Farm Business Survey: cattle and sheep (hill and lowland), dairy and pig and poultry.

4. 'Arable' farms cover the farm types: specialist cereals and general cropping.

Fisheries

Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, pursuant to her answer of 13 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 372W, on fisheries, for what reasons a copy of Opinion of the Legal Service, Council of the European Union, No. 13585/02, Limite, JUR424 PECHE164, dated 29 October 2002, was not passed by her Department to the *(a)* Scottish Fishermen's Federation and *(b)* National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations. [92645]

Mr. Morley: Documents bearing the classification "Limite" are internal to the Council of the European Union and are not intended for disclosure to the public. Moreover, the Council Legal Service provides legal advice to assist the Council in the course of its work. The opinions are excluded from the categories of Council decisions subject to publication under the Council rules of procedure.

Under the terms of European Parliament and Council Regulation 1049/2001 it is not open to the Government to decide unilaterally to release a Council Legal Service opinion, unless there is a strong public interest to do so. Recent case law and Council decisions confirm that it is not in the public interest to release documents containing Council Legal Service advice. Release would also run contrary to the principle of Legal Professional Privilege.

GM Crops

Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list the release consents that contain the GM oilseed rape transformation events Ms8 and Rf3 for each of the years from 1990 to 1999 in *(a)* England, *(b)* Wales and *(c)* Scotland. [90617]

Mr. Meacher: The consents under which the GM oilseed rape transformation events Ms8 and Rf3 had permission for release in field trials for each of the years from 1990 to 1999 are given in the table PGS became AgrEvo in 1999 and is now known as Bayer CropScience.

All the listed consents apply to England, Scotland and Wales but most of the releases took place in England. Some of the consents give permission for a programme of releases covering more than one year and in these cases the years in which sowing the GM oilseed rape was permitted are given.

Year	*Date of consent*	*Years between 1990—99 in which releases permitted*	*Reference and consent holder*
1995	22 March 1995	1995	95/R15/7 PGS
	22 March 1995	1995	95/R15/8 PGS
	9 August 1995	1995	95/R15/14 PGS
1996	27 March 1996	1996	96/R15/16 PGS
	21 August 1996	1996	96/R15/17 PGS
1997	18 March 1997	1997, 1998 1999	97/R15/18 PGS
	3 April 1997	1997	97/R15/19 PGS
	1 August 1997	1997	97/R15/20 PGS
	1 August 1997	1997	97/R15/21 PGS
	4 September 1997	1997	97/R15/22 PGS
1998	19 March 1998	1998	97/R15/23 PGS
	10 July 1998	1998, 1999	98/R15/24 PGS
	20 August 1998	1998, 1999	[1]98/R20/2 NIAB
1999	22 March 1999	1999	98/R19/18 AgrEvo

[1] National Institute of Agricultural Botany

Greenhouse Gases

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the impact of legislation aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions on industries important to the delivery of Government initiatives aimed at reducing Greenhouse Gas emissions. [90810]

Mr. Meacher: The UK Climate Change Programme published in November 2000 sets out the range of policy measures—regulation, economic instruments, information programmes and public expenditure—that the Government and the devolved administrations are introducing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to meet the UK's climate change targets. The measures in the Programme will deliver wider environmental, social and economic benefits. Measures to stimulate more efficient use of energy by business, for example, will help improve competitiveness. The Programme is also designed to offer incentives to industry to develop new, low carbon technologies and to exploit the growing international market for more efficient processes and renewable technologies.

The Programme includes two legislative measures that affect industry directly, each of which was subject to individual regulatory impact assessments as part of the normal policy development process. The industries affected by the legislation will include some that are important to the delivery of the policy measures in the Programme, but the Government has not produced a separate assessment of the specific impacts on them.

The first legislative measure is the EC Directive 96/61 on integrated pollution prevention and control (IPPC), which applies an integrated environmental approach to the regulation of certain industrial activities and, inter alia, contributes to the reduction of emissions of greenhouse gases, as well asimproving the energy efficiency of most of the energy intensive sectors of industry. The impact of the Directive, and the legislation implementing its requirements in England and Wales, was considered in the regulatory impact assessment published on 26 April 2000. It is available on the Defra website at http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/consult/ippc5/pdf/ippc5.pdf. The Directive has some impact on combined heat and power (CHP) technology, which the Government is supporting because of its high efficiency.

The second legislative measure is the energy efficiency provisions contained in Part L of the Building Regulations for England and Wales, which were amended by the Building (Amendment) Regulations 2001. The aim is to improve the energy performance of all types of building, including those used for industrial and commercial purposes, to reduce energy use and therefore emissions of carbon dioxide. The Building Regulations are the responsibility of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The amendments came into force on 1 April 2002. A regulatory impact assessment for the Regulations was published by the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (now the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) when the Regulations were made. It is available on the ODPM website at http://www.safety.odpm.gov.uk/bregs/brpub/ria/ria-01/index.htm. I understand that, in accordance with normal practice, the Office intends to investigate how the amended Regulations are being implemented around 2004, when there is a sufficient sample of works compliant with the new requirements.

Heritage Assets

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what sales of heritage assets and antique assets have been made by her Department since May 1997; if she will list such assets; and if she will estimate the total sales proceeds. [92390]

Alun Michael: Since Defra was created on 8 June 2001 no heritage or antique assets have been sold.

Illegal Meat Imports

Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps she has taken to prevent illegal meat imports into Britain. [91996]

Mr. Morley: Significant progress has been made to implement the Government's action plan, published in March 2002. The action plan will be revised shortly in consultation with stakeholders to include a longer-term enforcement strategy, further development of detection initiatives, and enhanced and coordinated publicity materials.

A Cabinet Office review of enforcement structures concluded that all activity against smuggling of meat, animal products, fish and plant matter will move to Her Majesty's Customs and Excise, to objectives agreed with Defra. A new ministerial group will oversee improved coordination between the main control agencies.

The results of the disease risk assessment commissioned by Defra from the Veterinary Laboratory Agency, are being subjected to processes of quality assurance and peer review. The full report will be published in the next few weeks when these are complete.

Extra funding this financial year has been used primarily for additional enforcement officers to perform checks on imports at a number of ports and airports. Legislation was amended in May 2002 to provide enforcement officers with additional search powers, and written guidance was provided to them on the use of these powers, especially with regard to checks for illegal meat imports in passenger baggage.

Enforcement officers have improved access to intelligence to aid them in deploying anti-smuggling measures since a central computer database was established in April 2001. Notably they receive monthly reports of products seized and notified to Defra.

We are carrying out a six-month pilot using detector dogs to find illegal animal products in passenger baggage and freight. The pilot is proving valuable in determining the attributes and level of training required for both dogs and their handlers and the back-up services we need to support the dog teams.

X-ray equipment is being used, on a trial basis, at a seaport to detect illicit material hidden in commercial freight. Defra is working with the Foreign Office and Customs on a pilot to test x-ray technology on air passenger baggage.

Public awareness is being increased through penalty posters and information leaflets at airports and seaports. Public information videos have been produced and are being broadcast on television. Negotiations are on-going with airlines to show them in-flight. The posters have been updated, and new literature is being produced, to highlight the new tighter personal import rules which came into effect on 1 January 2003 as a result of UK pressure on the European Commission.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she expects to publish the Veterinary Laboratory Agency risk analysis report into animal health from illegal meat importation. [92612]

Mr. Morley: Emerging results of the risk assessment are currently being subjected to peer review and quality assurance procedures. The complexity of the work, and the necessity to complete the quality assurance and peer review processes, have delayed publication. We now hope to be in a position to publish by early March.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what instructions her Department has issued to local authority environment health officers and port health authorities about illegal meat importation. [92614]

Mr. Morley: The Department produced new enforcement guidance in conjunction with the enforcement agencies. This was published in August 2002 and has just been updated to take account of the new European personal import rules that came into force on 1 January. We are also discussing prosecutions policy with enforcement agencies.

The Food Standards Agency has also issued guidance letters to port health authorities and local authorities to ensure there is continued vigilance and checks on imported products both at the point of import and at the retail level. In collaboration with Defra, the FSA is developing a training programme to provide information to all local authorities on imported food issues.

[illegible] Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action she is taking to prevent the illegal entry of meat into the UK. [92880]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* Significant progress has been made to implement the Government's action plan, published in March 2002. The action plan will be revised shortly in consultation with stakeholders to include a longer-term enforcement strategy, further development of detection initiatives, and enhanced and coordinated publicity materials

A Cabinet Office review of enforcement structures concluded that all activity against smuggling of meat, animal products, fish and plant matter will move to Her Majesty's Customs and Excise, to objectives agreed with Defra. A new ministerial group will oversee improved co-ordination between the main control agencies.

The results of the disease risk assessment commissioned by Defra from the Veterinary Laboratory Agency, are being subjected to processes of quality assurance and peer review. The full report will be published in the next few weeks when these are complete.

Extra funding this financial year has been used primarily for additional enforcement officers to perform checks on imports at a number of ports and airports.

Legislation was amended in May 2002 to provide enforcement officers with additional search powers, and written guidance was provided to them on the use of these powers, especially with regard to checks for illegal meat imports in passenger baggage.

Enforcement officers have improved access to intelligence to aid them in deploying anti-smuggling measures since a central computer database was established in April 2001. Notably they receive monthly reports of products seized and notified to Defra.

We are carrying out a six-month pilot using detector dogs to find illegal animal products in passenger baggage and freight. The pilot is proving valuable in determining the attributes and level of training required for both dogs and their handlers and the back up services we need to support the dog teams.

X-ray equipment is being used, on a trial basis, at a seaport to detect illicit material hidden in commercial freight. Defra is working with the Foreign Office and Customs on a pilot to test x-ray technology on air passenger baggage.

Public awareness is being increased through penalty posters and information leaflets at airports and seaports, Public information videos have been produced and are being broadcast on television. Negotiations are ongoing with airlines to show them in-flight. The posters have been updated, and new literature is being produced, to highlight the new tighter personal import rules which came into effect on 1 January 2003 as a result of UK pressure on the European Commission.

Landfill

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the *(a)* number and *(b)* total size is of landfill sites due to close in each year up until 2015, broken down by region. [85892]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 11 December 2002]:* This information is not available in the form requested. Landfill are operated by private companies and the commercial decisions in relation to closure are a matter for them. Some landfills will be closed as a result of regulatory action by the Environment Agency, but predicting how many and when is not possible.

Information that is available relates to England and Wales and comes from the conditioning plan exercise conducted by the Environment Agency. The number of landfill sites that will remain operational post July 2002 and post 2004, broken down by classification (hazardous, non-hazardous and inert) and by region is as follows:

Region	*Non-hazardous*	*Inert*	*Hazardous (post 2002)*	*Hazardous (post 2004)*
Anglian	43	60	47	9
Midlands	50	74	42	4
North East	89	58	39	11
North West	49	37	27	8
South West	39	46	16	1
Southern	30	35	13	1
Thames	31	49	19	0
Wales	23	30	15	3
Total	311	329	218	37

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her estimate is of the total expenditure by her Department on ministerial travel *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* abroad, in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if she will make a statement. [92458]

Alun Michael: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, on 22 January 2003, *Official Report,* column 344W.

Recycling

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much recyclable waste was collected in Somerset in 2002. [93122]

Mr. Meacher: This information is not held centrally. I would advise the hon. Member to contact the Head of Waste Services and Rural Affairs at Somerset County Council on 01823 356014 for this information.

Recycling (Household Waste)

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what statutory performance standards local authorities are required to meet for the percentage of household waste sent for recycling or composting in *(a)* 2003–04 and *(b)* 2005–06; and what the performance against target for waste recycling was in (i) 2001–02 and (ii) 2002–03. [92056]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* Statutory performance standards for individual authorities in the relevant years are set out in a table which has been placed in the Library. It also shows performance targets for household waste recycling for 2001–02 and is published on Defra's website at http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/waste/management/guidance/mwms/10.htm.

Recycling (Tyres)

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations her Department has made to the Department of Trade and Industry regarding the UK's submissions to the EU discussions and decision-making process on the packaging waste recycling targets under the new Packaging Waste Directive. [91497]

Mr. Meacher: The Department has been in close contact with the Department of Trade and Industry throughout the discussions of the draft Directive to ensure that environmental considerations are fully taken into account in arriving at an agreed Government line. Officials from DEFRA attend meetings in Brussels along with representatives from the DTI.

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what plans she has for promoting the use of old tyres as a surfacing material; [91846]

(2) what targets she has set for the recycling and retreading of tyres. [91848]

Mr. Meacher: The Government are supporting a number of end-use studies for used tyres, including the incorporation of tyre granulate in road surfaces.

The EC Landfill Directive, in banning the disposal of almost all tyres to landfill, effectively sets a 100 per cent. recovery requirement. Within that overall recovery requirement, there are no individual targets for the recycling and retreading of tyres, and the Government have no present plans for introducing such targets. Figures for 2001 show that value was recovered from over 60 per cent. of the estimated 480,000 tonnes of tyres disposed of in the UK that year. Significant additional recovery capacity has since been brought forward and is anticipated to be taken up as the landfill directive requirements bear down.

The Government in partnership with the tyre industry through the Used Tyre Working Group (UTWG) are investigating alternative disposal, recycling and recovery options for those tyres displaced from landfill with the aim of ensuring that sufficient capacity is available to handle those tyres.

Refrigerator Disposal

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what arrangements are in place to monitor compliance with her Department's guidelines on the disposal of refrigerators; and if she will make a statement. [91644]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* To monitor the disposal of refrigerators, we have asked local authorities to report on the number of fridges they have dealt with as part of the national waste monitoring questionnaire.

To monitor recycling processes, the Environment Agency have been working closely with plant operators to ensure that they meet the performance standards set out in their permit conditions.

Treatment plant have been operating in the UK since the summer, local authorities are in the process of letting contracts with operators, and the backlog of stored fridges is decreasing and expected to disappear within a year.

Sickness Absence

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many working days have been lost in her Department and its predecessors due to illness in each year since 1997–98. [92717]

Alun Michael: Records are not yet available for the number of days lost due to sickness absence in 2002, but these will be announced in due course. Sickness absence figures for previous years are published in the Cabinet Office annual report "Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service", copies of which are placed in House Libraries.

Figures for the most recently available years for the former Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the former DETR and are shown as an average per staff year. These are:

MAFF

Year	*Days*
1997	7.8
1998	8.7
1999	9.3
2000	9
2001	7.2

DETR

Year	*Days*
1997	9.7
1998	8.7
1999	8.7
2000	9.0
2001	10.5

The Department is committed to the effective management of sickness absence, and to meeting its Service Delivery Agreement of reducing sickness absence to 6.9 days for 2003.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many Sites of Special Scientific Interest there were in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire for each year since 1997. [93075]

Mr. Morley: The figures for the number of Sites of Special Scientific Interest in Shrewsbury and Atcham in each year since 1997 are:

	Number
1997	[1]25
1998	26
1999	26
2000	28
2001	28
2002	28
2003	28

[1] One more than previously reported in 2001 due to improved mapping and boundary definition.

In Shropshire as a whole:

	Number
1997	[1]103
1998	[2]107
1999	[2]108
2000	[2]110
2001	[2]110
2002	[2]110
2003	[2]110

[1] Of which two are partly in Shropshire

[2] Of which three are partly in Shropshire.

Thames Barrier

Mr. Mark Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what research she intends to carry out in the next 12 months to determine whether the Thames Barrier is sufficiently able to protect London in the event of a tidal surge. [92650]

Mr. Morley: The Thames Barrier and associated defences provide a high standard of protection to London and the Thames Estuary against a combination of tidal/fluvial flood risks, the principal risk being from tidal surge events.

A generous allowance for sea level rise was built into the design for the Thames Barrier and associated defences and thus we have today a standard of 0.05 per cent. risk of flooding from tidal surge in any one year. As sea level rises, this standard of protection will reduce as planned to the design standard of 0.1 per cent. risk of flooding from tidal surge by the year 2030. This will provide a level of protection equivalent to 2 metres above the maximum level of the 1953 flood event and is the highest standard of protection in the UK.

The Environment Agency, with Defra support, is engaged in a number of studies and investigations which are reviewing the current and future needs of London's tidal defences, including the overarching planning and research project "Planning for Flood Risk management in the Thames Estuary". This is developing a flood risk management strategy for London and the Thames Estuary for the next 100 years, and includes climate change research, geomorphological and flood modelling, engineering studies and the development of management intervention and decision-testing models. This is the first year of a six year project which will provide a plan for the establishment of the next generation of tidal defences for London and the Thames Estuary post 2030.

Timber

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list the local authorities which *(a)* have responded to the Environment Minister's letter on timber procurement from 19 September 2002, *(b)* have confirmed that they have policies to ensure that all timber purchased is from legal and sustainable sources and *(c)* do not have policies to ensure timber procurement from legal and sustainable sources; and what percentage of local authorities have taken action under *(a)*, *(b)* and *(c)*. [89078]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 8 January 2003]:* My letter of 19 September 2002 asked chief executives of local authorities in England to pledge their support to a commitment to purchase timber from legal and sustainably managed sources, and to put in place the necessary procedures to ensure its effective implementation. I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet (Colin Burgon) on 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 947W, on how Central Government sets its policy.

Replies have been received from the following local authorities: Basingstoke and Deane, Blackpool, Bolton, Bournemouth, Braintree, Bristol, Broadland, Buckinghamshire, Bury, Calderdale, Camden, Chelmsford, Chichester, Copeland, Cornwall, Cotsworld, Derbyshire, East Cambridgeshire, East Lindsey, East Staffordshire, East Sussex, Eastbourne, Eastleigh, Epping Forest, Fareham, Gateshead, Gloucester, Gosport, Hampshire, Harlow, Harrogate, Harrow, Hart, Havant, Huntingdonshire, Kensington and Chelsea, Kent, Kerrier, Kirklees, Knowsley, Lewes, Lincolnshire, Liverpool, Malvern Hills, Manchester, Mansfield, Melton, New Forest, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Norfolk, North Devon, North Shropshire, North Somerset, Northumberland, Purbeck, Reading, Redcar and Cleveland, Richmondshire, Rochdale, Salford, Sheffield, Shepway, South Oxfordshire, South Ribble, South Somerset, South Staffordshire, St. Albans, St. Edmundsbury, Staffordshire, Stockport, Swindon, Tandridge, Tendring, Tonbridge and Malling, Tunbridge Wells, Wandsworth, Wellingborough, West Lindsey, Westminster, Wirral, Wolverhampton, Worcester, Worcestershire, Wyre Forest and Yorkshire.

The 88 authorities that replied represent 23 per cent. of the 387 written to. Of those that replied, 46 (52 per cent.) confirmed they had policies in place, and 36 (41 per cent.) were either putting or considering putting policies in place. Some of the respondents, however, did not specifically stipulate that timber should be sourced from both legal and sustainably managed sources. Six (7 per cent.) were using other strategies such as procuring through regional buying consortiums that had sustainable procurement policies in place. The information received is now over three months old and, therefore, it is possible that more of these authorities will now have policies in place.

I am in the process of writing again to request a response from those that did not reply. I will be updating them on progress being made by the Government on implementing its policy and stressing the importance we place on them declaring their position.

Waste Disposal Plants

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what guidance she sets county councils when deciding on permission for waste disposal plants. [93123]

Mr. Meacher: Guidance on the siting of waste management facilities is provided in Planning Policy Guidance Note 10 'Planning and waste Management', which was published by the then DETR in September 1999. Applications for planning permission have to be decided in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise, including taking account of national and regional policy and planning guidance.

PRIME MINISTER

Entertainment

Mr. Laws: To ask the Prime Minister what his estimate is of the total spending of his Department on entertainment in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92416]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker) on 28 February 2002, *Official Report*, columns 1444–48W.

For 2001–02, the total cost of official entertainment to my Office at 10 Downing Street and Chequers was £53,050.

Information prior to 1997–98 is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Press Releases

Mr. Laws: To ask the Prime Minister how many press releases have been issued by his Department in each *(a)* year and *(b)* quarter from 1995–96 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92419]

The Prime Minister: Information on the number of press releases issued by my Office is given in the table.

	Number of press notices
1997 (from 1 May)	86
1998	143
1999	138
2000	129
2001	120
2002	114

The majority of press releases issued by my Office relate to appointments. The numbers do not include my speeches or statements made to the House.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Cayman Islands

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with *(a)* the Leader of the Government of the Cayman Islands and *(b)* the Cayman Islands Financial Reporting Unit on money laundering. [92842]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My noble Friend Baroness Amos, Overseas Territories Minister, is in close touch with the Leader of Government Business in the Cayman Islands. They spoke most recently on 20 January.

There have been no Ministerial discussions with the Financial Reporting Unit (FRU) in the Cayman Islands.

Computer Misuse

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many cases of computer misuse there were in his Department in each of the last five years, broken down by each category of misuse; and how many of those cases resulted in disciplinary action. [93053]

Mr. Rammell: I regret that the detailed information requested is not available. But over the last five years disciplinary action has been taken in the following cases:

1999—Two cases of browsing inappropriate Internet sites

1999—One case of downloading pornographic material

2001—Two cases of browsing inappropriate Internet sites

2001—One case of using offensive language in an e-mail.

Convention on the Future of Europe

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether the Government supports the Franco-German proposals for the President of the European Commission to be elected by the European Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [93621]

Mr. MacShane: The Government welcomes the French and German joint contribution to the Convention on the Future of Europe. We are studying their proposal for the President of the European Commission to be elected by the European Parliament and I am holding consultations with other EU partners on what is, at this stage, merely one of many proposals put to the convention.

Cyprus

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the role the British Government are playing in the negotiations to unify the island of Cyprus. [92958]

Mr. MacShane: We fully support the efforts of the UN Secretary-General and his special adviser on Cyprus, Mr. Alvaro de Soto. The Government believe that a crucial opportunity has now arisen for a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement in Cyprus. While it is for the two sides in Cyprus to agree on the details of a settlement, we strongly urge the parties to reach agreement, based on the UN Secretary-General's 10 December 2002 proposals, by the UN deadline of 28 February.

This would enable referenda to be held on both sides of the island and a reunited Cyprus to sign the Treaty of Accession with the EU on 16 April. Our aim remains for a reunited island to accede to the EU. We believe this is in the best interests of Cyprus, of Greece and Turkey, and of the wider European community.

This is a vital opportunity: we urge the two sides not to let it slip away.

We have taken every opportunity to convey these points to the parties. My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary expressed these points to Turkish Ministers at the Copenhagen European Council. The Defence Secretary did likewise during his visit to Ankara on 8 January.

The UK Special Representative for Cyprus, Lord Hannay, will visit Athens and Nicosia this week, and Ankara at the beginning of February, in order to help facilitate negotiations at this crucial time.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the effect Cyprus' accession to the EU will have on the status of the British sovereign bases on the island. [92993]

Mr. MacShane: I refer the hon. Member to the written ministerial statement made by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on 10 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 10WS, and to the answer given in another place by my noble Friend Baroness Symons on 14 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 123.

The UK's policy is that, following Cyprus's accession, the SBAs should remain outside the EU, with technical adjustments to ensure the continued smooth functioning of the relationship between Cyprus and the SBAs. We expect final agreement to take the form of a protocol which will be part of the terms of Cyprus's accession. The accession treaty is due to be signed on 16 April, and a Bill introduced to enable its ratification by the UK.

Empty Homes

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many empty homes his Department *(a)* had five years ago and *(b)* has now, by region; if he will establish an empty homes strategy within his Department; and if he will set a target for reduction in empty homes. [92920]

Mr. Rammell: It is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's policy to limit empty properties to one of four categories: *(a)* those that must be vacated while undergoing refurbishment or adaptation; *(b)* those that are surplus and in the process of disposal; *(c)* those we cannot occupy because of a break in diplomatic relations or a similar eventuality, but we expect to need in the future; *(d)* those that are vacant for short periods between officers' overseas tours.

Routine management of the FCO estate is devolved to our overseas posts and information is not held centrally. It is therefore not possible to identify these properties or their costs without disproportionate cost.

Energy Supplies (Security)

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions with other *(a)* Departments and *(b)* Governments his Department has had over the last 12 months with regard to the British Foreign Policy objective of ensuring secure energy supplies. [92177]

Mr. Rammell: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has participated in regular cross-Whitehall discussions on the security of energy supply, most importantly, in the context of the Energy White Paper.

The FCO has had regular bilateral and multilateral discussions on a range of energy issues, including the security of energy supplies, with both energy producing and energy consuming countries.

Entertainment

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his estimate is of the total spending of his Department on entertainment in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92374]

Mr. Rammell: Comparable information is only available for the years 2000–01 to 2002–3. The following figures show the actual spend on entertainment within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for the first two of these years, with a forecast for year three based upon expenditure to date:

	£
2000–01	8,337,306
2001–02	8,708,262
2002–03	8,566,545

All expenditure on entertainment within the department is carefully monitored to ensure that it is made in accordance with departmental guidance that is based on the principles set out in "Government Accounting".

Industrial Action/Illness

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many working days have been lost in his Department and its predecessors due to *(a)* industrial action and *(b)* illness in each year since 1997. [93165]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has not lost any days due to industrial action since 1997. The number of days lost due to sick absence are as follows:

	Average days per officer
1997	8.9
1998	8.0
1999	n/a
2000	6.3
2001	6.6
2002	5.7

Notes:

1. Figures for 1997 to 1998 have been uplifted to account for different recording practices in different parts of the Department and its overseas posts.
2. Figures for 1999 could only be provided at disproportionate costs, the method of recording changed part way through 1999.
3. FCO figures are recorded as total days (not working days).

Kenya

Joyce Quin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received on compensation for alleged victims of repression by the British authorities in Kenya during the period of the Mau Mau rebellion and before Kenyan independence; and if he will make a statement. [90681]

Mr. Rammell: Ten different individuals and organisations have made representations to the British High Commission in Nairobi since January 1999 to ask for compensation for alleged victims of repression by the British authorities during the period of the Mau Mau rebellion. The latest approach was on 19 October 2002 on behalf of the "Mau Mau Original Trust". In addition, BHC officials received a delegation of Mau Mau veterans on 23 October 2002. Responsibility for the actions of the colonial Government of Kenya passed to the Government of Kenya at Independence in 1963.

United Nations Organisations

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what official representations have been made during the last six months to UN organisations on behalf of the United Kingdom at the UN; and what the results were of those representations. [93346]

Mr. Straw: The UK makes daily representations to UN organisations and agencies, and to other members of the UN, on a wide range of issues.

Examples of the UN's achievements in the last six months to which UK representations have contributed include:

The unanimous adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1441 and the return of weapons inspectors to Iraq;

The successful transition of the International Police Task Force in Bosnia to the European Union Police Mission;

The adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1445 strengthening UN action against Al-Qaida;

The adoption, by a large majority, of a new international human rights instrument to combat torture: the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture;

The adoption of General Assembly Resolutions on major human rights thematic issues, including torture, rights of the child, rights of the disabled and honour crimes;

Significant agreements on international sustainable development governance at the World Summit for Sustainable Development: e.g. access to sanitation, biodiversity, chemicals management and sustainable production and consumption;

Lifting sanctions in Angola.

Visas

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) how many applications for a visa to visit family members in the UK were *(a)* received, *(b)* determined and *(c)* refused by entry clearance posts, in (i) 2000, (ii) 2001 and (iii) 2002; [93093]

(2) how many applications for a visa to visit family members in the UK were *(a)* received, *(b)* determined and *(c)* refused by those entry clearance posts that provide monthly statistical information in each month since 1 October 2000. [93092]

Mr. Rammell: The figures for Family Visit Applications received, determined and refused since October 2000 are set out as follows.

Family visit applications

	January	*February*	*March*	*April*	*May*	*June*	*July*	*August*	*September*	*October*	*November*	*December*
2000												
Received	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	20,809	15,868	12,456
Determined	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	20,530	15,758	12,386
Refused	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2,022	1,893	1,283
2001												
Received	13,612	15,975	20,811	22,560	32,220	32,292	36,998	28,899	17,981	13,908	16,251	14,551
Determined	11,432	14,574	19,533	22,142	30,182	28,156	35,559	26,895	17,858	13,256	15,587	13,886
Refused	2,305	2,831	4,205	3,979	5,178	5,610	5,887	5,138	4,225	3,344	4,136	2,706
2002												
Received	15,904	18,759	23,207	27,137	33,299	26,706	31,235	23,382	17,591	17,896	19,307	13,617
Determined	13,477	15,306	19,221	24,765	28,465	21,023	29,360	22,984	16,641	17,149	17,780	12,197
Refused	3,208	3,881	4,363	5,497	5,908	3,425	5,184	6,187	4,959	4,713	4,668	2,714

Yugoslavia

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what assistance the Government has provided to the Government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to undertake investigations into the activities of arms dealers involved in the illegal supply of weapons to *(a)* West Africa and *(b)* Iraq; [93487]

(2) what the outcomes of his meeting on 6 November 2002 with the President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia were regarding the illegal supply of weapons to *(a)* West Africa and *(b)* Iraq; and if he will make a statement; [93488]

(3) what assistance *(a)* the EU and *(b)* the UK have provided to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to develop arms export legislation. [93489]

Mr. MacShane: When he met President Kostunica and Foreign Minister Svilanovic in late 2002, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary raised our serious concerns about reports of arms sales from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) to Iraq and Liberia, in breach of UN sanctions. He urged them to ensure a thorough investigation, leading to prosecutions of those responsible. Since then Mr. Cekovic, Head of Jugoimport, and Mr. Djokic, Assistant Minister for Defence, have been sacked, the Jugoimport office in Baghdad closed and a commission established to investigate Jugoimport's activities. The FRY has also cancelled a bilateral agreement with Iraq and suspended bilateral military industrial agreements with all states that are subject to UN sanctions. Svilanovic has promised further investigation and possible prosecutions. The United Kingdom is considering the provision of technical assistance to the FRY to ensure effective regulation of arms exports. On 10 December UK experts visited Belgrade to conduct a preliminary assessment; a follow-up visit will take place soon. The EU provides support to the FRY's reform process, including improving the democratic control of the armed forces, from its Common Foreign and Security Policy budget.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list his meetings in the last 12 months with representatives of Zimbabwean *(a)* Government, *(b)* opposition, *(c)* churches, *(d)* humanitarian organisations, *(e)* sports organisations and *(f)* commercial interests. [91260]

Mr. Rammell: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met the former Zimbabwean Minister of Finance, Dr. Simba Makoni, on 6 February 2002, who was transiting the UK on his return to Zimbabwe from the World Economic Summit in New York.

FCO officials are regularly in contact with a range of Zimbabweans, including from all the groups specified.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what information he collates on the extent of Government inspired murder and torture in Zimbabwe; and if he will make a statement. [91261]

Mr. Rammell: We monitor closely the situation in Zimbabwe and regularly receive detailed information on human rights violations there from a number of sources, including human rights organisations and other NGOs. The UK Government, along with other members of the international community, has consistently condemned the Government of Zimbabwe for its appalling record on human rights and have called on it to respect its obligations under international human rights conventions. Along with our EU partners, the UK Government will continue to focus international attention on human rights abuses in Zimbabwe.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the steps taken by *(a)* Her Majesty's Government and *(b)* the Commonwealth troika to end misgovernment and reintroduce democracy and the rule of law in Zimbabwe. [91262]

Mr. Rammell: The UK Government have taken a number of measures in response to the situation in Zimbabwe including; an outright rejection of the conduct and outcome of the Presidential election in March 2002; a complete embargo on arms sales since May 2000; a suspension of non-humanitarian aid and the withdrawal of our military training team. Working with our EU partners, we have also imposed targeted sanctions, a travel ban and assets freeze, on 79 members of the Mugabe regime.

The Commonwealth suspended Zimbabwe from its Councils in March 2002. The Commonwealth Troika is pressing for good governance and the rule of law to be restored in Zimbabwe. It last met in Abuja on 23 September 2002. It deferred a decision on further Commonwealth measures, but stated that it would stick to its task over the next six months "at which point further measures might need to be considered". It is due to meet again in March.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when in the last 12 months representatives of Her Majesty's Government have visited each province of Zimbabwe. [91266]

Mr. Rammell: Officials based at the High Commission in Harare regularly visit provinces throughout Zimbabwe in the course of their duties. London based officials have also visited provinces in Zimbabwe in the last twelve months. It would entail disproportionate cost to list the details. No Government Minister has visited Zimbabwe in the last twelve months.

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what resolutions have been tabled on behalf of the United Kingdom at the UN concerning the application of more international pressure on Mr. Robert Mugabe and his government. [93347]

Mr. Straw: As a UK initiative, EU member states tabled a draft resolution on Zimbabwe at the 58th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva in March/April 2002. Regrettably, the African Group blocked discussion. Despite this, the UK's attempt to secure a resolution served to highlight the Zimbabwe Government's appalling human rights record.

We welcome the UN Secretary General's recent statement that: "At the heart of the problem is the crisis in Zimbabwe—a country which used to be the region's breadbasket, but is now wracked by hunger and HIV/AIDS. This tragic situation is caused partly by forces of nature, and partly by mismanagement".

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Iraq

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what evaluation she has made of the impact of suspension of the UN Oil for Food programme on civilians' food needs in Iraq. [92888]

Clare Short: Suspension of the UN Oil for Food Programme could have an extremely serious impact on civilians' food needs in Iraq. My Department is considering a range of eventualities in Iraq and is in regular discussion about them with other governments and UN agencies.

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the ability of the UN Oil for Food programme to continue in the event of military action in Iraq. [92889]

Clare Short: I am concerned about the ability if the UN Oil for Food programme to continue in the event of military action in Iraq. It is important for all parties to ensure that humanitarian provision for the people of Iraq is given priority under all eventualities.

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has made to the US Government regarding the protection of food supplies in the event of military intervention in Iraq. [92890]

Clare Short: My Department is in regular contact with the US Government on contingency preparedness planning for a range of eventualities in Iraq.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with the Defence Secretary regarding co-ordination of the military and humanitarian strategy in Iraq in the event of war. [92869]

Clare Short: My Department consults regularly with the Ministry of Defence on a variety of issues at official and ministerial level. This includes consideration of a range of eventualities in Iraq.

Afghanistan

Mr. Robert Key: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent reports she has received on female education in Afghanistan; what assessment her Department has made of the level of female education in Afghanistan; and if she will make a statement. [92759]

Clare Short: During my visit to Afghanistan in late October I visited a school in Kabul, this was one of many that have reopened across Afghanistan. In the past year 3 million children have returned to school and girls now make up 30 per cent. of school children. Estimates are that 7,000 schools for 4.5 million children will re-open on 21 March for the new year. Women are also seeking education to make up for a time when they were unable to study. Accurate figures are not available, but estimates are that literacy rates for women over 15 are less than 25 per cent. It remains difficult for women and girls to gain education in some parts of Afghanistan but we are supporting the fghan Government in assisting all those who wish to, to access education.

Dr. Jenny Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the outcome was of the December meeting of donors in Oslo to discuss aid to Afghanistan; and if she will make a statement. [92853]

Clare Short: The Afghanistan Support Group (ASG) in December brought together the Afghan Government, the United Nations and donors to discuss progress already made in Afghanistan and the next steps in the reconstruction process. A key element of the ASG was the launch of the 2003 UN appeal for the Transitional Assistance Programme forAfghanistan. Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani also made a brief presentation on the budget for the coming year. Few donors were in a position to make specific pledges 2003 but most were able to confirm that they expected to provide a similar level of funding as they had provided for 2002; around $1 .Sbillion.

It was also agreed by all present that this would be the final ASG. A new Development Forum, designed to ensure greater Afghan leadership of the reconstruction effort will supersede it. The new forum will have 12 Consultative Groups within its structure where selected donors can work with government on specific sectors. Until such time as the first Development Forum in March, the Japanese agreed to lead a transitional humanitarian group on humanitarian issues in Afghanistan.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent progress has been made towards the reconstruction of Afghanistan. [93012]

Clare Short: A great deal has been achieved since January 2002, when we pledged £200 million to the reconstruction of Afghanistan at the Tokyo conference. A broad-based Transitional Administration has been elected. A new currency has been issued. 3 million children have returned to school, and polio has almost been eradicated.

The 2002 harvest saw grain production rise by 80 per cent. compared to 2001. The power station and airport in Kabul are being refurbished. The rebuilding of the roads system has begun, and work is continuing on customs reform and the drafting of a new constitution.

However, much remains to be done. One of the most pressing issues is to improve security for those living outside Kabul, and to extend the authority of the elected government beyond the capital. This is of fundamental importance to both the reconstruction effort, and in order to ensure human rights are respected. In December President Karzai issued a decree setting out plans for a multi-ethnic national army, and in the last month the first Provincial Reconstruction Team was deployed in Gardez province, under US leadership. First reports indicate that the security situation has improved as a result. The UK is actively considering leading a PRT in the future.

An important development has been the signing by Afghanistan's neighbours of Good Neighbourly Relations declaration by Afghanistan's neighbours. The declaration, essentially an agreement to maintain constructive relations and not to seek influence by exploiting ethnic rivalries, was signed by all Afghanistan's immediate neighbours in December 2002.

Work on humanitarian relief is also continuing. We contributed £11 million to the UN's Winterisation programme to help ensure that vulnerable communities had adequate shelter and food over the winter, and a further £2 million to the UN snow-clearing operation to ensure that aid reaches remote communities. Early indications are that this programme is going well, helped by a relatively mild winter. DFID will shortly be conducting a humanitarian assessment mission to formulate our strategy for the coming year.

The Development Forum meeting in Kabul in March will be important in setting the priorities for reconstruction and international assistance over the next year.

Alternative Crop Projects

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with her EU counterparts regarding damage to alternative crop projects funded by EU, following fumigation with pesticides by United States helicopters. [92630]

Clare Short: I have held discussions with my European Union colleagues how to reduce production of illegal narcotics in developing countries by providing viable alternative livelihood opportunities for producing farmers. I have not specifically discussed damage to European Commission-funded alternative crop projects from fumigation with pesticides, or any other sources

Colombia

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress has been made with the EU contribution to Plan Colombia. [92631]

Clare Short: The EU supports the efforts of the Colombian Government to put an end to the violence affecting the country. However, the EU does not contribute to Plan Colombia because it has reservations about some aspects of the plan and it does not support with aid any initiative with a military dimension.

In October 2000 the EU announced an aid package of euros 140 million towards the support of ongoing Colombian activities in the search for peace, targeting the roots and causes of the conflict and providing humanitarian assistance to the victims of the conflict.

Entertainment

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the estimate is of the total spending of her Department in all forms of entertainment in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if she will make a statement. [92404]

Clare Short: The following table shows recorded DFID spending from the running cost budget on entertainment for the years in question, to the nearest £000.

Year	*£*
1994–95	7,000
1995–96	9,000
1996–97	10,000
1997–98	24,000
1998–99	43,000
1999–2000	62,000
2000–01	48,000
2001–02	55,000
2002–03[1]	74,000

[1] Estimated

For the earlier years some expenditure may not have been separately recorded.

All expenditure on official entertainment is made in accordance with published departmental guidance on financial procedures and propriety, based on the principles set out in Government Accounting.

Ethiopia

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to secure resources to assist rural investment in Ethiopia and prevent future food crises. [91682]

Clare Short: One of the priorities for our assistance programme in Ethiopia is to help address the roots of food insecurity. This means looking at long-term approaches to reducing poverty and vulnerability—such as promoting broad-based economic growth, market development and rural roads. We are working with other bilateral and multilateral donors to achieve this whilst continuing to respond to short-term humanitarian demands.

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to secure international commitment to increased interim aid for Ethiopia. [91683]

Clare Short: We are committed to long-term partnership with Ethiopia, which includes support to addressing the underlying causes of food insecurity. In addition, we continue to play our part in providing humanitarian assistance, including food aid when necessary. We plan to substantially increase our development budget for Ethiopia over the next three years. Whilst doing this, we are in agreement with the Government of Ethiopia that donors should harmonise their efforts to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of development assistance.

John Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the humanitarian situation in Ethiopia. [92512]

Clare Short: The humanitarian situation in Ethiopia is a matter of great concern. However, we consider that the Government of Ethiopia, donors and NGOs are coordinating their response well to ensure that this does not become a crisis.

As always we remain committed to playing our part in the international response. During 2002 we committed £32.3 million to food and non-food humanitarian assistance. This included £15 million for food aid to be distributed by the World Food Programme in late January and February 2003.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when her Department intends to move to direct budget support for Ethiopia. [92860]

Clare Short: During my visit to Ethiopia last week, along with the Ethiopian Finance Minister, I signed a Memorandum of Understanding covering the long-term development partnership between the UK and Government of Ethiopia to tackle poverty. The Memorandum indicates that we plan to provide at least 60 million of direct budget support over the next three years. We expect to disburse the first 10 million of this within the next month.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much of her Department's budget for Ethiopia will be disbursed by *(a)* direct budget support and *(b)* NGOs (i) as a proportion of her Department's assistance to Ethiopia and (ii) by value. [92861]

Clare Short: We currently expect development programme spending in Ethiopia, where the total will be split approximately two-thirds direct budget support and one-third technical assistance. We will continue to do some work with civil society and local and international NGOs where this can help deliver our poverty reduction objectives.

On current plans we hope to commit at least 60 million on direct budget support and 30 million on technical cooperation over the next three years. In addition to the development programme spending a proportion of our humanitarian assistance will also continue to be provided through NGOs.

External Consultants

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much *(a)* her Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body spent on external consultancy in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (planned); and if she will make a statement. [92252]

Clare Short: DFID expenditure on consultancies from the development programme since 1995–96 is given in the table:

Year	*£ million*
1995–96	143
1996–97	161
1997–98	204
1998–99	199
1999–2000	198
2000–01	209
2001–02	[1]198

[1] Expenditure is understated due to the move to Resource Accounting. DFID issued contracts valued at £302 million.

The figures for agencies/Non Departmental Public bodies are not held centrally and it would require disproportionate cost to obtain them.

Figures for planned expenditure on external consultancy are not available. DFID has issued contracts from 1 April 2002 to date, valued at £222 million.

Fraud and Theft

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much money has been lost by her Department and its agencies and non-departmental public bodies through *(a)* fraud and *(b)* theft in each year since 1996–97. [92481]

Clare Short: The estimated cost to DFID's budget of theft and fraud in the period 1April 1996 to 31 March 2002 is some £367,000 of which £207,000 can be attributed to contractor fraud. Of the remaining sum, £129,000 relates to the theft of assets and misappropriation of cash, which in line with Treasury guidance has been classified as involving departmental staff either directly or through collusion. Details of suspected or proven fraud are provided to the Treasury on an annual basis. The annual report that the Treasury prepares on fraud is deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

Health and Safety

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development whether her Department and its agencies have met the commitment arising from Action Point 13 of the June 2000 Strategy statement on revitalising health and safety to summarise health and safety performance and plans in annual reports from the year 2000–01 onwards. [89487]

Clare Short: My Department will meet the commitment in its forthcoming Departmental Annual Report covering performance in the calendar year 2002. We have no agencies.

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which senior officials within her Department and its agencies take responsibility for health and safety at board or equivalent level; and where their names are publicised. [89488]

Clare Short: My Department's Health and Safety Policy (which is agreed with the trade unions and published in its Staff Handbook, on its Departmental Intranet site and elsewhere) contains the following:

> "The Permanent Secretary recognises and accepts responsibility for providing a safe and healthy workplace and working environment for all staff and will take all practicable steps to meet that responsibility."

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what information she has collated on the application to her Department and its agencies of the checklist, circulated by letter by Sir Richard Mottram, referred to under Action Point 12 of the revitalising health and safety strategy statement; and if she will make a statement. [89489]

Clare Short: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to her by the Minister for Work on 20 January, *Official Report*, columns 85–86W. Within my Department the requirements of the checklist will be reflected in any future revision of our Health and Safety Policy and structured health and safety management systems.

Humanitarian Contingency Planning

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with her colleagues in *(a)* the US, *(b)* the EU and *(c)* the UN, regarding humanitarian contingency planning for humanitarian aid to Iraq in the event of war with Iraq. [92868]

Clare Short: My Department has regular discussions with the US, EU partners and the UN on general contingency preparedness planning in a number of countries. In the case of Iraq, planning is underway for a range of eventualities.

Kenya

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with the European Commission on the Westlands-St. Austin Road Project in Kenya; and if she will make a statement. [92219]

Clare Short: None. The construction of the road referred to took place from 1990 to 1993. Officials from the then Overseas Development Administration were aware of various complaints from people living in communities (not between Westlands and St. Austin, but further north on the same road) and discussed these with European Commission officials. The EC Ombudsman subsequently investigated and concluded that there had been no mal-administration on the part of the EC.

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the timetable is for reviewing UK bilateral aid to Kenya. [93405]

Clare Short: I visited Kenya last week and had discussions with Kenyan Ministers on how Britain could best help the new Government deliver quickly on its election promises to stamp out corruption, revive the economy and improve public services. We are already reviewing our bilateral programme to ensure that we respond effectively and flexibly to the needs of the new Government. I am also pressing the international financial institutions and the European Commission to help the new Government fill the large hole in the public finances which they have inherited.

Malawi

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she plans to support further debt relief to Malawi. [93023]

Clare Short: Malawi remains off track with its economic and financial reform programme. An IMF mission which left Lilongwe on 21 January was still unable to give a positive endorsement to the Government's overall performance.

My Department with the EC and Norway will conduct a separate assessment next month. Meanwhile, in collaboration with other development partners, DFID is continuing a dialogue with the Government of Malawi on measures necessary for resumption of budget support and debt relief.

Mauritania

Mr. Robert Key: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of *(a)* the level of malnutrition and *(b)* the number of deaths due to malnutrition in the last year in Mauritania. [92760]

Clare Short: My Department has not carried out an independent assessment of the level of malnutrition or the number of deaths due to malnutrition in the last year in Mauritania. A survey carried out by the NGO World Vision in November 2002 found acute malnutrition rates amongst children of between 10–15 per cent. in some parts of the country.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of food shortages in Mauritania; and if she will make a statement. [92761]

Clare Short: The World Food Programme (WFP) estimate that there are 750,000 people affected by food shortages. Reports by NGOs, such as Oxfam and World Vision, support this analysis. We are monitoring the situation closely and are providing assistance through contributions to WFP and Oxfam.

Minimum Wage

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will estimate the impact of increasing the minimum wage *(a)* in line with average earnings, *(b)* to £4.17 per hour, *(c)* to £4.87 per hour, *(d)* to £5.00 per hour and *(e)* to £5.30 per hour, on the cost of salaries of departmental employees (i) in total and (ii) for each nation of the United Kingdom in the next financial year. [90602]

Clare Short: The department's current minimum wage under our three year pay agreement is £5.25 per hour based on a 37 hour week. There would be no financial impact of increasing the minimum wage on the cost of departmental salaries until £5.30 per hour, when the additional cost in the next financial year would be £287 a year and would apply to 11 employees in Scotland only.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her estimate is of the total expenditure by her Department on ministerial travel *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* abroad in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if she will make a statement. [92478]

Clare Short: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 334W.

Multilateral Debt

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her policy is on 100 per cent. cancellation of low-income country multilateral debts. [92985]

Clare Short: While it is essential to deal with the problem of unsustainable debt in the poorest countries as part of our efforts to assist in eradicating poverty, complete cancellation of debt is not required; nor is it the most effective means of delivering aid resources to reduce poverty. We do not support the proposal for 100 per cent. cancellation of IMF and World bank loans, which is neither desirable nor equitable. For these institutions to provide 100 per cent. relief would risk skewing limited development resources away from other very poor countries, which have handled their debt well. Countries need to borrow—initially only on very concessional terms—to finance their poverty reduction strategies. In this way, they can re-establish their creditworthiness, which will also help them attract private investment and accelerate economic growth and poverty reduction.

Poverty and Wildlife Study

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to implement her Department's study on Poverty and Wildlife commissioned from Joanna Elliott. [92610]

Clare Short: The implications of the findings of the Wildlife and Poverty Study will be discussed in DFID and with DEFRA and FCO. We also hope that it will encourage other government and non-government organisations to prioritise the integration of the needs and voices of the poor into wildlife-related strategies.

Publicity and Advertising

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much *(a)* her Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body sponsored by her Department spent on (i) publicity and (ii) advertising in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if she will make a statement. [92251]

Clare Short: Our expenditure on publicity, which forms part of our effort to raise awareness and understanding of international development issues in the UK, has been as follows:

Year	*£*
1995–96	568,755
1996–97	579,916
1996–98	399,755
1998–99	674,531
1999–2000	879,354
2001–01	1,484,281
2001–02	1,286,054
2002–03	[1]1,300,000

[1] Estimated outturn

We do not hold a separate advertising budget. The majority of advertising relates to recruitment advertising in newspapers and journals. Expenditure for the last three calendar years was as follows:

Year	*£*
2000	751,972
2001	938,297
2002	1,010,930

Expenditure figures for the preceding years are not available.

Refugees (Iraq)

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with *(a)* Jordan, *(b)* Syria, *(c)* Turkey, *(d)* Iran, *(e)* Kuwait and *(f)* Saudi Arabia regarding their policy towards accepting refugees from Iraq. [92870]

Clare Short: None.

Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress is being made on education projects in Southern Sudan; and if she will make a statement. [92638]

Clare Short: This financial year we have committed £220,000 to support scholarships programmes in Sudan, particularly for women, and £300,000 to UNICEF for schools rehabilitation and teacher training in the Nuba Mountains. We are also planning a significant intervention in the education sector in government and SPLM/A controlled conflict affected areas.

Western Sahara

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with Ministers in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office regarding food security in Western Sahara. [92639]

Clare Short: I have not had any specific discussions with Ministers in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on food security in Western Sahara.

DFID continues to provide support to the Saharawi refugees through its contributions to the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) and the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Western Sahel

Mr. Robert Key: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much emergency aid her Department is giving to the World Food Programme's Emergency Operation Appeal for the Western Sahel; and if she will make a statement. [92802]

Clare Short: We have agreed to provide £1,000,000 for the World Food Programme's Emergency Operation Appeal for the Western Sahel.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Civil Servants

Mr. Laws: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, how many civil servants have been employed by *(a)* her Department and *(b)* each of its agencies and non-departmental bodies in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if she will make a statement. [92367]

Ms Rosie Winterton: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office, (Mr. Alexander) on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 333W.

PRIVY COUNCIL

Annual Report

Norman Lamb: To ask the President of the Council how much producing the Privy Council Department's latest Annual Report cost; how many copies were printed; how many copies of it were sold at its cover price; to whom copies of the report have been provided free of charge; and how many copies were provided free of charge. [90888]

Mr. Robin Cook: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office on Wednesday 22 January, *Official Report*, column 333W.

As in previous years, my Department's latest Annual Report is published in the same document as the Cabinet Office's.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Congestion Charge

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission if he will arrange for a payment point to be set up in the precinct of the House to enable hon. Members and others to pay the Congestion Charge. [93401]

Sir Archy Kirkwood: Over recent months House officials have sought to make arrangements with Transport for London for a Congestion Charge payment point to be installed at a convenient location in the Palace of Westminster, and they will continue to press TFL for early action.

Meanwhile, hon. Members may wish to know that there is a payment machine at the entrance to the Abingdon Green car park, and that other methods of payment include:

Online at www.cclondon.com;

By telephone on 0845 900 1234;

By mobile phone text message, having registered online or by telephone;

At a range of petrol stations and retail outlets;

E-mail

Mr. Tyler: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, what the estimated cost is of the system introduced to block the delivery of e-mails to members containing profanities or other language considered objectionable; what criteria are being used for this editorial system and by whom; how many e-mails have been blocked; and if he will make a statement. [93384]

Sir Archy Kirkwood: PCD is using existing software to block inappropriate e-mails and therefore the new system has minimal cost. In the first week the system blocked 908 inappropriate e-mails sent to parliamentary e-mail addresses. The system filters incoming e-mails from non-parliamentary addresses and will not affect internal communications, outgoing e-mails or e-mails received from remote workers attached to the parliamentary data and video network (PDVN) via Citrix. The sender of any e-mail that is blocked will be notified and invited to contact the intended recipient to arrange for the blocked e-mail to be unblocked. This will prevent any genuine e-mail from being lost.

PCD recognises that on occasions, constituents might use strong language: for example, if they are writing about a constituency issue on which they have firm views, or of which they have had a bad direct experience. Incoming e-mails that contain only a few mild expletives will be unaffected. Only those e-mails which contain a high proportion of the most offensive obscenities are blocked automatically.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Further Education

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the review of Further Education in Northern Ireland will be published; and what plans he has to change the number of Further Education *(a)* colleges and *(b)* campuses in Northern Ireland. [93277]

Jane Kennedy: A consultation paper oh the role of the statutory FE sector, was published on 5 November 2002. The consultation period closed on 10 January 2003 and responses are being considered. Concurrently, evidence is being gathered on the range of issues covered by the review. The publication date for any conclusions or proposals is not yet known. It is too early, therefore, to comment on any particular matter.

Hub Arts Centre

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much Laganside Corporation proposes to offer as its contribution to the overall cost of the Hub Arts Centre. [92930]

Mr. Browne: Plans are not sufficiently developed at this stage to give a precise answer to this question. An economic appraisal is currently being carried out by the Arts Council for Northern Ireland to determine the scale and usage of the proposed building subject to its board approval. Laganside Corporation plans to contribute land upon which to site the Arts Centre and the value of this land will be determined further into the project.

Wind Farms

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans there are to consult *(a)* the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and *(b)* the RSPB on future wind farm applications in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [92274]

Angela Smith: All applications for wind farm developments are considered against prevailing planning policies, taking account of representations received following normal advertising and consultation procedures.

The main policy guidance in this area is contained in "A Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland". This states that all proposals for wind farms will be assessed in respect of their implications for the visual, ecological and historic landscapes; the implications for agriculture; and the safety and amenity of local residents. It also makes it clear that permission will not be granted for wind turbine development in any location where it would have a seriously detrimental impact on the amenity of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty or on any area designated for its conservation, scientific, archaeological or historic interest.

Consultation on wind farm proposals will normally include the Environmental Health Department of the relevant local Council, the Department of the Environment's Environment and Heritage Service, the Department for Regional Development's Roads and Water Services, the Ministry of Defence, and the Civil Aviation Authority.

In addition, under the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999, the Department may require an Environmental Statement where a proposal is located in a 'sensitive area' and/or involves the installation of more than two turbines, or the hub height of any turbine or height of any other structure exceeds 15 metres. This Statement will provide the Department with detailed information about the impact that a proposal may have on the environment.

It is not normal procedure to consult the Northern Ireland Tourist Board on planning applications that, although in scenic areas, do not have a direct impact on tourism, and thus do not fall within the statutory remit of the Board. It is not, therefore, the practice of the Planning Service to consult the NITB automatically in relation to planning applications for wind farms and there are no plans to introduce such a practice.

The English Planning Policy Guidance Note (PPG 22) 'Renewable Energy' states that, apart from the movement of the blades, the development of a wind farm warrants no different approach in terms of ecological considerations from any other development, and evidence suggests that the risk of collision between moving turbine blades and birds is minimal both for migrating birds and for local habitats.

Applications for wind farms will sometimes be made in, or close to, areas designated as of ecological importance, and such applications will be rigorously examined under the policies and guidance contained in Planning Policy Statement 2, 'Planning and Nature Conservation'. However, in terms of any potential direct impact of a wind farm proposal on the integrity of sites designated as of wildlife importance, including those designated for the conservation of birds, the Planning Service's main source of advice and guidance will remain the Department's Environment and Heritage Service and there are no plans to introduce a practice of consulting the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds on wind farm applications.

Landfill Directive

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on what criteria a decision on the implementation of the EC Directive 1999/31 on the landfill of waste will be based. [92278]

Angela Smith: The Landfill Directive contains two separate components—targets for reducing the amount of biodegradable municipal waste (BMW) going to landfill and the introduction of detailed regulatory requirements in relation to the design, operation and aftercare of sites.

The decision on how the BMW targets will be achieved in NI will be based on the outcome of a consultation exercise which has just ended. An analysis of responses is underway to determine the preferred option for NI.

The implementation of the regulatory requirements of the Directive will be based on the detailed prescriptive criteria already contained in the Directive.

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the estimated cost is of implementing EC Directive 1999/31 on the landfill of waste in Northern Ireland; how much of this cost will be borne by district councils; and if he will make a statement. [92275]

Angela Smith: The Landfill Directive contains two separate components—targets for reducing the amount of biodegradable municipal waste (BMW) going to landfill and the introduction of detailed regulatory requirements in relation to the design, operation and aftercare of sites.

A consultation paper, published in October 2002, set out four options for achieving the BMW targets. The paper was accompanied by a partial regulatory impact assessment (RIA) which gave indicative costs relating to four options for dealing with the waste which has to be diverted from landfill. The consultation exercise has just ended and an analysis of responses is underway to determine the preferred option for NI. Actual costs will not be known until a full regulatory impact assessment has been undertaken on the preferred option.

The estimated cost of implementing the regulatory requirements of the Directive will not be known until a RIA has been undertaken. This is planned for later this year.

David Burnside: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the locations are of wind farm applications seeking planning approval in Northern Ireland; and what stage the current applications have reached. [92272]

Angela Smith: Planning Service is currently dealing with six planning applications for wind farms; these applications and their current status are as follows:

(i) Planning application J/2001/0291/F for a wind farm for Bin Mountain, in the district of Strabane, in the townlands of Bolaght, Lettercarn, Binnawooda, Drummahon, Castlecraig, Curraghmacall, Ally, Meenabog and Meenacloy, and Drumquin, Co. Tyrone. This application was presented to Strabane district council on 26 February 2002 with a recommendation to refuse. The reasons for refusal were that the proposal would:

be significantly detrimental to the visual amenity and character of the area;

have an adverse effect on nature conservation interests;

have an adverse effect on Lough Lee from construction activity and contamination.

The application was deferred by the council to allow a site meeting to take place. This meeting took place on 31 May 2002, and as a result the applicant indicated verbally that he will withdraw the application.

(ii) Planning application K/2001/048/F for a wind farm in the district of Omagh, in the townlands of Lough Hill, Castlecraig, Curraghmacall and Drummahon, Co. Tyrone. The access would be from the Meenacloy Road via an existing forestry road through the townlands of Meenacloy, Meenabog, Ally and Sloughan, and Drumquin, Co. Tyrone. Planning Service is awaiting further consultation responses and the proposal is still under consideration by the Department.

(iii) Planning application L/2001/1346/F for a wind farm in the district of Fermanagh, in the townlands of Garrane, Mullaghfad, Corraleek and Corragunt, and Rosslea, Co. Fermanagh. Planning Service is awaiting further consultation responses and the proposal is still under consideration by the Department.

(iv) Planning application L/2001/1514/F for a wind farm in the district of Fermanagh, in the townlands of Callagheen and Garrison, Co. Fermanagh. This proposal was presented to Fermanagh district council on 16 January 2003 with a recommendation to refuse. The reasons for the refusal were that the proposal would:

be detrimental to the visual amenity and character of the proposed area of outstanding natural beauty;

have an adverse impact on nature conservation.

The council deferred the application to allow for an office meeting, the date of which is to be arranged.

(v) Planning application L/2002/1042/F for a wind farm in the district of Fermanagh, in the townlands of Glenarn, Stranahone and Stranadarriff, Tappaghan Mountain and Lack, Co. Fermanagh. Planning Service is awaiting further consultation responses and the proposal is still under consideration by the Department.

(vi) Planning application L/2002/1183/F for a wind farm in the district of Fermanagh, in the townlands of Caricknabrattoge, Carrowmaculla, Eshmeen and Tully, and Lisnaskea, Co. Fermanagh. Planning Service is awaiting further consultation responses and the proposal is still under consideration by the Department.

Planning Policy

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he will consult the public on the creation of a new offence of commencing development without the benefit of planning permission. [92782]

Angela Smith: The Government do not consider that a sufficient case has yet been made for the creation of a new criminal offence in Northern Ireland of commencing development without planning permission. To enable me to recommend the creation of a new offence, I would need to demonstrate:

that the impact of unauthorised development upon the planning system is so serious in Northern Ireland as to warrant a departure from policy elsewhere in the UK;

that there is factual evidence to support this;

that all the options for addressing the problem have been considered and this is the best option; and,

that a regulatory impact assessment of the potential options has been made and taken into account in recommending the best option.

I am not in a position to make such a case without further work, and this needs to be done before a consultation paper can be produced that will generate an informed public debate. I want to think about the issue very carefully, before deciding on the way forward.

Ulster Covenants

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland whether the Ulster Covenant records will be available online by March 2003; and if he will make a statement. [92936]

Angela Smith: The Ulster Covenant records are due to be available online by 28 March 2003.

US-Ireland Alliance

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much money has been provided from Government funds to the US-Ireland Alliance in each of the last three years; whether he has made representations to the US Government about the charitable status of the US-Ireland Alliance; whether a representative of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland sits on the honorary board of the US-Ireland Alliance; and what plans he has to review funding for the US-Ireland Alliance. [92304]

Jane Kennedy: The Department for Employment and Learning has committed financial support to the Mitchell Scholarship Programme, which is managed by the US-Ireland Alliance, for the period 2000–05; contributing £22,619 in the financial year 2000–01, £24,717 in 2001–02 and £23,900 in 2002–03. No representations have been made to the US Government on the charitable status of the US-Ireland Alliance. The Department is unaware of any representative membership of the honorary board from the Unionist community in Northern Ireland. The Department plans to review funding for the Mitchell Scholarship Programme in 2005.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

ADSL

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of UK households and businesses are able to receive ADSL telecommunication services in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* Scotland. [92724]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 23 January 2003]*: Oftel statistics for 1 November 2002, available at www.oftel.gov.uk, show that 63 per cent. of UK households and businesses were able to receive ADSL services at that date. Research undertaken by Analysis for the Government shows that at the end of August 2002, 39 per cent. of households in Scotland were able to receive ADSL services. This rises to 53 per cent. of households in Scotland counting ADSL and cable modem together.

Broadband

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what help will be given to rural communities to enable them to access broadband. [93127]

Mr. Timms: In November 2002, the Government launched the UK Broadband Task Force, which has the aim of stimulating the take-up and roll-out of broadband across the UK, particularly in rural and remote areas. The Task Force's regional broadband coordinators, located in each of the English regions and the Devolved Administrations, will seek to address this issue in their particular regions or nations.

Also at a regional level, the Government have provided the Regional Development Agencies and the Devolved Administrations with the £30 million UK Broadband Fund, which was set up to help develop innovative schemes to extend broadband roll-out. Projects from this Fund are on-going and being monitored to identify examples of best practice that can be shared around the country.

In addition, the Government have pledged £1 billion over 2003–06 towards broadband connectivity in the public sector. It is anticipated that this will lead to broadband networks being extended more widely. The aggregation of public sector demand, which is a main focus of the UK Broadband Task Force, will help accelerate this roll-out and ensure its efficiency.

Competitiveness White Paper

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many commitments made by her Department in the 1998 Competitiveness White Paper have been met; and if she will make a statement. [91652]

Ms Hewitt: Of the 77 commitments made in the 1998 White Paper, "Our Competitive Future—Building the Knowledge Driven Economy" (Cm 4176), 70 have been fully achieved. The delivery dates of six commitments have not yet been reached.

Full details of progress against targets can be found in the White Paper Implementation Plan, published on the DTI website at: www.dti.gov.uk/comp/impl.html

Fossil Fuel

John Thurso: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the existing surplus of fossil fuel levy funds in Scotland is. [91741]

Mr. Wilson: £10.1 million. This is held by the Collector and invested in accordance with the regulations.

Renewable Energy

John Thurso: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what she expects the proceeds to be of the auction of the renewable obligation certificates. [91742]

Mr. Wilson: Future income from auctions of Renewable Obligation Certificates (ROCs) will depend on the output of renewable energy auctioned and the market value of ROCs.

In England and Wales an auction was held on 12 August and income from the electricity, LECs and ROCs will be paid between October 2002 and March 2003. The auction related to output during this period from 486MW capacity of renewable energy.

In Scotland, the proceeds of the first auction of ROCs were just under 4.4 million. The second auction has just been held on 16 January at which the average price for ROCs was £47.46 per ROC. A total of 64,337 ROCs were successfully auctioned.

Empty Homes

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many empty homes her Department *(a)* had five years ago and *(b)* has now, by region; if she will establish an empty homes strategy within her Department; and if she will set a target for reduction in empty homes. [92918]

Ms Hewitt: The answer, in both cases, is none.

Ethical Banking

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what contracts have been concluded as a result of the Government's commitment to support ethical banking. [89940]

Ms Hewitt: The Government believe it is important for consumers to have choice in financial products, including the availability of 'ethical' products. However, it would not be appropriate for the Government to exclusively support the development of one specific group of financial providers. It is for individual consumers to decide the attributes they most value from their financial services and for financial services firms to be transparent about their use of funds and investments.

Export Control Act

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when she expects to introduce secondary legislation under the Export Control Act 2002. [93032]

Nigel Griffiths: It is expected that the Act and the secondary legislation to be made under it will enter into force in the second half of 2003, following the appropriate period of consultation.

Fraud

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the operating cost in each year since 1997 was of her Department's *(a)* ORACLE RAB and *(b)* anti-fraud control system; and if she will make a statement. [88827]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 14 January 2003]:* The information is as follows:

(a) The ORACLE RAB system became operational in December 1998. Operating costs for the system for the financial years in question were as follows:

	£ million
1997–98	0.00
1998–99	1.04
1999–2000	2.12
2000–01	2.53
2001–02	2.62

(b) The Department has anti-fraud control built into all its financial systems, and it is therefore not possible to quantify the overall operating cost.

General Agreement on Trade in Services

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment she has made of the impact of the General Agreement on Trade in Services upon *(a)* teaching and research and *(b)* the knowledge economy. [88944]

Nigel Griffiths: We have just completed a public consultation on the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), and are now analysing the responses received. GATS might only have an impact upon teaching, research and the knowledge economy if we were minded to meet liberalisation requests made to us by our trading partners in relevant areas. The UK negotiates in the WTO as part of the European Community. We have yet to see the Commission's draft proposals on which requests they suggest the EC might meet in the offer to be tabled in the WTO by the end of March 2003. Their proposals will be discussed with the Department for Education and Skills and the Devolved Administrations, as part of our internal assessment process.

Huntingdon Life Sciences

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the estimated cost is of providing *(a)* banking; and *(b)* insurance facilities to Huntingdon life sciences. [91536]

Ms Hewitt: Huntingdon Life Sciences is reimbursing to the DTI the full cost of facilitating insurance and of the facilitation of banking services. DTI has recognised possible contingent liabilities consequent on the provision of insurance services.

Industrial Action

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* trades unions and *(b)* individuals have been (i) charged with offences resulting from industrial action and (ii) convicted of offences resulting from industrial action in each year since 1973. [92763]

Alan Johnson: Although there have been a number of charges and convictions resulting from offences committed in the course of industrial action, the Government do not collect statistics relating to the circumstances in which offences took place.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions she has had with *(a)* representatives of British industry and *(b)* trades union representatives concerning (i) the number of days lost to industrial disputes over the last 12 months and (ii) the state of the manufacturing industry in the UK. [92765]

Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I regularly attend meetings with representatives of British industry and trade unions at which employment relations and manufacturing issues are discussed.

Information Society Initiative Centres

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many ISI centres are open; if she will list their locations; and if she will make a statement. [88809]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 7 January 2003]:* ISI Centres were established as part of the Information Society Initiative, which was re-branded as UK online for business in 2000. The centres themselves were established to provide independent and impartial advice to SMEs about information and communication technology. When the re-organisation of the Small Business Service and the Business Link Organisation took place, it was agreed that the provision of this ICT advice would be delivered through the Business Link network and the equivalents in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Many of the ISI advisers were subsumed into the Business Link organisation. There are therefore no ISI centres still in existence.

Innovation Unit

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many industrial secondees there were in the Department's Innovation Unit in each year since 1998; and if she will make a statement. [91653]

Ms Hewitt: During the period 1998–2002, the Innovation Unit had the following number of part-time industrial 'secondees' engaged within the Unit at some point in the year: 1998—33; 1999—29; 2000—28; 2001—29 and 2002—23. The Innovation Unit has now been restructured and its work incorporated across the new Innovation Group within the DTI.

Job Creation

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many grants for job creation her Department awarded in *(a)* south-east Northumberland and *(b)* Wansbeck in 2002; and what the value was in each case. [93026]

Alan Johnson: The table sets out the numbers, value and associated jobs for grant offered in 2002 under the Regional Selective Assistance (RSA) and Enterprise Grant schemes for Wansbeck and south-east Northumberland (the local authority districts of Blyth Valley, North Tyneside and Wansbeck). From 1 April 2002 responsibility for RSA was transferred to ONE NorthEast, the regional development agency.

Details of individual RSA grants of over £75,000 are published in "Labour Market Trends" after the first payment of grant has been made.

Regional Selective Assistance and Enterprise Grant 2002

	Wansbeck	*South-east Northumberland*
Number of offers	2	20
Grant value	£177,500	£5,327,460
Associated jobs	40	842

Manufacturing Advisory Service

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much her Department will provide from its Innovation Budget to fund the Manufacturing Advisory Service; how this amount will be spent; and if she will make a statement. [93288]

Alan Johnson: The Department will allocate £14.2 million from its Innovation Budget to fund the Manufacturing advisory Service. This money will be allocated to Regional Development Agencies and the Welsh Development Agency to match fund the Regional Centres for Manufacturing Excellence (RCMEs) that we have established in partnership with them to deliver the Manufacturing Advisory Service in their respective regions and in Wales. Our allocated Innovation Budget funding will also cover the cost of a contract that DTI has awarded to Inbis to establish a National Network of Centres of Expertise in Manufacturing and a website for the MAS. All 10 RCMEs and the national website have been launched and are in operation (the site is at *www.dit.gov.uk/manfacturingm/mas).*

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many businesses with *(a)* five employees or fewer and *(b)* over five employees have received assistance from the Manufacturing Advisory Service since it was established; and if she will make a statement. [93289]

Alan Johnson: The Department does not collect data from the MAS which allows us to separate or help given companies of more or fewer than five employees. The thrust of the MAS is however, very much on helping what the EU defines as being Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) employing up to 250 employees. In the period to 30th September 2002 the MAS:

Responded to around 5,000 enquires through its Regional Centres for Manufacturing Excellence

Undertook some 670 diagnostic and advisory visits to companies

Included some 4,700 in regional training and other events

Undertook over 100 in-depth consultancy projects with manufacturers

Completed 21 Case studies that have been published on the MAS website *(at www.dti.gov.iik/manufacturing/mas).*

Initial monitoring data show that achievements within companies included:

Average people productivity improvement of 28 per cent.

Average scrap or wastage reduction of 35 per cent.

Average on time delivery improvement of over 40 per cent.

Average improvement in stock turnover of some 90 per cent.

Average value added to each SME client company is just over £50,000.

Miners Compensation

Andy Burnham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many claims have been lodged to date under the Coal Health Compensation Scheme for *(a)* COPD and *(b)* vibration white finger; and what percentage of those claims have (i) been settled in full and (ii) received an interim payment but not full settlement in the parliamentary constituencies of (A) Leigh, (B) Makerfield, (C) Wigan, (D) St. Helens North, (E) St. Helens South, (F) Warrington North, (G) Warrington South, (H) Bolton North East, (I) Bolton North West, (J) Bolton West, (K) Salford, (L) Worsley, (M) Eccles, (N) Knowsley North and (O) Knowsley South. [93428]

Mr. Wilson: The Department's claim handlers, IRISC, are unable to provide details of how many individuals have received interim payments, as some claimants have received more than one interim payment.

The figures for claims received and percentage of claims settled is:

	COPD		*VWF*	
Constituency	*Claims registered*	*Percentage settled*	*Claims registered*	*Percentage settled*
Leigh	1,781	25	685	30
Makerfield	1,284	20	622	33
Wigan	1,032	22	350	32
St. Helens North	878	21	496	34
St. Helens South	922	23	503	36
Warrington North	85	27	59	25
Warrington South	22	5	17	6
Bolton North East	124	27	30	30
Bolton South East[1]	336	31	86	42
Bolton West	222	36	74	41
Salford	27	22	14	50
Worsley	816	23	255	38
Eccles	143	30	30	47
Knowsley North	25	32	14	36
Knowsley South	193	24	110	29

[1] The figures have been given for Bolton South East. Bolton North West is not a constituency.

A full breakdown of constituency statistics is available on the DTI website: www. dti.gov.uk/coalhealth

National Minimum Wage (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many workers in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire have benefited from the national minimum wage in each year since 1997. [93076]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Paul Marsden, dated 27 January 2003:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question about the number of workers in the Shrewsbury and Atcham parliamentary constituency and in Shropshire who have benefited from the national minimum wage (NMW) in each year since 1997. (93076)

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) calculates estimates of the number of jobs paid less than NMW rates for the United Kingdom and Government Office Regions. These are available on the National Statistics website at:

http://www.statistics.gov.uk/themes/labour_market/pay_and_earnings/measuring_low_pay.asp

Estimates for Parliamentary Constituencies and counties are not available.

Ofgem Board

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many people were interviewed for each position on the Ofgem Board. [86191]

Mr. Wilson: The numbers interviewed for a single non-executive post vary according to the field. Tyupically, three to five candidates are interviewed.

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will set out the process for appointing members of the Ofgem Board. [86192]

Mr. Wilson: The process followed for the chair and for non-executive members is as for other public appointments, with guidance from the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. The process involves advertisement and search; interviews by panels including independent members; and recommendations to Ministers, who take the final decision, from the shortlist presented. Other executive members are appointed on an ex-officio basis.

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much money Ofgem has spent on *(a)* political advisers, *(b)* attendance at party conferences and *(c)* corporate hospitality in each year since it was established. [86193]

Ms Hewitt: These are matters for the Gas and Electricity markets Authority. The Chairman of the Authority will write to the hon. Member, and I have asked for a copy to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what criteria she uses to assess the performance and salary of each member of the Ofgem Board. [86195]

Mr. Wilson: Executive members of the Gas and Electricity Markets Authority do not receive any additional remuneration for their role as members. Their pay and conditions as executives are matters for the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets. Non-executive members are not eligible for performance-related pay, but their performance is assessed as required by the guidelines for public appointments before re-appointment.

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry whether the recruitment consultants used by her Department advised on the appointment of members of the Ofgem Board. [86201]

Mr. Wilson: A number of firms of recruitment consultants were retained by the Department under call-off contacts, one of which assisted with the process of appointment of the combined post of Director General of Gas supply and Director General of Electricity Supply (and Chairman-designate of the Gas and Electricity Markets Authority).

Post Office

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will discuss with the management of the Post Office its *(a)* complaints handling arrangements, *(b)* response times and *(c)* response to complaints concerning the Royal Mail from honourable Members; and if she will make a statement. [93071]

Mr. Timms: These are matters which fall within the day to day responsibility of Royal Mail. If the hon. Member has specific points to raise in relation to these matters, I will be glad to take them up with the Chairman.

Post Office Card Accounts

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many subpostmasters have completed the training necessary for the operation of post office card accounts. [92876]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* This is a matter which falls within the day-to-day responsibility of Post Office Ltd. I have therefore asked the chief executive to reply direct to the hon. Member.

Post Office Raids

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what representations she has received concerning security for local post offices against armed hold-ups in rural sub-post offices; and if she will make a statement; [93008]

(2) what representations she has received from sub-post office masters about recent raids on local post offices in North Yorkshire. [93009]

Mr. Timms: There have been no representations. Security arrangements at all post offices are an operational matter for Post Office Ltd. in conjunction with sub-postmasters.

Post Offices (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what financial support is available to rural post offices in Shrewsbury and Atcham. [93016]

Mr. Timms: Rural post offices across the UK will benefit from the £450 million package of financial support for the rural post office network that I announced on 2 December 2002.

The package is underpinned by the appointment of rural transfer advisers by POL and a £2 million fund to support community post office initiatives.

The rural network also benefits from investment in the network generally. The rural network benefits from the considerable investment in the network's IT, and in new products, including universal banking services. On automation alone, the Government have made the largest ever investment in the Post Office—£480 million--much of it on the rural network.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* urban and *(b)* rural post offices closed in (i) Shrewsbury and Atcham and (ii) Shropshire in each year since 1997. [93074]

Mr. Timms: I am informed by Post Office Ltd. that current and historic data on the post office network is not held on a parliamentary constituency or county basis.

Power Cuts

Mr. Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions she has had with energy regulators to ensure energy companies receive lists of vulnerable people who are a priority for reconnection in the event of a power cut. [93319]

Mr. Wilson: Ministers and officials meet the Energy Regulator regularly and discuss a wide range of issues.

The licence for Distribution Network Operators (DNOs) require them to maintain a register of customers who have special communication needs or depend on electricity for medical reasons, and who require advance notice of planned interruptions to supply. This ensures that the DNOs are aware of vulnerable customers, and can prioritise accordingly. The DNOs are also required to give advice via a code of practice (provision of services for persons who are of pensionable age or disabled or chronically sick).

Press Releases

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many press releases have been issued by her Department in each *(a)* year and *(b)* quarter from 1995–96 to 2002–03; and if she will make a statement. [92471]

Ms Hewitt: The number of DTI press releases issued since April 1995 were as follows:

	Q1	*Q2*	*Q3*	*Q4*	*Total*
1995	Not available	195	224	246	665
1996	265	231	224	245	965
1997	287	142	194	252	875
1998	212	217	194	272	895
1999	232	258	180	239	909
2000	213	200	181	191	785
2001	175	109	160	185	629
2002	184	193	177	217	771

These quarterly statistics include a number of statutory type announcements (merger clearance, power station consents and company winding up petitions) that the Department is required to issue when individual decisions are made.

Regulatory Impact Assessments

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the Regulatory Impact Assessments produced by her Department since 1 May 1997; and if she will make a statement. [88836]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 16 January 2003]*: Regulatory Impact Assessments were first introduced in August 1998. The Cabinet Office, in a bi-annual Command Paper, publishes lists of all Departments' Regulatory Impact Assessments, and their predecessors, Compliance Cost Assessments. Copies of the Command papers are available in the Libraries of the House.

Regulatory Impact Assessments published by my Department since July 2002, for which a Command Paper is yet to be published, are as follows:

The Offshore Installations (Emergency Pollution Control) Regulations 2002

The National Minimum Wage Regulations 1999 (Amendment) Regulations 2002

Wireless Telegraphy (Licences charges) Regulations 2002

The Electronic Commerce (EC Directive) Regulations 2002

The Directors' Remuneration Report Regulations 2002

The Maternity and Parental Leave (Amendment) Regulations 2002

The Paternity and Adoption Leave Regulations 2002

The Statutory Paternity Pay and Statutory Adoption Pay (Weekly Rates) Regulations 2002

The Electricity Safety, Quality and Continuity Regulations 2002

Industrial Development (Financial Assistance) Bill

The Flexible Working (Procedural Requirements) Regulations 2002

The Community designs (Fees) Regulations 2002

Communications Bill

Communications Bill—Media Ownership Rules

Communications Bill—TV and Radio Services

Communications Bill—Spectrum Trading

Communications Bill—Newspaper Mergers

Communications Bill—Setting up OFCOM as a Single Regulator

Enterprise Act

Enterprise Act—Competition Reform

Enterprise Act—Consumer Protection

Enterprise Act—Insolvency Provisions

EC Directive 1999/44/EC on certain aspects of the sale of Consumer Goods and Associated Guarantees

The Electricity (Approval of Pattern or Construction and Installation and Certification) (Amendment) Regulations 2002

The Measuring Instruments (EC Requirements) (Electrical Energy Meters) (Amendment) Regulations 2002

The Gas (Calculation of Thermal Energy (Amendment) Regulations 2002

Working Time (Amendment) Regulations 2002

Working Time (Amendment) Regulations 2002

Rural Transfer Advisers

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what plans she has to review the effectiveness of the Rural Transfer Advisers referred to in the report by the Scottish National Rural Partnership of November 2002, Section B.13 of Implementing Services in Rural Scotland; [93193]

(2) where the six Rural Transfer Advisers referred to in the report by the Scottish National Rural Partnership of November 2002, Section B.13 of Implementing Services in Rural Scotland, are; and what progress they have made in preserving rural post offices. [93199]

Mr. Timms: The employment and effectiveness of Rural Transfer Advisers are operational matters for Post Office Ltd. I have therefore asked the chief executive to reply direct to the hon. Member.

Scottish Post Offices

Mr. Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which post offices in Scotland referred to in the report by the Scottish National Rural Partnership of November 2002, Section B.13 of Implementing Services in Rural Scotland, received funding from the Sub Post Office Start Up Capital Subsidy Funding; how much each has received; and what proportion this represented of the successful applications from throughout the UK. [93194]

Mr. Timms: I understand from Post Office Ltd. who operate the Sub Post Office Start Up Capital Subsidy Fund on behalf of the Department that 13 applications from Scotland had been approved, out of a total of 133 approved for the UK, as at end December 2002. As at that date, the amounts approved and paid in respect of applications from Scotland were as follows:

£

	Approved	*Paid*
Achnasheen	20,000	289
Almondbank	17,750	17,750
Arnisdale	1,810	1,657
Bernisdale	11,131	8,880
Bowden	5,000	2,184
Drinishader	4,550	—
East Mains of Carseburn	315	315
Glenboig	17,500	17,500
Glencoe	10,307	10,307
Laxay	2,213	1,664
Ollaberry	3,411	3,411
Strathkinness	17,963	—
Struan	3,898	3,898

Sickness Absence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many days were lost due to sickness absence in the Department in 2002. [90547]

Ms Hewitt: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on 20 January, Official Report, column 12W.

Sizewell

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) which organisations were responsible for security at Sizewell B at 6.00 am on 13 January 2003; and what their responsibilities are; [93219]

(2) pursuant to her answer to the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Llew Smith) of 20th January 2003, *Official Report,* column 9, what lessons were learnt from the Greenpeace UK incursion to Sizewell B in October 2002; and what actions were taken as a result of those lessons; [93220]

(3) pursuant to her oral statement of 14 January 2003, *Official Report,* column 547, on the Sizewell security breach, when the Government's preliminary conclusion from the inquiry will be acted upon. [93254]

Mr. Wilson: The Office for Civil Nuclear Security (OCNS), the security regulator, is reviewing security following the incursion into Sizewell B nuclear power station on 13 January by demonstrators organised by Greenpeace. Some security enhancements have already been identified and any others arising during the review will be implemented as soon as practicable. An earlier review was conducted following the incursion in October 2002 and action taken.

Responsibility for security at the Sizewell B nuclear power station lies with British Energy, the site licensee. Site management comply with the company's security plan in respect of the site as required by the Nuclear Generating Stations (Security) Regulations 1996 (SI 1996 No. 665). OCNS, on behalf of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, advises site management about security threats, specifies the security standards to be followed, approves the security plan and monitors compliance. OCNS had already required the station to implement several additional measures in response to the heightened terrorist threat.

Space Industry Club

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry whether the British National Space Centre's Best Practice in the Space Industry Club is self financing; how many United Kingdom companies are committed to the Club; and if she will make a statement. [91655]

Ms Hewitt: The Space Industry Best Practice Club is working towards achieving self-sufficiency. Including associates, it now has 60 members.

I welcome the activities of the Club. It was set up under a joint commitment by the British National Space Centre and the United Kingdom Industrial Space Committee, and was launched by my hon. Friend the Minister for Science in 1999. Since then, it has worked hard to improve the competitiveness of British companies working in the space sector and has developed relationships with other sectors and within the European Space Agency.

Transco

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many British Gas employees were qualified to purge and relight domestic premises affected by a major gas supply failure in 1994. [91408]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: I have been asked to reply.

I am advised by the Health and Safety Executive that this information is not available.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many Transco employees are qualified to purge and relight domestic premises affected by a major gas supply failure. [91409]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: I have been asked to reply.

I have been advised by the Health and Safety Executive that on 16 January 2003, Transco's statutory registration by the Council for Registered Gas Installers (CORGI) covered work by 2,707 emergency service operatives holding valid certificates of competence under one of the three recognised assessment schemes: the Approved Code of Practice (ACOP) scheme; the Nationally Accredited Certification Scheme (ACS); and the aligned National Vocational Qualification.

Transco is also able to contract other CORGI-registered installers if additional resource is considered necessary due to the scale of the failure.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what tests her Department has conducted to establish the capacity of Transco to respond to a major gas supply failure without requiring the closure of power stations. [91410]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: I have been asked to reply.

The Department has carried out no such tests. However, I am advised by the Health and Safety Executive that Transco, in its capacity as the national Network Emergency Co-ordinator, has duties to test its arrangements for responding to a major gas supply failure and minimising its effects. Arrangements are also in place for activating a Government/industry Joint Response Team to co-ordinate action should a major supply failure occur, and these arrangements are periodically tested by means of joint exercises.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what capacity Transco *(a)* is required by regulation to maintain and *(b)* has to purge and relight domestic premises affected by a major gas supply failure. [91411]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: I have been asked to reply.

The Gas Safety (Management) Regulations 1996 (GSMR) require Transco as a gas conveyor to prepare a safety case which *(a)* demonstrates how it will minimise the risk of a gas supply emergency; and *(b)* gives particulars of the procedures it has established to restore safely the gas supply to consumers, should a supply failure occur.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what contracts are in place between Transco and other companies to supply suitably qualified engineers to purge and relight domestic premises affected by a major gas supply failure. [91412]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: I have been asked to reply.

This commercial information is not available. The requirement of Schedule 1 of paragraph 21 of the Gas Safety (Management) Regulations 1996 (GSMR) is for Transco as a gas conveyor to describe the particulars of the procedures that it has established to restore safely the gas supply to consumers following an interruption of supply.

Westport Private Equity Limited

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what independent audits have taken place of Westport Private Equity Ltd.; whether these audits are available to Members; and if she will make a statement. [91651]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Westport Private Equity Ltd. has filed audited annual accounts at Companies House on a regular basis. The audited accounts for the year ended 31 December 2001 were filed on 15 May 2002. The accounts are available for public inspection.

TREASURY

Employment Statistics

Mr. Forth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people were employed in *(a)* central Government, *(b)* local and regional government, *(c)* agencies of government, *(d)* the services sector and *(e)* manufacturing in (i) June 1997 and (ii) December 2002. [92673]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from L. Cook to Mr. Eric Forth, dated 27 January 2003:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question about how many people were employed in *(a)* central government, *(b)* local and regional government *(c)* agencies of government, *(d)* services sector and *(e)* manufacturing in (i) June 1997 and (ii) December 2002. (92673)

The latest information is given below. The Office for National Statistics does not use the term 'agencies of government', so, for completeness, total public sector employment is shown:

Workforce Jobs by Sector

thousands

	June 1997	*June 2001*	*September 2002*
Central government	870	874	not available
Local authorities	2,593	2,732	not available
Public non-financial corporations	1,491	1,557	not available
Total public sector	4,954	5,163	not available
Total services (seasonally adjusted)	21,152	22,922	23,158
Manufacturing (seasonally adjusted)	4,493	4,054	3,835

Source:
Economic Trends, June 2002 issue, ONS
Labour Market Trends Table B.18, ONS

Estimates of workforce jobs are based on the results of regular sample surveys of employers which count the number of employee jobs. Full information on public sector employment is published once a year; data for 2002 will be published in an article in Economic Trends in June 2003.

The Cabinet Office publication 'Civil Service Statistics 2001' shows civil servants in main departments and Next Step agencies separately and a separate Cabinet Office publication, 'Public Bodies 2001' gives details of employment in Non-Departmental Public Bodies. Both these publications are available from the House of Commons Library.

Advertising Campaigns

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will place in the Library evaluation reports on advertising campaigns conducted in each of the last five financial years by *(a)* National Savings and *(b)* the Office for National Statistics. [92830]

Ruth Kelly: The information is as follows:

National Savings and Investments

Every advertising campaign run by National Savings and Investments is monitored and evaluated.

Methods of evaluation:

Calls/sales evaluation

All press advertisements are media coded. Calls generated through advertising are monitored, and associated sales are monitored and evaluated in terms of return on investment to ensure the cost effectiveness of campaigns.

Brand awareness and perception of the brand

A continuous tracking study measures awareness of the brand and advertising campaigns and associated changes in the perception of the brand and consideration to save with us.

Independent auditing

All advertising spend is audited quarterly by independent auditors to ensure value for money is achieved in buying press space and TV airtime.

As regards to placing the evaluation reports in the Library, much of the information contained in these reports is commercially sensitive. We operate in a commercial marketplace to ensure value for money is achieved in buying press space and TV airtime. Making public the information on our advertising effectiveness would allow media owners the competitive advantage in negotiations and so jeopardise our ability to secure favourable terms for advertising in the future.

Office for National Statistics

The Office for National Statistics advertising expenditure for 1998–99 and 1999–2000 was £3,000 and used to promote the availability of statistics.

Expenditure on advertising in 2000–01 and 2001–02 was £1,272,000 and £1,770,000 respectively. The spend in these two years covered the campaign to raise awareness of the 2001 Census. It aimed to encourage the population of England and Wales to take part.

Evaluation was by results. These demonstrated that 98 per cent. of households completed and returned their Census form.

A review of the Census publicity campaign has been published on the National Statistics website. The web address for the report is www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/proj_pub.asp.

No advertising expenditure was incurred by ONS in 2002–03.

Affordable Housing

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what advice he has received about the likely impact of the introduction of tax-transparent property investment trusts on the supply of affordable housing in the UK. [92568]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government are aware of the arguments for and against the introduction of tax transparent property investment vehicles, including those submitted by the property industry itself. Proposals on tax are a matter for consideration by the Chancellor in the Budget.

Capital Modernisation Fund

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the amounts of the capital modernisation fund allocated for financial years *(a)* 2003–04, *(b)* 2004–05 and *(c)* 2005–06; and if he will make a statement. [92792]

Ruth Kelly: As shown in table B15 of the pre-Budget report 2002, the allocations to the capital modernisation fund are £1.2 billion, £0.9 billion and £1 billion in 2003–04, 2004–05 and 2005–06 respectively.

Of the £1.2 billion in 2003–04, £0.8 billion has already been allocated to Departments.

Details of all capital modernisation fund projects announced to date are available on the Treasury website (www.hm-treasury.gov.uk).

CAT Standard

Mr. Lazarowicz: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is on the introduction of a common recognisable logo for products which meet the CAT standard. [92566]

Ruth Kelly: The Government decided that setting appropriate standards would be the best way to establish a range of straightforward financial products that are simple, clear and fair.

These standards have had a positive influence in the market on behalf of consumers.

Cigarettes

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 748W, on cigarettes, what assumptions he made regarding affordability and profitability of trips; and if he will make a statement. [92777]

John Healey: The profitability and affordability of trips depend on several factors, including the price of tobacco products, the cost of passage to other EU member states and the level of disposable income available to different shoppers. Variations in cost between routes and products, in shoppers' income and in their understanding of existing unlimited shopping rights, prevent explicit or quantifiable relationships being derived about the likely response—in terms of the number of shoppers, the frequency of their trips and the scale of their purchases—to changes in indicative levels for tobacco. The assumptions used to inform the estimates of the revenue impact of the new indicative levels reflect Customs' best judgment on the basis of the available evidence.

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 748W, on cigarettes, what proportion of travellers who previously purchased at the indicative level were expected to increase their purchases to the new indicative level; and if he will make a statement. [92797]

John Healey: As I stated in my answer of 16 January 2003, HM Customs and Excise's survey data of cross-channel travellers shows that the majority of travellers make no purchases of cigarettes and that, of those who do make purchases, two-thirds purchase below the previous indicative level of 800 cigarettes, and that a further 15 per cent. purchase above. The recent change to the levels can be expected to have little effect on the shopping patterns of these travellers.

The assumptions for the public finance forecasts relate to the impact on behaviour of those travellers purchasing at the previous indicative levels for tobacco. For this group of travellers it was assumed that:

> those who are purchasing with intent to resell illegally in the UK would increase their purchases to the new indicative level; and
>
> the remainder would increase their purchases to an average level of 1,600, equivalent to a three-month supply for an average smoker.

Company Accounts

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he plans to issue a report on the new approach to investigations of company accounts. [92816]

Dawn Primarolo: In consultation with representative bodies, the Inland Revenue has recently extended the framework developed for inquiries into Income Tax Self Assessment returns to cover Corporation Tax Self Assessment inquiries. The framework does not involve any new powers and does not affect taxpayers' rights. Rather, it is designed to enhance co-operation in inquiries between the Inland Revenue and tax practitioners. Details of the framework, as it extends to Corporation Tax, will be published in a 'Working Together' newsletter in February or early March 2003. The Working Together Group is a partnership between the Inland Revenue and those bodies who represent tax practitioners. There are no plans to issue a separate report.

Computer Misuse

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many cases of computer misuse there were in his Department in each of the last five years, broken down by each category of misuse; and how many of those cases resulted in disciplinary action. [93051]

Ruth Kelly: The information is as follows.

HM Treasury

	Cases of potential misuse investigated	*Disciplinary action*
1998	Nil	Nil
1999	1	1
2000	3	3
2001	1	1
2002	1	1

The Treasury has about 1,200 employees all of whom have access to the Departmental office IT system.

Inland Revenue

	Cases of potential misuse investigated	*Disciplinary action*
1998	61	56
1999	239	166
2000	300	233
2001	226	188
2002	211	205

The Inland Revenue has over 70,000 employees the vast majority of whom have access to customer records to carry out their duties.

The Department's records of these cases are not broken down by category of misuse.

HM Customs and Excise

	Cases of potential misuse investigated	*Disciplinary action*
1998	2	0
1999	1	0
2000	11	11
2001	37	18
2002	101	42

The cases of potential misuse break down as follows:

	IT systems	*Database access*	*E-mail*	*Internet*	*Total*
1998	—	1	—	1	2
1999	—	—	1	—	1
2000	6	1	4	—	11
2001	10	5	21	1	37
2002	6	4	83	8	101

HM Customs and Excise employs over 20,000 people. The majority of staff have access to internal e-mail and external Internet services. A limited number of staff have access to databases that contain information regarding the business activities of registered traders. This access is required to enable staff to undertake their duties.

Congestion Charge

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether payments made by public sector employers to employees working within the Central London congestion charging zone by way of reimbursement of congestion charges incurred on travel to their place of work will be treated as taxable emoluments, subject to *(a)* tax and NI payments by the recipient employee and *(b)* employers' NI contributions. [92569]

Dawn Primarolo: Yes, in the same way as other payments made by employers to employees for travel costs to their normal place of work.

Corporate Profitability

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the levels of UK corporate profitability were in each year since 1996. [92819]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Howard Flight, dated 27 January 2003:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question on levels of UK corporate profitability in each year since 1996.

Information on profits and rates of return for private sector non-financial companies is available in the "Profitability of UK Companies" First Release which is published by the Office for National Statistics and is available from the House of Commons Library. It is also available from the National Statistics website: www.statistics.gov.uk.

Tables 1 to 7 give data back to 1989 or earlier. The latest currently available data cover the 3rd quarter of 2002. Data for the whole of 2002 will be published on 2nd April 2003.

The ONS does not produce estimates of rates of return for financial companies, but estimates of profits for this period are in table A3 of "United Kingdom National Accounts" which is also available from the National Statistics website.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the total excess working hours worked by staff in his Department in each year from 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [93448]

Ruth Kelly: Information before January 1999 is not available. Information from January 1999 is available in the Library of the House and was referred to in the answer I gave on 25 February 2002 to the hon. member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) *Official Report*, columns 1045–46W.

ECOFIN

Mr. Hood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the outcome was of the ECOFIN Council held on 21 January; what the Government's stance was on the issues discussed, including its voting record; and if he will make a statement. [93156]

Mr. Gordon Brown: I attended the ECOFIN meeting on 21 January.

The Presidency and the Commission introduced their work programmes for ECOFIN. The principal objective would be to maintain a stable macroeconomic environment and boost confidence and growth through a renewed commitment to structural reforms.

The council reached political agreement on the tax package, based on proposals outlined by the presidency at the 3 December 2002 ECOFIN meeting, and discussed at the 11 December 2002 ECOFIN meeting.

The council confirmed the agreement at the Feira European Council that the objective of the EU should be exchange of information on as wide a basis as possible. And it confirmed the rejection at Feira of an EU-wide withholding tax, which would have had severe implications for the London bond market.

Political agreement was reached that 12 member states will move to automatic exchange of information on the savings income of EU residents. Austria, Belgium and Luxembourg will move to automatic exchange of information by the end of the first full fiscal year from the date when the council agrees by unanimity that the third countries named at Feira have committed to the OECD standard of exchange of information on request.

Austria, Belgium and Luxembourg will operate a transitional withholding tax of 15 per cent. from 1 January 2004, 20 per cent. from 1 January 2007, and 35 per cent. from 1 January 2010. The council agreed that the EC should enter into an agreement with Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Andorra and San Marino to adopt the same rates of withholding and maintain the 35 per cent. after adoption of exchange of information to the OECD standard.

The council assessed that in respect of dependent and associated territories the necessary reassurances had been received that the same measures would be applied as in EU member states, and that in respect of the United States the necessary reassurances had been received that equivalent measures would be applied.

The council committed itself to formal adoption of the tax package before the European Council in March 2003. This is dependent upon receiving firm offers from Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Andorra, San Marino and Monaco to enter into agreements as outlined, and on the council assessing the work of the Code of Conduct Group on the rollback of the identified harmful business tax measures of member states and of dependent and associated territories.

In furtherance of the ultimate objective of exchange of information on as wide a basis as possible, the council asked the commission to continue negotiations with Switzerland and the other third countries for the exchange of information and to report back to the council before 2007, and to enter into discussions with other important financial centres.

On the Stability and Growth Pact, the council adopted Opinions on the Stability and Convergence programmes of Sweden, Finland, Greece, Italy, Germany and France. The council adopted a Recommendation on an Excessive Deficit Procedure for Germany. It also adopted a Recommendation on an Early Warning for France, with France abstaining.

In view of the lengthy discussion on the tax package, the presidency decided to postpone discussion of energy taxation and VAT administrative co-operation to the 18 February ECOFIN.

No formal votes were taken at this meeting.

Employment Distribution

Mr. Cousins: To ask Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer what the distribution of employment in finance and insurance was in each Government office region and nation of the United Kingdom in *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 2000 and *(c)* the most recent available period. [89905]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Jim Cousins, dated 27 January 2003:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question (158) about the distribution of employment in finance and insurance in each Government Office Region and nation of the United Kingdom in *(a)* 1996, *(b)*2000 and *(c)* the most recent available period. (89905).

The attached table shows the number of employee jobs in financial intermediation by Government Office Region for 1996, 2000 and 2002. The latest earlier years also relate to September. figures are for September 2002, and, for improved comparability, the figures for earlier years also relate to September.

Equitable Life

Mr. John Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer who has assumed the *(a)* responsibilities and *(b)* potential liabilities of the regulatory bodies previously charged with regulating the affairs of the Equitable Life Assurance Society. [93256]

Ruth Kelly: The Treasury was responsible for the prudential supervision of insurers between 5 January 1998 (prior to this responsibility rested with the Department of Trade and Industry) and 30 November 2001. Between 5 January 1998 and 31 December 1998 the Treasury undertook this task directly. From 1 January 1999 the Treasury contracted out most of its functions relating to prudential insurance supervision to the FSA. The FSA became responsible for prudential insurance supervision in its own right from midnight on 30 November 2001 when the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (FSMA) came into force.

Under the provisions of Part II of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994, the Treasury remains responsible for the actions carried out by the FSA on behalf of the Treasury during the period of contracting out. Under the Transfer of Functions (Insurance) Order 1997 (S11997/2781) the Treasury became responsible for all the liabilities of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in connection with the functions which were transferred to the Treasury.

Under the Financial Services Act 1986, conduct of business regulation was the responsibility of the Personal Investment Authority (PIA), a self-regulating organisation recognised by the FSA. Between 1 June 1998 and 30 November 2001, FSA staff carried out work on behalf of the PIA Board, under contract, in preparation for the implementation of FSMA when conduct of business regulation also became the responsibility of the FSA.

Under transitional provisions made under FSMA, the FSA assumed the liabilities of the PIA and other Self Regulatory Organisations when the Act came into force.

Euro

Mr. Allen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how he proposes, within the assessment of the five economic tests, to verify whether present and planned levels of public expenditure could be maintained if the UK were to join the Euro. [93117]

Ruth Kelly: A comprehensive and rigorous assessment of the Five Economic Tests will be completed within two years of the start of this Parliament.

The Government remains fully committed to its plans for public spending. These plans provide a much needed boost to public investment in key public services including schools, hospitals and transport, redressing years of under-investment, while maintaining economic stability.

Mr. Allen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment was made by HM Treasury of the economic consequences of joining the euro in the first wave; and if he will publish it. [93118]

Ruth Kelly: "UK Membership of the Single Currency: An Assessment of the Five Economic Tests" was published by HM Treasury in October 1997. A copy can be found in the Library, and is also available on the HM Treasury website.

Euro Pamphlets

Mr. Flook: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many businesses were sent the pamphlets, "Do you trade with business or individuals from the euro area?" and "Do you know whether the euro's introduction in the euro area could affect your cashflow and profits"; how many have responded to date; and what the cost was of this exercise. [91618]

Llew Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to the statement by the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, of 15 January, *Official Report* 307–88WH, what the cost was of the printing and distribution of the factsheets and business case studies on the euro. [92319]

Ruth Kelly: Details of HM Treasury expenditure on business euro preparations were included in the 'Sixth Report on Euro Preparations', published on 18 July 2002. Copies of the report were deposited in the Library of the House.

In Autumn 2002, over 1.4 million businesses were sent a mailer containing the 'Dealing with the euro' leaflet. 11,600 requests for additional information on how to deal with the euro as a foreign currency have been received to date and 34,600 copies of material relating to the euro as a foreign currency sent to UK businesses. The cost of this mailing was met from within departmental resources.

Exchange Rates

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the impact of exchange rates on small businesses in *(a)* 1992, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 2002. [93010]

John Healey: The effects of exchange rate changes are difficult to isolate with any confidence, but the Government recognise the difficulties that the recent weakness of the euro has caused for exporters, including many small businesses.

The Government seek a stable and competitive pound over the medium-term, and the best contribution it can make is to deliver low, stable inflation and sound public finances. Previous experience shows that any short-term attempt to manipulate the exchange rate can lead to wider economic instability, with damaging consequences for small businesses.

Financial Advisers

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will relax the requirement on small independent financial advisers with a good claims record to obtain professional indemnity insurance; and if he will make a statement. [93354]

Ruth Kelly: This is a matter for the Financial Services Authority (the FSA). The requirement for independent financial adviser firms to have professional indemnity insurance is contained in their rules.

The FSA is aware of the difficulties facing such firms and will be publishing a consultation document shortly.

Fraud and Theft

Mr. John Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the cost of theft and fraud to *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies in 2002. [89897]

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much money has been lost by his Department and its agencies and non-departmental public bodies through *(a)* fraud and *(b)* theft for each year since 1996–97. [92437]

Ruth Kelly: I refer the hon. Members to my answer of 21 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 651W. On the basis set out there, the Treasury's losses to theft and fraud in 2001–02 were £1,000.

Fuel Poverty

Estelle Morris: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effect of fuel duty on low-income families in rural areas. [92354]

John Healey: We have made no specific assessment of the effects of fuel duty on low-income families in rural areas. As with all families, they will have benefited from the effective duty reduction on ultra low sulphur petrol and diesel in Budget 2001, and the duty freeze on other oils in that Budget, and on [illegible] oils in Budget 2002.

Health and Safety Strategy

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what information he has collated on the application to his Department and its agencies of the checklist, circulated by letter by Sir Richard Mottram, referred to under Action Point 12 of the Revitalising Health and Safety Strategy Statement; and if he will make a statement; [89522]

(2) which senior officials within his Department and its agencies take responsibility for health and safety at board or equivalent level; and where their names are publicised; [89521]

(3) whether his Department and its agencies have met the commitment arising from Action Point 13 of the June 2000 strategy statement on Revitalising Health and Safety to summarise health and safety performance and plans in Annual Reports from the year 2000–01 onwards. [89520]

Ruth Kelly: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to her by the Minister of State, Department of Work and Pensions on 20 January, *Official Report*, columns 85–86W.

In addition, my Department and agencies are fully committed to supporting the aims of the "Revitalising Strategy" and to continuous improvement in all areas within the checklist circulated by Sir Richard Mottram and the good practice guide issued by the High Level Forum.

The Treasury and Office of Government Commerce (OGC) summarise health and safety performance within their departmental Annual Reports. The Debt Management Office and the Royal Mint plan to do so in their departmental reports for 2002–03.

At departmental board level within the Treasury and its agencies the following board members have been given responsibility for health and safety:

HM Treasury—Managing Director Corporate Services and Development;

Office of Government Commerce—Chief Executive;

The Royal Mint—Director of Human Resources and Corporate Affairs;

The Debt Management Office—Chief Executive.

These details are published in our Health and Safety Policy Statements and made available on our intranet sites.

HM Treasury

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what his estimate is of total public spending on HM Treasury in *(a)* current and *(b)* capital terms in each year from 1990–91 to 2003–04 (planned), in 2001–02 prices; and if he will make a statement; [93454]

(2) what his estimate is of total staff numbers within HM Treasury for each year from 1990–91 to 2004–05 (planned); and if he will make a statement. [93453]

Ruth Kelly: I refer the hon. Member to expenditure figures in the Treasury's annual reports (of which the most recent is Cm 5425). GDP deflators are available in the 'Economic Data and Tools' section of the Treasury website: www.hm-treasury.gov.uk Details on staff numbers are published in "Civil Service Statistics", copies of which are available in the House of Commons Library.

HM Treasury Staff

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many HM Treasury staff are based at Great George Street in London; and what floor space of office accommodation they are occupying. [92221]

Ruth Kelly: The Treasury moved to 1 Horse Guards Road in July 2002, where all staff are now based. The Department occupies 22,223 square metres of net usable area. Details on staff numbers are published in Civil Service Statistics copies of which are available in the House of Commons Library.

Immigration

Mr. Soames: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the net non EU foreign immigration to the UK was, including the dependants of asylum seekers, in each year from 1992 to 2001 *(a)* before the recent adjustments to take account of the census results and *(b)* after these adjustments had been made. [93370]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from L. Cook to Mr. N. Soames, dated 27 January 2003:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your question on the net immigration of non-EU nationals to the UK from 1992 to 2001. (93370)

The information requested is provided in the attached table which shows the net migration estimates for non-EU nationals for 1992 to 2001. Two different estimates are shown in the table: (i) interim revised net migration estimates for non-EU nationals for 1992 to 2001 that take preliminary account of the 2001 Census results, and (ii) the original series of net migration estimates for non-EU nationals compiled prior to the results of the 2001 Census becoming available; it should be noted that the latter series has now been withdrawn.

The estimates shown in the table take account of dependants of asylum seekers. The Office for National Statistics are working closely with the Home Office to ensure that the best use is made of the recently available detailed Home Office information on dependants of asylum seekers in preparation of the revised international migration series which will be published in late Spring 2003. These revised estimates will be based upon more detailed information from the 2001 Census and further research work and will supercede the interim series included in the attached table.

Net migration to the UK of non-EU[1] nationals

Thousands

Year	*Interim revised series[2]*	*Original series[3]*
1992	+31.2	+ 68.9
1993	+ 36.5	+ 72.5
1994	+ 58.7	+ 95.7
1995	+ 77.0	+ 116.7
1996	+ 69.0	+ 105.4
1997	+ 70.4	+ 110.8
1998	+ 105.6	+ 150.6
1999	+ 132.3	+ 182.5
2000	+ 165.0	+ 222.3
2001	+ 178.1	

[1] Figures for all years show EU as it was constituted on 1 January 1995.

[2] These estimates represent interim revised migration estimates, adjusted in light of first results of the 2001 Census. Further revisions to the series, in the light of more detailed 2001 Census data, will be made available in late Spring 2003. This table includes adjustments for asylum seekers, and for persons admitted as short-term visitors who are subsequently granted an extension of stay for other reasons—for example, as students or on the basis of marriage.

[3] These are the original published estimates for 1992–2000 compiled prior to the results of the 2001 Census being available. This series has now been withdrawn and superceded by the interim revised estimates released on 28 November 2002 and shown in the first column.

Income Tax Evasion

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many taxpayers have been prosecuted for fraudulently evading income tax in each year since 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [90980]

Dawn Primarolo: A new offence of fraudulently evading Income Tax, which can be tried in a magistrate's court or in a crown court, was introduced in Finance Act 2000 in response to the recommendations of Lord Grabiner's report "The Informal Economy (March 2000). The legislation applies to offences committed from 1 January 2001. No prosecutions have as yet been completed using the new legislation.

Industrial Action

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many days were lost to industrial action in the UK in each month since January 1991 up to the most recent date for which information is available. [92766]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from L. Cook to Mr. Howard Flight, dated 27 January 2003:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question about the days lost to industrial action in the UK in each month since January 1991 up to the most recent date. (92766)

The table below shows the number of working days lost in each month from January 1991 to November 2002.

Number of Working Days lost in the United Kingdom 1991–2002 (000s)

	1991	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*
Jan	44	56	49	2	24	51
Feb	36	24	71	4	18	36
Mar	55	35	74	8	28	15
Apr	105	24	154	15	34	13
May	105	28	30	33	51	8
Jun	53	33	15	70	16	241
Jul	57	37	50	32	32	149
Aug	64	54	19	39	19	442
Sep	78	70	8	20	25	122
Oct	84	47	4	14	31	39
Nov	46	65	175	17	77	162
Dec	34	53	1	23	60	25
Total	761	528	649	278	415	1303

	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
Jan	25	16	9	11	52	92
Feb	14	19	27	6	36	24
Mar	36	33	35	18	48	80
Apr	48	14	4	11	16	15
May	36	7	50	14	93	81
Jun	13	70	16	7	12	57
Jul	11	59	8	36	24	521
Aug	6	24	10	115	18	13
Sep	1	6	22	93	24	9
Oct	19	7	19	14	39	42
Nov	14	18	22	115	62	371
Dec	12	11	20	59	102	
Total	235	282	242	499	525	

Manufacturing Industry

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the state of manufacturing industry in the UK. [92767]

John Healey: The global economic slowdown of 2001 was the principal cause of recent difficulties faced by UK manufacturers. G7 industrial output grew by 4.7 per cent. in 2000. During 2001 it contracted by 3.6 per cent. This was the sharpest slowdown in G7 industrial activity since 1975. But manufacturing output showed signs of stabilising in the course of 2002—in Q3 it rose by over 1 per cent., ending six consecutive quarters of decline.

The stable macroeconomic framework is creating the right underlying conditions to enable manufacturing to invest, grow and prosper. The UK stands ready to benefit from any sustained recovery in the sector due to strong economic fundamentals and the Government's pro-active enterprise agenda.

In particular, corporation tax is now lower than in any major industrialised country. Cuts in capital gains tax mean the UK's CGT regime will be more favourable than the US's from April. R&D tax credits for large companies will provide an important boost to UK manufacturing and RDAs have been created to drive growth in every English region.

New Deal

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the expenditure on *(a)* New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds, *(b)* New Deal for over-25s, *(c)* New Deal for over-50s, *(d)* New Deal for lone parents, *(e)* New Deal for disabled people, *(f)* New Deal for partners of unemployed people, *(g)* New Deal for schools, childcare and University for Industry was in each year from 1997–98 to 2001–02. [93385]

Ruth Kelly: Information on the allocation of the windfall tax can be found in the pre-Budget report published in November 2002, which is available in the Library.

Expenditure within Departmental Expenditure Limit can be found in the departmental annual reports.

Information on the expenditure of *(a)* through *(f)* can be found in Appendix 3 of the Department for Work and Pensions departmental report published in May 2002, which is available in the Library.

Information on the expenditure for New Deal for schools, childcare and University for Industry can be found in Table 4.2 of the Department for Education and Skills 2002 departmental report, which is available in the Library.

Other sources of child care expenditure include local authorities and devolved Governments.

Office of Government Commerce

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how effective the Office of Government Commerce has been at reducing costs for HM Government. [92982]

Mr. Boateng: OGC has a target of delivering £1 billion of savings in Government procurement in the three years 2000–01 to 2002–03. After the first two years of this target period, Departments have reported total gains of £815 million.

Partnerships UK

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 16 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 169W, on Partnerships UK, what percentage of Partnerships UK is owned by HM Treasury. [93027]

Mr. Boateng: HM Treasury and the Scottish Ministers hold 44.56 per cent. and 4.44 per cent. respectively of Partnerships UK's share capital. Further details of the company's structure and business activities can be found on its website, www.partnershipsuk.org.uk, and in the company's Public Information Memorandum and Annual Report for the year 2002 which are available from the House Library.

Peter Gershon

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the speeches made by Peter Gershon in his capacity as Chief Executive of the Office of Government Commerce since his appointment; and if he will place copies of the speeches in the Library. [93196]

Mr. Boateng: The information is contained in the table and copies of the speeches made by Peter Gershon, Chief Executive of the Office of Government Commerce are available on the OGC Website www.ogc.qov.uk

Date	*Event*
4 April 2000	Public Sector EXPO 2000
20 February 2001	Gateway Process Launch Transcript
¾ April 2001	Public Sector EXPO 2001
22 May 2001	Greening Government Procurement Conference
12 June 2001	PFI Conference
7 September 2001	Global Revolution II Conference
20 November 2001	GSSA Procurement event II—"Are we getting IT right now?"
17/18 April 2002	Public Sector EXPO 2002
13 May 2002	OGC/NAO Joint Seminar on Contract Management—"Managing long term contractual relationships"
28 May 2002	Public Private Finance Congress—"The procurement policy—A government update"
12 June 2002	Government Computing Conference— "Commercial reform in public services"
28 June 2002	Worldwide Workplace Web (W4) Conference—"OGC: Catalysing value for money in public procurement"
23 September 2002	Successful Delivery Skills Launch
16 October 2002	OGC/HMT/PUK Conference on PPP/PFI—"Improving client capability"
16 October 2002	Defence Estates Conference for Industry

Date	*Event*
30 October 2002	Senior IT Forum Product Launch
30 October 2002	Property and Construction Forum 2002—"Achieving value for money in property and construction projects"
6 November 2002	SOPO Conference—"Defining the future of procurement"

Public Services

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of HM Treasury spending on improving the cost-effectiveness and quality of public services in each year from 1997; and if he will make a statement. [93440]

Mr. Boateng: Since 1999–2000 figures for expenditure in support of the Treasury's better public services objective have been published in schedule 5 of its annual resource accounts (Cm 5062 and HC 573). The 2001–02 accounts will be published shortly. No figures are available for earlier years.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress he has made in delivering on his public service agreement target to improve the productivity of public services year by year; and if he will make a statement. [93452]

Mr. Boateng: Progress against this target is set out on page 6 of the HM Treasury Autumn Performance Report, Cm 5665.

Reserve Forces

Mr. Heald: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether the level of NI employee contribution paid on behalf of individuals in their main job is protected during periods of service as an armed forces reservist; and if he will make a statement. [93341]

Dawn Primarolo: Armed forces reservists receive earnings from the Ministry of Defence for periods of service. These earnings are liable to national insurance contributions.

Reservists' Pensions

Mr. Heald: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) whether periods of service as an armed forces reservist count as periods of continued employment in a taxpayer's main job for the purposes of the favourable tax treatment given to the share option scheme called Enterprise Management Incentive; and if he will make a statement; [93345]

(2) whether favourable tax treatment available to taxpayers in continued employment is lost to them during periods of service as an armed forces reservist; and if he will make a statement. [93344]

Dawn Primarolo: The Enterprise Management Incentive rules dealing with employees' working time do not cater specifically for periods of service by armed forces reservists. Normally this will not cause difficulty in determining an employee's eligibility to the tax advantages available under Enterprise Management Incentives. However, I will be asking my officials to consider whether any issues may arise.

I am not aware of other instances where favourable tax treatment will in practice be lost, but if the hon. Gentleman has any particular case in mind perhaps he will write to me.

Royal Mint

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 16 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 596W, on the Royal Mint, for what reasons the review is commercially confidential; and if he will make a statement. [92825]

Ruth Kelly: The review is considered commercially confidential because if made public the review might unfairly prejudice the commercial position of the Royal Mint, to the detriment of the taxpayer.

Skye Bridge Toll

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the Government will return to the Scottish Executive the revenue derived following the Scottish Executive's decision to pay the VAT on the Skye Bridge toll. [90899]

John Healey: Any agreements entered into by the Scottish Executive in respect of the Skye Bridge following the imposition of VAT on tolls will be funded from within the existing 2002 Spending Review settlement.

Stock Exchange

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the growth rate of the London Stock Exchange in comparison to the other major stock exchanges of the world in the last three years. [92984]

Mr. Boateng: Between 1999 and 2002 the number of UK equity transactions conducted on the London Stock Exchange's main market rose by 78 per cent. Other major stock exchanges have also experienced a rise in transactions.

Student Loans

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the annual cost is to the Inland Revenue of the collection of student loan repayments; and if he will make a statement. [91724]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue operates the collection of student loans scheme on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills. All costs are met by DfES.

Tax Evasion (Construction Industry)

Phil Sawford: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what action he is taking to combat tax evasion in the construction industry. [93386]

Dawn Primarolo: Since April 2002, the Inland Revenue has increased the number of specialist units which deal with industry compliance with the construction industry scheme from nine to 12.

In addition, there are around 70 Employer Compliance Units that review businesses' compliance with their PAYE obligations and carry out employment status reviews. Each unit has staff specialising in status and construction industry work. These units are:

participating in a national project which is examining all contracts between a sample of contractors and sub-contractors to ensure proper compliance with tax obligations;

ensuring that a minimum percentage of resource is deployed on construction industry reviews (6 per cent.), including those identified by the national project; and

ensuring that a minimum percentage of reviews relate to cases with a significant construction industry element (6.5 per cent.).

A consultation paper, "The Inland Revenue and the Construction Industry: Working Together for a New Scheme", was published alongside the Pre-Budget Report. The paper outlines proposals for a replacement scheme that would reduce the burden of the scheme on the industry while providing the Revenue's compliance officers with new systems to enable them to tackle non-compliance quickly and effectively.

Treasury Building (PFI Deal)

Mr. Bacon: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the total professional fees were for the Treasury Building PFI deal, broken down by *(a)* payer and *(b)* payee. [93404]

Ruth Kelly: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 27 June 2002, *Official Report,* columns 1051–52W.

Treasury Expenditure (Parliamentary Bodies)

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of his Department's spending on the *(a)* Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, *(b)* British American Parliamentary Group, *(c)* Inter-Parliamentary Group and *(d)* British-Irish Parliamentary Body in each year from 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [93451]

Mr. Boateng: The annual amounts of grant-in-aid paid to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), the British American Parliamentary Group (BAPG), the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the British-Irish Parliamentary Body are set out in the table.

£

	CPA	*BAPG*	*IPU*	*BMP*
1997–98	88,750	70,170	843,899	149,601
1998–99	888,750	82,124	785,000	149,000
1999–2000	868,300	73,350	785,000	201,700
2000–01	2,498,683	84,600	853,000	218,000
2001–02	93,750	85,420	0	95,000
2002–03[1]	362,710	96,250	294,000	0

[1] Forecast

Vehicle Excise Duty

Mr. Syms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to change the exemption date for vehicle excise duty on classic cars to vehicles made before 1 January 1973. [92805]

John Healey: The Chancellor announced in his 1998 Budget speech that rolling forward exemption for vehicles over 25-years-old would stop so that only vehicles manufactured before 1 January 1973 remained eligible for the exemption. Continuing the rolling forward exemption was difficult to justify on environmental grounds. Any changes to taxation policy will be announced by the Chancellor in the context of his Budget judgment.

Working Families Tax Credit

Jeff Ennis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the average length of time is which it takes for a new applicant to receive Working Families Tax Credit; and how much back-dating of Working Families Tax Credit is allowable. [92892]

Dawn Primarolo: Specific figures are not available giving average UK processing times for new Working Families Tax Credit applications. But the Inland Revenue aims to decide 91 per cent. of all Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) applications within 30 days of receiving them, and for the period from 1 April 2002 to 31 December 2002, the Inland Revenue assessed 97 per cent. of all WFTC applications within 30 days of receipt.

Entitlement to Working Families Tax Credit is generally based on a family's circumstances at the date they make their application. Where a late application is made, there are prescribed circumstances in which back-dating of up to a maximum of three months may be allowed.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Affordable Housing

Helen Southworth: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will take action to ensure that housing designated as affordable housing when planning consent is given is *(a)* affordable in relation to the market in the planning authority area rather than solely in relation to the specific site land values and *(b)* retained within the affordable housing sector for a reasonable period. [93005]

Mr. McNulty: Circular 06/98 "Planning and Affordable Housing" advises that local planning authorities should define in their local plans what they regard as affordable housing, based on up-to-date surveys and other data of local need. The circular explains that definitions should be framed to endure for the life of the plan, for instance, through references to the level of local incomes and their relationship to house prices or rents, rather than to a particular price or rent.

Circular 06/98 also provides guidance on the securing and controlling of the occupancy of such housing by, for example, the involvement of a registered social landlord or through the use of appropriate planning conditions or obligations. The Government are looking at circular 06/98 and whether it needs to be revised. An announcement will be made shortly.

Annual Report

Norman Lamb: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how much producing his Department's latest annual report cost; how many copies were printed; how many copies of it were sold at its cover price; to whom copies of the report have been provided free of charge; and how many copies were provided free of charge. [90876]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister was created as a separate Department on 29 May 2002 and will publish its first annual report in the spring of 2003. Material which is relevant to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's responsibilities can be found in the annual reports of the former Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions and the Cabinet Office.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he expects to publish his Office's annual report for 2002–03. [91619]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister expects to publish its first Annual Report in April 2003.

Contaminated Land

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what steps his Office is taking to promote *(a)* the decontamination of contaminated land and *(b)* its development in preference to development of green field sites; and if he will make a statement. [91623]

Mr. McNulty: As my right hon Friend the Deputy Prime Minister said in his statement on sustainable communities, housing and planning on 18 July 2002, *Official Report* columns 438–442. the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister needs to make better use of land. The Government target that 60 per cent. of additional homes should be on brown-field land is being met but the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister needs to keep up the pressure.

English Partnerships have been appointed as the Government's expert advisors on brown-field land. They are currently working with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to draw up a National Brown-field Strategy to be presented to the Deputy Prime Minister for approval in Spring 2003.

In addition, The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister consulted in February 2002 on new technical planning advice on the development on land affected by contamination. This emphasised the positive role of planning in bringing about the remediation of contaminated land. It recognised particularly that much of the contaminated land identified under Part IIA of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 will be subject to voluntary remediation through the planning system as part of the process of redevelopment. This revision of the contaminated land aspects of Planning policy guidance note 23 will be incorporated later this year in a new Planning policy statement, accompanied by a technical annexes on development on land affected by contamination.

Departmental Credit Cards

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many credit cards have been issued for official use by the Department since May 2002; how many departmental credit cards are in use; what has been the itemised cost for each credit card; and how many departmental credit cards are in use that were issued prior to May 2002. [91629]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister uses the Government Procurement Card and Corporate Card; there is no cost to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is unable to separate figures from Department for Transport without incurring disproportionate cost.

There were 84 cards issued since May 2002, which brings the total number in use at present to 214. Prior to May 2002 there were 125 cards in use.

External Consultants

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the total cost to his Department was of the use of external consultants in 2002. [90511]

Mr. Leslie: The total cost to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on external consultants since it was established on 29 May 2002 is £24,126,108.

Golden Jubilee Medals

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what reasons underlie the delay in awarding firefighters with their Golden Jubilee medals; and if he will make a statement. [92841]

Mr. Raynsford: There is no delay. The schedule agreed with the Royal Mint when the contract was extended to include emergency services, provided for the issue to be completed by June 2003.

Headstones

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) what mechanism exists for compensating relatives for the cost of raising headstones that have been laid flat for safety reasons by local authorities; [91879]

(2) what measures he advises local authorities to take to advise relatives of the instability of headstones in cemeteries; [91882]

(3) how many *(a)* deaths and *(b)* injuries have been attributed to unsafe headstones in cemeteries in each year since 1990; [91878]

(4) if he will estimate the cost to local authorities in 2002–03 of the safety testing of headstones; [91880]

(5) what guidance is issued to local authorities on funding the safety of headstones in cemeteries. [91881]

Hilary Benn: I have been asked to reply.

Information on the total number of deaths and injuries is not recorded centrally, but I understand that, sadly, there have been at least one death and 14 injuries attributed to unstable memorials in recent years.

Advice for all burial authorities on the issues arising from unsafe memorials is currently being considered by the Home Office-chaired Burial and Cemeteries Advisory Group. The aim is to supplement and expand on existing advice issued by the Health and Safety Executive and the relevant professional organisations. I expect to issue that advice later this year.

If a local authority has acted in a way which gives ground for compensation, or is found by a court to have so acted, it will be a matter for the authority to decide whether or how to meet any proper claim.

Information is not available on the extent of safety testing by local authorities and an estimate on such costs cannot therefore be made.

House Condition Survey

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will list for each region from the latest available English house condition survey the figures for *(a)* construction date, *(b)* unfitness, *(c)* worst and best condition, *(d)* unfit vacants, *(e)* unfitness, broken down by dwelling type, *(f)* reason for vacancy and *(g)* variation of general comprehensive and urgent repair costs, broken down by type of tenure. [92068]

Mr. McNulty: The 1996 English House Condition Survey (EHCS) regional report provides the currently available EHCS results which can be produced at the regional level. A copy of the report is available in the Library of the House. Copies of the supporting data tables are available on the website at http://www.odpm.gov.uk.

Housing (Rural Areas)

Andrew George: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) how many households were classified as homeless and in priority need of housing in *(a)* England and *(b)* local authorities defined as rural, by region, in each year since 1978; [90828]

(2) how many people were on the waiting list for social housing in *(a)* England and *(b)* local authorities defined as rural, by region, in each year since 1978. [90829]

Mr. McNulty: A table presenting available information reported by local authorities in England since 1985–86 in respect of homeless households in priority need accepted annually, and total households on their housing register at 1 April deemed to be "in need", has been placed in the Library of House. Figures are presented for each region, distinguishing activity in authorities categorised as either "mixed rural" or "deep rural".

Local authorities have different practices for compiling and managing their housing register which mean that comparisons between authorities can be misleading. Authorities' policies and practices may change, which can also affect comparisons over time.

Andrew George: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the average *(a)* public sector and *(b)* private sector rent was for housing in (i) England and (ii) local authorities defined as rural, by region, in each year since 1978. [90837]

Mr. McNulty: In all three tables "rural areas" refers to those local authorities classified by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister as "mixed rural" or "deeply rural".

The figures shown do not go back to 1978, as requested. This is because the current definitions of urban/rural apply to current local authority boundaries only. Rental figures prior to 1996 would require us to refer to earlier local authority boundaries and could be determined only at disproportionate cost.

Average registered social landlords weekly rents in rural areas only—as at 31 March each year

£

Region	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
North East	40.30	42.81	44.63	44.79	45.88	47.60
North West	38.50	42.07	43.79	45.71	45.13	47.84
Yorks and Humber	41.45	44.04	46.55	48.38	49.77	51.25
East Midlands	46.93	49.27	46.27	45.84	46.86	48.15
West Midlands	42.24	43.94	45.90	48.79	47.19	49.11
Eastern	44.34	46.61	49.80	51.58	52.99	55.24
London	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
South East	51.14	55.14	58.48	60.78	61.40	63.77
South West	48.92	51.75	52.01	53.02	53.73	55.99
All England (urban and rural)	46.81	49.82	51.92	53.11	53.90	55.81

Source:

Housing Corporation, annual Regulatory and Statistical Return.

Average local authority weekly rents in rural areas only—as at end-April each year

£

Region	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
North East	35.24	36.45	37.40	38.59	39.59	41.02	42.41
North West	35.24	36.62	37.34	38.25	40.12	42.97	45.37
Yorks and Humber	34.66	35.60	36.64	38.26	40.35	42.26	44.06
East Midlands	34.76	36.61	38.00	39.10	41.22	42.47	41.34
West Midlands	34.48	34.88	36.44	38.16	39.70	42.55	43.60
Eastern	40.40	41.50	42.57	43.30	45.48	47.83	48.70
London	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Average local authority weekly rents in rural areas only—as at end-April each year

£

Region	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
South East	46.47	47.55	48.97	52.18	52.65	53.79	56.43
South West	42.49	42.79	44.00	44.86	45.92	47.57	49.17
All England(urban and rural)	40.10	41.18	42.24	43.82	45.61	47.87	49.42

Sources:

1. 1996–2000: Housing Subsidies and Grants Advance Claim Forms submitted by local authorities.
2. 2001–02: Survey of Local Authority planned rent changes, conducted annually by the ODPM.

Average private sector weekly rents in rural areas, April 2000 to March 2002

£

Region	*2000–02*
North East	74
North West	77
Yorks and Humber	81
East Midlands	77
West Midlands	86
Eastern	85
London	n/a
South East	108
South West	80
All England (urban and rural)	107

Notes on the table of private sector rents:

1. Private rent figures are based on assured and assured shorthold tenancies only
2. The rents shown are before deduction of housing benefit, if any
3. Average rents are shown for a two-year period because sample size considerations prevent data being shown for individual years.
4. Analysis of data prior to 2000–02 would incur disproportionate costs

Source:

Survey of English Housing.

Housing Investment

Lynne Jones: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what capital resources for housing investment have been allocated at 2002–03 prices to Birmingham City Council in each year since 1990–91. [93097]

Mr. McNulty: The information requested is tabled as follows:

£ million

	Actual allocations[1]	*In 2002–03 prices*[2]
1990–91	62.3	87.2
1991–92	54.3	71.6
1992–93	54.1	69.2
1993–94	47.7	59.6
1994–95	36.2	44.7
1995–96	41.6	49.9
1996–97	40.0	46.5
1997–98	35.0	39.4
1998–99	44.9	49.2
1999–2000	45.1	48.2
2000–01	80.9	84.7
2001–02	90.2	92.5
2002–03	87.9	87.9
2003–04[3]	74.0	72.4

[1] Covers housing annual capital guidelines (which include an element to be financed from authorities' capital receipts); the major repairs allowance; support for disabled facilities grants; the Capital Receipts Initiative; and ring-fenced support for a number of housing schemes, eg Cash Incentive Schemes. Estate Action scheme funding is excluded.

[2] Allocations have been converted to 2002–03 prices using the GDP Deflator.

[3] The reduction in the allocation in 2003–04 mainly reflects a change in the local government capital finance system which means the allocations no longer include an element assumed to be financed from authorities capital receipts. The figure also excludes the allocation for disabled facilities grants which has not yet been announced.

Lynne Jones: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the annual housing investment that will be needed to ensure that his target for decent homes is met. [93098]

Mr. McNulty: To meet the decent homes target for social housing the investment needed has to both tackle homes that currently fail the standard and prevent homes from falling below it. For homes currently owned by local authorities the estimated average annual investment in their stock required to deliver decent homes is £3.5 billion at current prices This figure will reduce with stock losses from this sector. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister does not yet have comparable figures for homes owned by Registered Social Landlords.

Job Sharing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the extent of job sharing in his Department. [90862]

Mr. Leslie: Approximately 7.8 per cent. of staff in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister Central work part-time. Information specifically on job sharers is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. Job sharing forms just one strand of a range of possible alternative and flexible working arrangements. Under Office of the Deputy Prime Minister central posting arrangements, all posts are open to part-time workers or job sharers. In very exceptional cases where line managers consider that a post cannot be filled on a part-time/job share basis, they must make a case to Human Resources setting out compelling reasons for this.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, in conjunction with the Department for Transport, supports a part-time workers network.

The executive agencies of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister agencies, in almost all cases, also operate a policy of advertising all posts as open to part-time workers or job sharers. All operate a range of flexible working options.

Local Government Finance

Mrs. May: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) how many local authorities *(a)* requested meetings with ministers to discuss their funding settlement for

2003–04, *(b)* were granted meetings with ministers as requested and *(c)* were refused a meeting but were subsequently called to such a meeting; [93355]

(2) what criteria were used to determine which local authorities were granted a meeting with a minister to discuss their funding settlement for 2003–04. [93356]

Mr. Leslie: The cover letter to the provisional local government finance settlement consultation paper stated that meeting requests should be received as early in the consultation process as possible and by the 20 December at the latest. We warned that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to offer meetings to every individual authority that would ideally like one. All meetings had to take place before the end of consultation on the 14 January.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister received 51 requests before this deadline and held meetings with each of these delegations. We received nine requests for meetings after the 20 December. These were allocated on a first-come first-served basis and we were able to meet four of these delegations. No authority was refused a meeting and then subsequently called to a meeting during this consultation period.

We received a total of 385 written responses to consultation, including representations from all those who requested meetings after the deadline but whom we could not accommodate.

Local Government Finance (Somerset)

Mr. Flook: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the cash reserves of *(a)* Taunton Deane Borough Council, *(b)* Somerset County Council, *(c)* Mendip District Council, *(d)* West Somerset District Council, *(e)* Sedgemoor District Council and *(f)* South Somerset District Council were in each of the last 15 years. [92183]

Mr. Raynsford: The available information, as reported by local authorities, is tabled.

Cash reserves[1] at the beginning of the financial year

£000

Year	Somerset	Mendip	Sedgemoor	Taunton on Deane	South Somerset	West Somerset
1990–91	14,691	475	1,999	3,458	549	1,660
1991–92	15,933	1,867	1,291	4,330	1,473	1,835
1992–93	28,183	2,509	72	5,049	1,872	1,312
1993–94	28,349	3,201	46	5,139	2,116	943
1994–95	40,560	2,408	2,167	-1,674	5,638	768
1995–96	41,946	3,407	1,402	1,643	10,582	874
1996–97	26,679	3,407	3,040	6,054	8,334	974
1997–98	33,617	3,086	5,031	3,265	9,975	1,187
1998–99	31,859	3,188	5,931	3,838	9,389	1,800
1999–2000	35,070	3,824	6,045	3,213	7,396	1,200
2000–01	38,410	1,348	2,654	4,555	9,860	800
2001–02	45,225	867	5,872	4,942	10,198	928

[1] Cash reserves include schools' reserves, other earmarked reserves and unallocated reserves.

Information is not available prior to 1990–91.

Source:

RS forms 1990–91 to 2001–02

Mobile Phone Masts

David Davis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many appeals he has received from mobile phone companies to erect transmission masts in the East Riding of Yorkshire in the last 12 months; and how many appeals were upheld. [92907]

Mr. McNulty: Since 1 January 2002, for the East Riding area of Yorkshire, 12 appeals regarding the erection of telecoms masts were received, 10 of which were allowed.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister pursuant to his answer of 4 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 887W, concerning neighbourhood renewal status, what guidelines are issued to or requirements made of local authorities in receipt of neighbourhood renewal status funds about expenditure of such money; and if he will make a statement. [92670]

Mrs. Roche: Guidelines for local authorities in receipt of the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) are set out annually in a Special Grant Report.

Special Grant Report No. 93, which has been placed in the Library of the House, explains the purpose, allocations and spending conditions of NRF grant in 2002–03. The grant conditions include the requirements that: local authorities should agree the use of NRF with their Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), and they should submit my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister an annual Statement of Use, also agreed with the LSP, setting out how the grant is being spent and what impact is expected to be achieved with the grant.

(Arrangements for 2003–04 will be specified shortly, in a Special Grant Report for that year).

Payment of Bills

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what percentage of bills to his Department since May 2002 were paid *(a)* in accordance with agreed contractual conditions and *(b)* within 30 days of receiving goods and services or the presentation of a valid invoice where no contractual conditions applied. [91611]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister only pays invoices which are valid and in accordance with contract conditions 96.88 per cent. of valid invoices were paid within 30 days, this is the latest figure available for the period up to 30 November 2002.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many days were lost due to sickness absence in the Department in 2002. [90532]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister was established following machinery of Government changes in May 2002. The most recent 'Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service' published by the Cabinet Office and announced by Ministerial Statement on 19 December 2002 covered the calendar year 2001. Figures for 2002 will be announced in due course.

St. Oswalds Park

Mr. Dhanda: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when the ODPM will release the findings of the public inquiry on Gloucester's St Oswalds Park development. [93494]

Mr. McNulty: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has not yet received the report and recommendations from his Inspector following the Public Inquiry into the proposed development at St. Oswalds Park, Gloucester.

On receipt of the report my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will aim to make his decision as soon as possible.

Travellers Sites

Bob Russell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what his policy is on the provision of permanent sites for travellers; and what action he will take to ensure that all local authorities provide such sites where there is a need. [93109]

Mr. McNulty: Local authorities have a power to provide Gypsy and Traveller sites within their areas.

The Government continues to issue guidelines to local authorities reminding them of their need to establish both permanent and temporary sites with adequate facilities for Gypsies and Travellers who pass through their areas on a regular basis.

In order to assist with provision, the 2003–04 round of the current Gypsy Sites Refurbishment Grant has been extended to provide funding for transit sites and emergency stopping places as well as to continue to refurbish existing sites.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will issue additional planning policy guidance to make it easier for local authorities to obtain planning permission for local authority sites for travellers. [92954]

Mr. McNulty: The procedures dealing with development undertaken by local authorities are contained in the Town and Country Planning General Regulations 1992. Guidance on the regulations is given in DOE Circular 19/92. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has no plans to issue further guidance.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he plans to impose a duty on local authorities to provide suitable sites for travellers. [92955]

Mr. McNulty: There are no current plans to reintroduce the statutory duty placed on local authorities to provide gipsy and traveller sites in their areas.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what means he plans to make available to *(a)* private and *(b)* public landowners to remove travellers from unauthorised encampments more easily if local authorities have been (i) unable and (ii) unwilling to provide suitable sites for travellers. [92956]

Mr. McNulty: The Home Office are proposing to introduce new police powers to manage unauthorised encampments, but these powers will be used only if the local authority has provided alternative site provision for gipsies and travellers.

If no alternative local authority sites are available then the existing powers under Sections 61 to 62 and 77 to 79 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 will still be available to police and local authorities to remove travellers.

Private landowners will also be able to go through the civil courts for the recovery of their land under Orders 24 and 113.

Unitary Development Plans (Affordable Housing)

Martin Linton: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) how many London boroughs have *(a)* unitary development plans and *(b)* revised unitary development plans specifying in an objective or other paragraph that is not a policy what proportion of affordable housing should be provided on suitable sites. [92129]

(2) how many London boroughs have *(a)* unitary development plans and *(b)* revised unitary development plans specifying in a policy what proportion of affordable housing should be provided on suitable sites. [92130]

Mr. McNulty: Of the thirty three London Boroughs nineteen have adopted or revised but not yet adopted unitary development plans specifying in policy what proportion of affordable housing should be provided. Three have the proportion specified in supporting text. The proportions are typically expressed as ranges, minima or borough averages rather than a requirement for each site.

Women's Refuges

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the targets are for numbers of refuge places for women in *(a)* Coventry and *(b)* the West Midlands, and how much refuge provision for women there is in each. [92345]

Mrs. Roche: Targets are not set centrally for refuge places for women. It is for local authorities to assess need for refuge places in their areas and to take steps to address that need. Supporting People Commissioning Bodies have recently completed shadow strategies setting out their assessment of service provision for local people, including for women experiencing domestic violence, and how they will address gaps in supply. The Government's steer to Commissioning Bodies on preparing these strategies encouraged them to give particular consideration to provision for high risk or vulnerable groups, such as women fleeing domestic violence.

Data on refuge provision was gathered in September as part of the preparations for the Supporting People programme. In Coventry, 35 household spaces in women's refuge provision for women at risk of domestic violence were recorded. In the West Midlands, 474 such spaces were recorded.

DEFENCE

Aircraft Carrier Modernisation

15. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the procedures to be followed in the competitive bidding for the contract for aircraft carrier modernisation. [93182]

Mr. Ingram: The Future Aircraft Carrier project has utilised a Continuous Assessment process for the selection of prime contractor. This takes account of all relevant factors in order to ensure that we acquire the capability required at best value for money. Wider industrial issues are also being considered, consistent with the defence industrial policy published in the autumn. Our decision will be announced shortly.

Iraq

16. **Mr. Simmonds:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the assistance the US has requested for possible action in Iraq. [93183]

Mr. Hoon: As I told the House on 25 November 2002, the United States has approached a number of countries, including the United Kingdom, seeking support in the event that military action against Iraq proves necessary.

Armed Forces (Middle East)

17. **Mr. Stunell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the length of time forces deployed in the middle east can remain effective. [931[illegible]]

Mr. Ingram: While we want Saddam Hussein to disarm voluntarily, it is evident that we shall not achieve this unless we continue to present him with a clear and credible threat of force. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence told the House on Monday 20 January 2003, the United Kingdom forces being deployed to the Mediterranean and the middle east have the balance and flexibility for the tasks that might be asked of them. Exercise Saif Sareea II in Oman, towards the end of 2001, clearly demonstrated our ability to deploy United Kingdom ground forces to the middle east and sustain them there. I am confident therefore that we can sustain forces in the region for as long as necessary.

A-bomb Tests

18. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to assess the health problems of ex-military staff subjected to radiation from A-bomb tests. [93185]

Dr. Moonie: Two epidemiological studies of some 22,000 participants of the British nuclear test programme have been carried out on the Ministry of Defence's behalf by the National Radiological Protection Board. The results of these studies were published in 1988 and 1993. They showed that, as a group, participation in the tests has had no detectable effect on the expectation of life, or on the risk of developing cancer or other fatal diseases by those who took part.

The results of a third study are to be published in a few months' time. There are no plans for any further studies.

The Ministry of Defence is aware of clinical study programmes being undertaken at various universities worldwide. We have reservations about the applicability to test participants today since any radiation exposures involved in the tests were generally very small and over 40 years ago.

Royal Navy (Gulf)

19. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the activities of the Royal Navy in the Gulf. [93186]

Mr. Ingram: There are currently six Royal Navy and two Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships on long-planned deployments to the Gulf. The Type 42 Destroyer, HMS Cardiff, is on Armilla Patrol contributing, with other nations, to the enforcement of UN embargoes against Iraq. It is usual for a United Kingdom tanker to be deployed in the region to support the Armilla patrol. At present, RFA Bayleaf is the Armilla tanker.

The Type 22 Frigate, HMS Cumberland, is in the Gulf in support of operations against international terrorism. Four Mine Counter Measures vessels, HMS Bangor, HMS Brockelsby, HMS Blyth and HMS Sandown, together with RFA Sir Bedevere, are in the region at the invitation of the Saudi Government, made early last year, to carry out a series of joint exercises. This invitation followed on from the success of similar co-operation during Exercise Saif Sareea II. In addition, the survey vessel, HMS Roebuck, is also on a long-planned deployment to the Gulf.

Iraq (Post-conflict)

20. **Mr. Lyons:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what role British troops will have in a post-conflict Iraq. [93187]

Mr. Ingram: There is no inevitability about military action against Iraq; this question is therefore hypothetical at this stage. What I can say is that we take very seriously our current and potential responsibilities towards the Iraqi people. In the aftermath of any conflict, Britain would remain at the forefront of efforts to help the Iraqi people.

US Missile Defence System

21. **Mr. Beard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment his Department has made of whether the US missile defence system could protect the UK and her allies from ballistic missile attack. [93188]

Mr. Hoon: The United States missile defence programme remains evolutionary and its future architecture has still finally to be decided. The US has offered to extend missile defence coverage and make missile defence capabilities available to the United Kingdom as the evolution of the system permits, subject to appropriate political and financial arrangements. An assessment of how coverage of the UK and allies might be achieved is included in the discussion paper published by the Ministry of Defence on 9 December 2002. The UK will continue this process of assessment, not least through agreeing a technical Memorandum of Understanding with the United States to gain further insight into the missile defence programme.

First World War (Military Executions)

22. **Mr. Allen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent representations he has received on the subject of British soldiers executed after courts martial in the first world war; and what replies he has given. [93189]

Dr. Moonie: In the last six months, I have received five representations from hon. and right hon. Members and 32 from members of the public on this issue.

The position has not changed since the detailed and careful review by my right hon. Friend Dr. John Reid, the then Minister of State for the Armed Forces, who announced his conclusions to this House on 24 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1372–86.

This review resulted in very important steps being taken to recognise these men as victims of the war and to draw them and their families into the nation's consciousness and remembrance. The public commemoration of these men in the National Memorial Arboretum is very fitting.

Fylingdales

23. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the use of Fylingdales for national missile defence. [93190]

Mr. Hoon: As I informed the House on 15 January 2003, the Government's preliminary conclusion is that we should agree to the US request to upgrade RAF Fylingdales for missile defence purposes. Ballistic missile early warning would continue to be the station's primary role. The upgrade would enable the radar to track incoming missiles more accurately and guide interceptions by defensive missiles if necessary. We will take full account of the views which have been expressed in public and parliamentary discussion before communicating a final decision to the US Administration.

Departmental Suppliers (Lancashire)

24. **Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, if he will make a statement on suppliers to his Department based in Lancashire. [93191]

Mr. Ingram: The importance to the Ministry of Defence of our Lancashire-based suppliers is well understood. Work on defence contracts valued at many hundreds of millions of pounds is currently being carried out by well over 150 suppliers located in the county. The aerospace industry is of particular significance in the area, with BAES maintaining substantial facilities at Warton and Samlesbury. Prime contractors, together with a wide range of smaller companies supplying components and services, play an important role in equipping our Armed Forces.

Afghanistan

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, if he will make a statement on the operation of the new joint regional teams in Afghanistan. [93192]

Mr. Ingram: We welcome the recent United States announcement on the deployment of Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan, intended to help stabilise further the Afghan regions. We are examining the role we might play in these teams, and the possibility of leading one, but no decisions have been taken.

845 Squadron

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the last three operational deployments of 845 Squadron and the length of time between them; and if he will make a statement. [92668]

Mr. Ingram: The following table lists the last three operational deployments of 845 Naval Air Squadron, the period of deployment from their parent Air Station and the length of time between each deployment:

Serial	*Operational deployment/location*	*Period of operational deployment*[1]	*Length of time between operational deployment*
1	Operation TELIC Location-Middle East	16 January 2003 to date	7 months 12 days (Serial 2–1)
2	Operation ORACLE Location-Middle East	11 November 2001 to 4 June 2002	10 months 10 days (Serial 3–2)
3	Operation PALATINE Location-Bosnia	11 November 1992 to 1 January 2001	17 months 8 days (Serial 4–3)
4	Operation GRANBY Location-Middle East	5 January 1991 to 3 June 1991	—

[1] The objectives contained in Royal Navy guidelines include individual personnel deployments being no longer than nine calendar months and the total deployed time in any three-year period not exceeding 18 months. There has been general adherence to these objectives

Aircraft Carriers

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the impact of success for each of the bidders in the future aircraft carrier programme on the possibility of future co-operation with France on the construction of a new French carrier; and if he will make a statement. [93349]

Mr. Ingram: We have made no such assessment. The possibility of co-operation with France on carrier construction has not been a factor in the selection of a preferred prime contractor for the Future Aircraft Carrier programme.

Anthrax Vaccine

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether he has established the origin of anthrax and other vaccines washed up on the South Dorset coast; and if he will make a statement. [93167]

Dr. Moonie: The anthrax vaccine found on the South Dorset coast is from a batch produced by the centre for Applied Microbiology and Research and purchased by the Ministry of Defence in February 2001. Because ampoules from the batch were issued to a large number of units it has not yet been possible to identify how they came to be in the sea. As far as we are aware, this is the only vaccine found, although a number of other pharmaceutical products, including drugs, have been recovered. Investigations into the source of the items found are continuing.

BAE Systems

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his Department's relationship with BAE Systems; and what assessment he has made of *(a)* the strengths and *(b)* the weaknesses of BAE Systems in delivering his Department's procurement requirements. [93205]

Mr. Hoon: The Ministry of Defence has an excellent relationship with BAE Systems. The company is a key supplier to the United Kingdom Ministry of Defence. It has delivered substantial military capability over the years and I expect that it will continue to do so in the future.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the strategic significance to the UK of BAE Systems. [93206]

Mr. Hoon: BAE Systems is the largest supplier to the United Kingdom Ministry of Defence and is involved in many of our largest and most complex programmes. It is a very successful British and international company, with an excellent track record of winning overseas business. Our defence industrial policy, published in October 2002, made clear the importance the Government places on the whole of the UK defence industry.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether his Department has been advised in 2003 of interest by a non-UK company in merging with or taking over BAE Systems. [93207]

Mr. Hoon: The Ministry of Defence has not been advised of any interest by any company in merging with or taking over BAE Systems.

Battalion Deployments

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the last three operational deployments of *(a)* 1st Armoured Division and *(b)* 102 Logistics Brigade, broken down by battalion, stating in each case the length of time between operational tours. [93260]

Mr. Ingram: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Battalion Strength

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what occasions during the last five years were battalions and corps attached to other battalions and corps to bring that battalion up to strength for the purposes of operational deployment, giving in each case *(a)* the source and size of the attached unit and length of time attached, *(b)* location of deployment and *(c)* the length of time that the attached unit was rested before subsequent deployments. [92704]

Mr. Ingram: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Challenger

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Challenger II tanks are *(a)* undergoing desertification, *(b)* fully serviceable and *(c)* 1, 2, 3, 4th line inserviceable, broken down by regiment. [92133]

Mr. Ingram: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence announced in the House on 20 January 2003, 120 Challenger 2 tanks are to be deployed in support of current contingency planning. It is expected that all of these will be modified to improve their performance in desert conditions. In addition to the Challenger 2 tanks that we are modifying for contingency operations, consideration is being given to modifying further Challenger 2s. This decision does not in any way effect those tanks deploying, and will therefore be taken as part of the routine equipment planning process. I will write to the hon. Member with details of availability.

Clansman

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether Clansmen radios have been issued to the task force commanded by Ark Royal; and if he will make a statement. [92134]

Mr. Ingram: Clansman portable radios are carried by all Royal Navy warships, including those in the task force commanded by HMS Ark Royal.

Container Spares

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what stocks of spares his Department holds for containers handling rough terrain and how many units would the Ministry of Defence currently be able to deploy on operations; and if he will make a statement. [92662]

Mr. Ingram: There are sufficient stocks of spares to support and sustain the fleet of 26 Rough Terrain Container Handlers. Arrangements are also in place with our industrial suppliers to ensure rapid re-provision as needed. There are 17 of these container handlers available for deployment now. Of the remainder three are already deployed in the Balkans, four are required to maintain essential capability in the United Kingdom and two are undergoing in-depth repair.

Contingency Plans (Iraq)

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his medical contingency plans in respect of Iraq with particular reference to military hospitals, after care and convalescence contingency planning for armed forces personnel *(a)* not involved in Iraq, and *(b)* based in Iraq. [90912]

Dr. Moonie: Our medical contingency plans for Service personnel deployed to the Gulf area in the event of military action against Iraq include the provision of integrated medical support within units, dressing stations and field hospitals and, if necessary, medical evacuation back to the United Kingdom where aftercare and convalescence would be provided as appropriate. Service personnel serving elsewhere overseas and those in the UK would continue to receive medical care under existing arrangements.

Defence Reviews

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his policy is on defence reviews; and what further defence reviews are planned for the armed forces. [91038]

Mr. Hoon: The Government published the results of its comprehensive Strategic Defence Review (Cm 3999) in 1998. Following the events of 11 September 2001 we launched work to ensure that our defence policies, capabilities and force structures matched the new challenges we faced. The conclusions of this work were published in the SDR New Chapter (Cm 5566) in July 2002.

In announcing the publication of the new Chapter and the allocation of increased resources to defence in the Spending Review, I said that this provided a "mandate for accelerating the modernisation and evolution of the Armed Forces" *Official Report,* column 462. The capabilities and force structures of the Armed Forces must continue to evolve in the direction set by the New Chapter. I intend to publish a Defence White Paper later this year. This will provide an updated statement of Defence policy and explain in detail our plans for modernising the delivery of enhanced defence capability.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Bacon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the professional fees were to each payee for the redevelopment of his Department's main building, broken down by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the PFI contractor. [93403]

Mr. Ingram: The total professional fees (excluding VAT) paid by the Ministry of Defence to each payee to date are as follows:

Total professional fees (excluding VAT) paid by the Ministry of Defence to each payee to date

£

Payee	*Profession*	*Fee*
IBM Business Consulting Services (formerly Pricewaterhouse Coopers)	Financial Advice and Management/Administration Team	5.62 million
DEGW	Architects and Space Planning	1.51 million
Waterman Partnerships	Structured Engineers	0.47 million
Bernard Williams Associates	Cost Consultants and Facility Management Specialists	0.47
DTZ	Town Planners	0.18
Roger Preston and Partners	Mechanical, Electrical Engineers, IT Infrastructure	0.64
Bovis Program Management	Construction and Programming	0.65 million
Herbert Smith	Legal Advice	2.12 million

Fees paid by the PFI Contractor are a matter for Modus Services plc (the PFI contractor).

Eurofighter

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what criteria were applied in selecting areas of airspace suitable for testing the Eurofighter; what consultation was carried out with local communities; and what steps he is taking to monitor nuisance caused by test flights. [91153]

Mr. Ingram: The Eurofighter aircraft requires large areas of airspace in which to train. Following a review of current allocation of air space, the National Air Traffic Control Services and the Ministry of Defence have therefore agreed to redesignate airspace over the North Sea. Three large managed areas have been designated which, when required, may be "booked" and used for military training. Only the most northerly designated training area covers any land, and within this area all flights will be conducted above 24,500ft. Under Government guidelines public consultation regarding the use of airspace is not required except where flight takes place below 7,000ft.

The conduct of military flying is taken extremely seriously and any complaints are thoroughly investigated by the Ministry of Defence. Particular rules govern supersonic flight and these will continue to be strictly enforced.

European Procurement Projects

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, what progress has been made to help deliver major European collaborative procurement projects on schedule. [93175]

Mr. Ingram: We remain committed to maximising the benefits that can be derived from collaborative defence equipment programmes. The smart acquisition initiative stresses the need to predict and plan against those issues that have the potential to cause delay. This aims to ensure that risks and opportunities are addressed before we commit to new co-operative programmes. More generally, the development of the international agency OCCAR continues to be an important part of our aim to provide an effective route for the management of defence equipment collaborative programmes.

Exercises and Operational Deployments

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which *(a)* exercises and *(b)* operational deployments were undertaken during (i) 2001, (ii) 2002 and (iii) 2003 by (A) HQ3 Commando Brigade, (B) 40 Commando Royal Marines and (C) 42 Commando Royal Marines; and if he will make a statement. [92798]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* In 2001, HQ 3 Commando Brigade Royal Marines took part in Exercises, ROLLING DEEP, JMC 01, ARGONAUT 01 and SAIF SAREEA 2 and were operationally deployed to Kosovo. 40 Commando Royal Marines took part in Exercises DRUIDS DANCE, ROLLING DEEP, ARGONAUT 01 and SAIF SAREEA 2 and were operationally deployed to Afghanistan. 42 Commando Royal Marines took part in the WINTER Deployment, Exercises TARTAN RELIEF, FASTBALL and BLACKHORSE and were operationally deployed to Sierra Leone.

In 2002, 40 Cdo who took part in Exercise BLACKHORSE were operationally deployed to Afghanistan, as were HQ 3 Cdo Bde RM. 42 Cdo RM were operationally deployed to Northern Ireland.

Currently 40 Cdo are deployed with Naval Task Group 03 and will undertake training exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean. There have been no operational deployments in 2003.

HMS Ocean (Helicopters)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many helicopters, of which type, are aboard HMS Ocean. [92664]

Mr. Ingram: As at 20 January 2003 the following helicopters aboard HMS Ocean were:

Helicopter	*Total*
Sea King HC Mk4	10
Lynx AH Mk 7	6
Gazelle AH Mkl	6

HMS Sussex

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how he plans to safeguard the archaeological integrity of HMS Sussex. [93176]

Dr. Moonie: The project has been developed on the basis of archaeological best practice in deep water condition. An Independent Monitoring Panel of archaeologists, with the participation of English Heritage, has been set up to review the Project Plan. The agreement with the contractor provides for official observers to be present during the whole exploration and recovery process at sea and to oversee the arrangements and standards of conservation work ashore.

Military Clothing

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what stocks his Department holds of *(a)* desert boots, *(b)* desert clothing and *(c)* Combat 95 clothing; and if he will make a statement. [92136]

Mr. Ingram: As at 17 January 2003 we held, in central stocks: 16,300 pairs of desert combat boots; 30,800 pairs of desert trousers and 24,000 desert jackets; and 262,986 lightweight jackets, 399,902 pairs of combat trousers and 220,877 field jackets.

Information on unit level holdings of these items is not held centrally. Contracts have been placed to ensure the supply of sufficient desert boots, desert jackets and desert trousers. Our normal requirement is to hold sufficient stocks of desert boots and clothing to kit to scale the Joint Rapid Reaction Force.

Mobility

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress made since 1997 in *(a)* making British forces more mobile and *(b)* increasing their ability to contribute to international peace and security. [91855]

Mr. Hoon: The Strategic Defence Review recognised that conflict prevention, peace support, and crisis management require a powerful force that is capable of immediate and, if necessary, sustained operations. It established the concept of Joint Rapid Reaction Forces to provide more capable, more deployable, and better supported Joint Forces. The initial operating capability was achieved in 1999, and elements have been deployed successfully both on operations and exercises. 16 Air Assault brigade, also formed in 1999, combines airborne and air mobile assets with, in the future, the new attack helicopter, and provides a further significant enhancement to our tactical mobility.

In addition, the lease of four C17 aircraft in 2001, followed by the introduction of the A400M at the end of the decade, the procurement of a new Strategic Sealift Service of six RoRo vessels through a PFI-type contract in 2000, the provision of an interim strategic sealift capability through commercial charters until this new service is fully available (currently expected to be late this year); and the ordering of four new Bay class Landing Ship Dock (Auxiliary)s expected to enter service before the end of 2005, all represent a significant enhancement to the current and future mobility of our Armed Forces.

The ability of the United Kingdom's Armed Forces to contribute to international peace and security has consistently been demonstrated throughout the period since 1997, most recently in peace support operations in Sierra Leone and in Afghanistan.

Morale

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how Army personnel when last questioned described the morale of *(a)* themselves, *(b)* their working group, *(c)* their unit and *(d)* the Army as a whole; how many people responded; what percentage responded to each option asked; and if he will make a statement. [92147]

Dr. Moonie: On the basis of responses to a Continuous Attitude Survey (CAS) carried out in April/May 2002, the numbers of Army personnel expressing an opinion about their morale, that of their working group, that of their unit and that of the Army as a whole, are as given in the following Of 3,978 surveys issued, 1,867 (47 per cent.) completed forms had been returned at time of analysis.

Morale of themselves:

	Low		*Neither high nor low*		*High*	
Officers	36	10%	85	23%	245	67%
Soldiers	247	16%	413	28%	826	56%

Note:

99 per cent. (1,852) of those replying responded to this question.

Morale of their working group:

	Low		*Neither high nor low*		*High*	
Officers	40	11%	126	35%	196	54%
Soldiers	358	24%	542	37%	585	39%

Note:

99 per cent. (1,847) of those replying responded to this question.

Morale of their unit:

	Low		*Neither high nor low*		*High*	
Officers	58	16%	152	42%	153	42%
Soldiers	461	31%	577	39%	434	30%

Note:

98 per cent. (1,835) of those replying responded to this question.

Morale of the Army:

	Low		*Neither high nor low*		*High*	
Officers	88	25%	184	52%	83	23%
Soldiers	499	36%	634	45%	273	19%

Note:

94 per cent. (1,761) of those replying responded to this question.

NBC Equipment

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many NBC suits are *(a)* issued to personnel and *(b)* in stock; and if he will make a statement. [92135]

Mr. Ingram: There are sufficient stocks of NEC suits to meet our contingency plans. I am withholding the information relating to the quantities held, under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Operation Fresco

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service people have been given warning orders for both Operation Fresco and possible operations in Iraq. [92804]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* Over time it has been necessary to make adjustments to the forces allocated to Operation Fresco to ensure that those units that may be required for contingent operations elsewhere were available for duty. Most recently, elements of 16 Air Assault Brigade have been withdrawn from Operation Fresco in a phased manner as they have been assigned for potential future military action in Iraq. Consequently, there are no forces assigned concurrently to both Operation Fresco and possible operations in Iraq.

Redundant Weapons

Richard Younger-Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many redundant weapons there were in each year since 1997; and what the nature was of those weapons. [93575]

Mr. Ingram: The information requested will take some time to compile, therefore I will write to the hon Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of theHouse.

Richard Younger-Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how redundant weapons are disposed of. [93576]

Mr. Ingram: The Ministry of Defence disposes of significant amounts of munitions annually for a variety of reasons including that they become unserviceable or surplus to requirements. The United Kingdom approved methods are by burning, detonation, dilution by solvent and chemical destruction. MOD employs the first two methods. Small quantities are disposed of in licensed demolition grounds on MOD property. Large quantities of ammunition are normally disposed of under civilian contract either in the UK or abroad.

Reservists' Pensions

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions whether the pensions rights of individuals in their main job are protected during periods of service as an armed forces reservist; and if he will make a statement. [93342]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence has arrangements in place to ensure that reservists who are called-out for permanent service with the armed forces are not disadvantaged in pension terms.

Individuals may have a number of pension options dependent on their personal circumstances. Those individuals who wish to remain in their civilian pension scheme during their period of called-out service can do so and the MOD will meet the cost of the employer contribution to the pension scheme. Alternatively, individuals may opt to have the period of their called-out service covered by MOD's full time reserve service pension arrangements, or they can opt to be contracted-in to the state pension arrangements (state second pension). Those individuals who have previous service that gave them pension rights under the Armed Forces Pension Scheme (AFPS) may opt for an enhancement to their AFPS pension rights.

Royal Marines

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the main current deployments of the Royal Marines. [92895]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave today to the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch).

Royal Navy

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what modifications his Department has made to *(a)* Royal Naval and *(b)* Royal Marines tactical doctrine since 11 September 2001. [92901]

Mr. Ingram: Following 11 September 2001 the increased danger from terrorist organisations to the Royal Navy (including the Royal Marines) has been recognised and work undertaken to ameliorate the risks to both deployed forces and those in their base port. Detailed Force Protection advice on countering the Asymmetric threat from terrorist attack is available in both Tactical and Reference publications and is the subject of continual assessment and periodic update as new information and feedback is obtained. This doctrine comprises both a generic description of likely threats and consideration of numerous measures that Commanding Officers need to consider adopting depending on their area of operations. The advice covers methods of reducing ship and personnel vulnerability to attack, enabling Commanding Officers to formulate a defensive posture commensurate with their operational state and location; reducing the risk of attack from an enemy who holds the advantage of surprise and method.

When ashore, RM tactical doctrine follows Land (Army) tactical doctrine. Events since 11 September 2001 have not forced modifications to existing doctrine but lessons identified in operations since, by the Army and RM, are undergoing evaluation in order to capture them, as necessary.

Service Personnel (Gulf)

Mr. Paul Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what contingency plans he has made to replace the troops on their way to the Gulf; which troops from which units and regiments would be used; and if he will make a statement; [93259]

(2) what the maximum amount of time is that he estimates 30,000 soldiers could be maintained at a high level of readiness in the Gulf before rotating personnel. [93261]

Mr. Hoon: We continue to hope that Saddam Hussein will disarm voluntarily but it is evident that we will not persuade him to do so unless we present him with a clear and credible threat of force. No decision has been taken to commit British forces to military action, nor is such a decision inevitable or imminent. It is therefore premature to speculate about the duration of military deployments or about the rotation or replacement of those forces involved.

Shipping (Terrorists)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures are in place to protect *(a)* merchant and *(b)* naval shipping from terrorist attack. [91235]

Mr. Ingram: The threat from terrorist attack is kept under constant review and the Ministry of Defence works closely with other Government Departments on the protection of merchant shipping. The Royal Navy's worldwide Maritime Trade Operations—known as UK MTO arrangements—enable a number of options to be offered in support of merchant shipping, graduated to the prevailing threat. These range from the provision of routine advice and guidance through to naval supervision. The appropriate level of MTO support required in a given area remains under constant assessment. For example, UK MTO arrangements in the Gulf have been enhanced since October 2001 by the establishment of a UK MTO liaison cell in the region. If necessary, higher level Maritime Trade Operations can be implemented very quickly. Information on specific measures to protect naval shipping were provided in my answer to the hon. Member on 15 January, *Official Report*, column 640W.

Turkey

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what numerical restrictions there are under the CFE Treaty on deployments of armed forces to Turkey. [92532]

Mr. Ingram: The Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty limits the numbers of conventional armaments and equipment in Europe in five categories:

armoured combat vehicles

artillery pieces

combat aircraft, and

attack helicopters.

Numerical limits for the armaments and equipment apply within the area of application of the CFE treaty, which covers the entire land territory of the States Parties in Europe from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural Mountains. In the case of the Republic of Turkey, an area in the south-east of Turkey bordering the non-CFE states of Syria, Iraq and Iran is excluded from the area of application.

Furthermore, the Republic of Turkey lies within a specifically defined CFE zone, commonly known as the flank zone. Within this zone additional numerical limitations apply with regard to temporary deployments of conventional armaments and equipment. In the area of application of the CFE treaty these are:

153 battle tanks

241 armoured combat vehicles, and

140 pieces of artillery.

Deployments of combat aircraft and attack helicopters are not numerically limited, nor is the number of personnel. There are also no restrictions on naval forces under the CFE treaty.

UN Peacekeeping Missions

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the impact on the operational effectiveness of British contingents in UN peacekeeping missions of the deployment of forces to the Gulf. [92953]

Mr. Ingram: We do not expect the deployment forces to the Gulf to affect the operational effectiveness of British contingents in UN peacekeeping missions.

Urgent Operational Requirement Orders

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what orders in excess of £500,000 his Department has placed for urgent operational requirements in the last three months. [92508]

Mr. Ingram: About 90 Urgent Operational Requirements for in excess of 500,000 have been approved in the last three months. These will, inter alia, accelerate already funded programmes, address many of the lessons identified in Exercise SAEF SAREEA II (including Challenger 2 and AS90 desertisation), enhance medical support, maximise interoperability with coalition allies and improve our secure communications capability.

Vaccines

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the take-up of anthrax vaccination among troops preparing to deploy to the Middle East. [91821]

Dr. Moonie: Immunisation against anthrax is just one component of the range of defensive capabilities available to our Armed Forces which protect them against, and enable them to respond to, chemical and biological threats. These include detectors, warning and reporting systems, physical protection including respirators, decontamination equipment and procedures, and other medical counter measures such as antibiotics. We have assembled a package of information and education materials which we hope will encourage Service personnel to take advantage of the additional protection that immunisation against anthrax provides. We are confident that the majority of personnel now deploying to the Gulf will opt to receive immunisations against anthrax, and expect take-up to improve further as the programme expands.

Wheeled Support Vehicles

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what problems have arisen in the evaluation of the bids for the contract for the new wheeled support vehicles; how near these are to resolution; and if he will make a statement. [91872]

Mr. Ingram: No problems have arisen, but evaluation of the tenders received in June 2002 for the Support Vehicle contract concluded that more information was needed on some aspects of the solution put forward by the bidders to enable a decision to be taken on which proposal represents best value for money. All four bidders have been invited to participate in a further round of tendering and responses are due on 22 January 2003. A further period of evaluation will then take place. An announcement on the award of a contract is planned for late 2003.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Child Benefit

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how much has been spent on child benefit for 16 to 19-year-olds in each year since 1997. [90915]

Malcolm Wicks: Entitlement to child benefit between the ages of 16 and 18 is dependent on the child staying on in full-time education—up to and including GCE 'A' level or equivalent. Entitlement ceases when the child reaches 19 years of age or when the child leaves full-time education, if earlier.

Estimated expenditure on child benefit, including the higher rate payable to some lone parents, for 16 to 18-year-olds since 1997 is as follows:

Estimated child benefit expenditure (inc. lone parent addition) for 16 to 18-year-olds

£ millions

1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*2002–03*
750	780	960	1,020	[1]1,060	[2]1,100

[1] Estimated outturn

[2] Plans

Notes:

1. Because sample data have been used to obtain the age split the quoted figures are subject to sampling variability. The true figures are likely to lie in a range around those quoted.

2. Figures are rounded to the nearest £10 million.

Source:

DSS/DWP accounts and sample administrative data

Final Salary Pension Schemes

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what recent discussions he has had with business representatives concerning the provision of final salary pension schemes [92828]

Mr. McCartney: My right hon Friend met with representatives of the Confederation of British Industry in September and November last year to discuss pensions.

As part of the consultation exercise on the pensions Green Paper Simplicity, Security and Choice, my right. hon Friend and ministerial colleagues will be attending a number of events to which employer organisations are being invited.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what assessment he has made of the effect of closing a final salary pension scheme upon a firm's financial risk. [92829]

Mr. McCartney: When employers close their defined benefit schemes, they are seeking to put a limit on the long term liabilities of the company. Given the nature of these liabilities, however, closure is unlikely to have an immediate or even necessarily a short term impact. This is because the existing liabilities will still have to be met for the continuing life of the scheme irrespective of whether new members are being accepted. The Green Paper 'Simplicity, security and choice: working and saving for retirement' (Cm5677) sets out the Government's view that, for this and other reasons, closing or winding up pension schemes are not in the interests of either employers or employees. The Green Paper, therefore, sets out a range of proposals to simplify the regulatory regime for pensions, which could save employers £150 to £200 million a year in administration, and thus make it easier for employers to continue to provide final salary schemes and other types of pension arrangements for their employees. We have launched a wide ranging consultation in which we are seeking views on this approach including its impact on employers.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what measures he is taking to strengthen the rights of employees in relation to final salary pension schemes. [91942]

Mr. McCartney: I refer the hon. Member to my written answer of 13 January 2003, *Official Report*, volume 397, columns 361–62W.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what assessment he has made of the impact of proposals in the Pensions Green Paper on the rate of closure of final salary schemes. [93055]

Mr. McCartney: The Green Paper 'Simplicity, security and choice: working and saving for retirement' (Cm5677), published on 17 December 2002, sets out the Government's strategy to encourage and support employers providing and contributing to good quality pension schemes through provision of a regulatory framework. The Green Paper,, therefore, sets out a range of proposals to simplify the regulatory regime for pensions, which could save employers £150-£200 million a year in administration, and thus make it easier for employers to continue to provide final salary schemes and other types of pension arrangements for their employees. We have launched a wide ranging consultation in which we are seeking views on this approach including its impact on employers.

Guaranteed Minimum Pensions

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will estimate the cost of commuting all entitlements to guaranteed minimum pensions to entitlements to SERPS at the rate used to make such commutations in 1997. [92184]

Mr. McCartney: This information is not currently available. However, relevant work on the costs of guaranteed minimum pensions is currently being undertaken as part of the follow-up to the Green Paper "Simplicity—Security and Choice: Working and saving for retirement" published (Cm5677) on 17 December 2002. I will place the information in the Library once this is available.

Automated Credit Transfer

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) when each benefit will begin to be paid by automated credit transfer; [91285]

(2) in what sequence state retirement pensions will be transferred to payment by automated credit transfer. [91287]

Mr. McCartney: For some time now the Department has been able to pay benefits into a bank or building society account.

We have started to write to customers to request their account details as part of the move to direct payment. People will start to be paid this way rather than by paper-based methods from April 2003. We started with some Child Benefit and Veterans Agency customers, and will begin to contact people in receipt of Retirement Pension from the end of January.

The conversion exercise will be completed by 2005.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if the migration of each benefit case load to automated credit transfer will take place on a common date. [91286]

Malcolm Wicks: The conversion exercise from paper based methods of payment to direct payment into a bank or building society accounts will be phased. It began in October 2002 when we started to write out to some Veterans Agency and Child Benefit customers to request their account details. Payment into accounts will start from April 2003.

Other benefits will be phased in from January this year and the whole exercise is due to be completed in 2005.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when automated credit transfer invitation letters will be sent out to each type of benefit recipient. [91288]

Malcolm Wicks: The first invitation letters were issued to some Veterans Agency and Child Benefit customers in October 2002. The first invitation letters for Retirement Pension will be issued later this month. The invitation process for customers in receipt of working age benefits will begin from March 2003. We will start to invite other benefit recipients from July 2003.

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on fraud in the payment of benefit through post offices; and what plans he has to protect against fraud when the post office card account is introduced. [88245]

Malcolm Wicks: Paper-based instruments of payment can be vulnerable to fraudulent attack in a number of ways: they can go astray in the post, be lost or stolen, or be manipulated or counterfeited by a determined fraudster. We estimate that total benefit and pension losses from paper-based instruments of payment fraud in 2000–01 were around £77 million.

We have several measures in place to counter fraud, such as the Order Book Control System (OBCS). This makes use of barcode readers in post offices to scan order books that have been printed with a barcode on the front cover. OBCS alerts the post office clerk when a stop notice has been placed on an order book and instructs them to impound the book immediately. Crucially, the stop notice is activated in whatever post office the book is presented for payment and not only in the customer's designated post office. This helps to ensure that order books reported lost or stolen are not cashed, but instead impounded.

Introducing direct payment into a bank, building society or post office card account as the normal method of benefit payment for the Department's customers will result in significant savings to public funds. It is a much more secure method of payment. Work is on-going to develop a more secure method of payment to replace existing order books and girocheques for those customers who cannot or choose not to be paid by direct payment.

The post office card account is a Post Office product and detailed operational questions are the responsibility of the chief executive for the Post Office. However, the Department's officials will continue to work in close co-operation with the Post Office to ensure that the card account is as secure as possible.

Benefit Payments

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what instructions he has given to his staff who are dealing with the programme for migrating benefit payments from order book to direct bank credit, for responding to benefit recipients who express a wish to receive payment in cash via a Post Office card account. [90653]

Malcolm Wicks: All DWP staff who deal with customers will receive training about Direct Payment. This will highlight to staff the options that are available to customers who are transferring from a girocheque or order book to payment into an account. This will include the option to have payments made into a Post Office card account which can be collected from a Post Office branch.

Benefits (Direct Payment)

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what discussions he has had with *(a)* postmasters and *(b)* the National Federation of Sub-postmasters on the introduction of direct payment of benefits into bank accounts. [91078]

Malcolm Wicks: Department of Trade and Industry Ministers meet the National Federation of Sub-postmasters (NFSP) on a regular basis. Officials from this Department and the Department of Trade and Industry also meet with the NFSP. The Post Office meet with individual postmasters to discuss the move to Direct Payment.

Benefits Agency (Fraud)

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many Benefits Agency staff have been found to have committed fraud in each of the last five years. [92506]

Malcolm Wicks: The figures are an extract from the Departmental annual returns to HM Treasury on internal fraud, and show the number of Benefits Agency staff that have been found to have committed fraud in each year since 1997.

A breakdown by agency for 1997–98 is not available, and the figure given is the total for the then Department of Social Security.

Benefits agency staff that have been found to have committed fraud in each year since 1997

	Total DSS figure
1997–98	189
1998–99	112
1999–2000	139
2000–01	65
2001–02	128

Although technically defined as fraud cases for HM Treasury reporting purposes, many of the cases above involve little or no financial loss e.g. unauthorised use of software, or trading on official premises.

While these types of case are treated seriously, and disciplinary action inevitably follows, each case is treated individually and penalties therefore vary considerably, from an oral warning to dismissal, prosecution and custodial sentencing.

Cash Savings

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list for each year since 1997 his estimate of the average cash savings held by families on low incomes. [91982]

Malcolm Wicks: The information is not available. The Department's Family Resources Survey provides information on savings, however data are not available for average amounts of savings because this information is not collected for all respondents.

Child Care Costs

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what the basis is for his policy that a couple who are both in receipt of benefits where one receives invalidity or incapacity benefit and the other jobseeker allowance, are not eligible for child care costs when the parent on jobseeker allowance joins the Government New Deal and Training for Work programmes. [88601]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The Department does not have a policy to refuse help with child care for a couple who are both in receipt of benefits, one on incapacity benefits and the other on jobseeker's allowance, when the latter joins the New Deal. The child care arrangements for people in these circumstances are as follows.

Within the New Deal for Young People and New Deal 25 plus programmes, child care costs can be met where there is a genuine need and the individual would otherwise be unable to participate in a New Deal option or Intensive Activity Period. New Deal Personal Advisers decide on a person's eligibility for help with child care costs based on that individual's particular circumstances.

Under New Deal 50 plus, a person starting work receives financial support through 52 weekly payments (Employment Credit) to help them during the transitional period between benefit and work. It is up to the individual whether they use this money to help meet child care costs.

Jobseekers in Scotland may also be entitled to child care costs when applying for Training for Work. The Training for Work programme is the responsibility of the Scottish Executive. It is delivered by Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise who have discretion to fund child care costs for participants.

Child Poverty

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) if he will list for each year since 1997 the change in *(a)* numbers and *(b)* percentage of those children taken out of poverty; [91995]

(2) if he will list for each year since 1992 the percentage of children living in households below the poverty line. [91994]

Malcolm Wicks: Poverty is a complex and multidimensional problem. We published 'Opportunity for all—Fourth Annual Report' (Cm 5598) in September 2002, which contains information on a range of indicators of poverty for children and young people.

We expect to publish the preliminary conclusions of our consultation on Measuring Child Poverty in spring 2003.

Child Support

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when he intends to evaluate the outcomes of the child support reforms IT system testing. [91295]

Malcolm Wicks: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer I gave the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Duncan) on 27 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 317 W.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many CSA cases were referred to the Independent Case Examiner in the last year; what the average time taken to determine each case; what and how many complaints were upheld. [88155]

Malcolm Wicks: The information is in the table.

Further information is available in the Independent Case Examiner's Annual Report for 2001–02, a copy of which is available in the Library.

April 2001-March 2002

Complaints	*Number*
Complaints received	1,498
Accepted for examination	772
Resolved	424
Areas of complaint (per cent.)	
Delay	17.1
Error	7.0
Enforcement	4.6
Communication	23.6
Failure to take action	29.1
Staff bias/attitude	3.9
Compensation	6.8
Other	8.0
Average clearance time (weeks)	32.28
Findings	
Fully upheld	46
Partially upheld	141
Not upheld	26

Notes:

1. Complaints are only classified as fully, partially or not upheld if they cannot be resolved through conciliation between the client and the Child Support Agency.
2. It may be of interest for you to know that we are advised by the Agency that at the end of November 2002, the Agency's live and assessed caseload was 1,088,920.
3. Figures are in thousands and rounded to the nearest hundred.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if it is his intention to transfer the existing Child Support Agency caseload onto the new scheme on a single common date. [91296]

Malcolm Wicks: Current plans envisage that existing cases will be converted to the new scheme on a common date. Where it emerges that a new application for child support maintenance is linked to an existing case, for example, because the non-resident parent is the same person in both cases, then the existing case will be transferred to the new scheme early.

Clergy

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what effect changes proposed in the recent Green Paper on retirement would have on the retirement age of clergy. [90570]

Mr. Bell: I have been asked to reply.

Currently the majority of Church of England clergy must retire on reaching 70, under the Ecclesiastical Offices (Age Limit) Measure 1975. Since the Government is still consulting on how the Employment Directive—to which Chapter 6 of the Green Paper refers—should be implemented as regards discrimination on grounds of age, it is not yet possible to say what its effect will be and whether changes will be required to the 1975 Measure.

However, since most clergy choose to retire before reaching 70, I do not envisage significant effect in practice on the retirement age of clergy.

Computers

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions pursuant to his answer, ref. 88450, on the cost of new PCs installed in his Department, if he will provide a breakdown of the figure of £156.7 million into the cost of the *(a)* machines, *(b)* software and *(c)* network; how many machines were installed; what the average cost of each machine was; and if he will provide a breakdown of the figure of £58.5 million for installation costs, indicating what services were provided in relation to the installation of the machines. [89919]

Mr. McCartney: By 30 November 2002 the Department for Work and Pensions had installed 100,120 workstations (desktops and laptops) along with the associated software, smart card readers, printers, servers and switches.

The £156.7 million capital expenditure up to 30 November 2002 is broken down as follows.

	£ million
Desktops	85.2
Laptops	7.5
Printers	11.1
Software	18.2
Servers	24.0
Network Switches	10.7

The cost of a desktop workstation (including base unit, monitor, and keyboard) has been negotiated down from £838 to £804 during the course of rollout. The specification has also improved with each bulk order.

The £58.5 million installation costs are covered by two contracts with suppliers. The detailed breakdown of costs is commercially sensitive information which could enable suppliers to gain an advantage in pricing negotiations. Such information is not disclosed under part 2, paragraph 13 of the Code of Practice an Access to Government Information. However, the services provided are delivery, on-site allocation and testing, disposal and warehousing, implementation management, ordering, work scheduling, planning, central support, migration of data, network connection, on-site management and problem resolution.

Departmental Assets

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what sales of heritage assets and antique assets have been made by his Department since May 1997; and if he will list such assets; and if he will estimate the total sales proceeds. [92402]

Mr. McCartney: No sales of heritage or antique assets have been made by the Department for Work and Pensions since May 1997.

Disability Living Allowance

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many deaf people were provided with a qualified British Sign Language interpreter when attending a medical assessment for disability living allowance in each year since 1997. [92720]

Maria Eagle *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* The information requested is not available. SchlumbergerSema Medical Services do not keep records of the numbers of requests made for a Sign Language interpreter to attend at medical assessments. All customers are informed of the availability of interpreter services on request.

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many disability living allowance awards have been made for which deafness is the main disability condition, broken down by *(a)* age and *(b)* type of award, including (i) care only component, (ii) mobility only component and (iii) combined care and mobility components. [92721]

Maria Eagle *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* The information requested is detailed in the table.

Number of DLA recipients where the main disabling condition was deafness or deaf and blind, by age and component as at 31 May 2002

Thousands

		Higher care and		*Higher care only*	*Middle care and*		*Middle care only*	*Lower care and*		*Lower care only*	*Mobility*	
	All	*Higher mobility*	*Lower mobility*		*Higher mobility*	*Lower mobility*		*Higher mobility*	*Lower mobility*		*Higher*	*Lower*
All	28.5	0.6	[1]0.3	[1]0.2	0.7	9.7	8.1	[1]0.3	2.7	3.4	[1]0.4	2.0
0–4	1.3	—	—	[1]0.1	—	—	1.1	—	—	—	—	—
5–15	7.9	[1]0.2	[1]0.3	[1]0.1	[1]0.1	4.2	2.2	—	[1]0.2	[1]0.2	—	[1]0.4
16–24	4.0	—	—	—	—	1.8	0.9	—	[1]0.4	[1]0.3	—	[1]0.4
25–29	1.4	—	—	—	—	[1]0.4	[1]0.4	—	[1]0.2	[1]0.2	[1]0.1	[1]0.1
30–34	2.0	—	—	—	[1]0.1	0.6	0.6	—	[1]0.1	[1]0.4	—	[1]0.1
35–39	2.5	[1]0.1	—	—	[1]0.1	0.6	0.8	—	[1]0.4	[1]0.4	—	[1]0.2
40–44	2.1	—	—	—	[1]0.1	0.5	0.5	—	[1]0.4	0.5	—	—
45–49	1.3	—	—	—	—	[1]0.2	0.5	—	[1]0.1	[1]0.2	—	[1]0.2
50–54	1.4	—	—	—	[1]0.1	[1]0.3	[1]0.2	—	[1]0.2	[1]0.4	—	[1]0.2
55–59	1.8	—	—	—	[1]0.1	[1]0.5	[1]0.4	—	[1]0.3	[1]0.3	[1]0.1	[1]0.1
60–64	1.5	—	—	—	[1]0.1	[1]0.4	[1]0.3	[1]0.1	[1]0.2	[1]0.2	[1]0.1	[1]0.1
65+	1.3	[1]0.1	—	—	[1]0.1	[1]0.2	[1]0.2	[1]0.1	[1]0.1	[1]0.2	[1]0.1	[1]0.2

Source:

IAD Information Centre, data taken from 5 per cent. sample.

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many disability living allowance applications by people whose main disabling condition is deafness were refused at *(a)* initial application, *(b)* reconsideration and *(c)* aural tribunal in (i) England, (ii) Scotland and (iii) Wales in each year since 1997. [92722]

Maria Eagle *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* Information regarding applications which have been refused is not readily available by disabling condition and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Source:

IAD Information Centre.

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many disability living allowance awards there were to *(a)* disabled people and *(b)* people whose main disabling condition is deafness in each year since 1997; and how many of these were granted at (i) initial application, (ii) reconsideration and (iii) aural tribunal, in (A) England, (B) Wales and (C) Scotland. [92723]

Maria Eagle *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* The available information is set out in the tables. Figures for reconsideration are not available by disability or by region. We are currently unable to supply statistically reliable information on those successful at appeal.

Number of Disability Living Allowance awards to disabled people in general in England, Scotland and Wales since 1997

Thousand

	All	*England*	*Scotland*	*Wales*
1996–97	287.5	233.0	30.6	23.8
1997–98	248.0	202.4	26.5	19.1
1998–99	215.5	177.4	23.0	15.1
1999–2000	217.4	176.8	24.5	16.2
2000–01	254.0	208.8	28.0	17.1
2000–02	252.8	205.3	29.0	18.5

Note:

Figures are in thousands and rounded to the nearest hundred.

Source:

IAD Information Centre, data taken from 5 per cent. sample (1 June–31May each year).

Number of Disability Living Allowance awards where the main disabling condition is deafness or deaf and blind in England, Scotland and Wales since 1997

Thousand

	All	*England*	*Scotland*	*Wales*
1996–97	3.0	2.4	[1]0.3	[1]0.2
1997–98	4.5	4.0	[1]0.3	[1]0.2
1998–99	3.5	3.1	[1]0.2	[1]0.2
1999–2000	3.1	2.8	[1]0.2	[1]0.1
2000–01	3.0	2.6	[1]0.3	[1]0.2
2001–02	2.8	2.3	[1]0.3	[1]0.2

[1] Less than 500 and subject to a high degree of sampling variation.

Note:

Figures are in thousands and rounded to the nearest hundred.

Source:

IAD Information Centre, data taken from 5 per cent. sample (1 June–31 May each year)

Number of Disability Living Allowance awards granted on initial application in England, Scotland and Wales since 1997

Thousand

	All	*England*	*Scotland*	*Wales*
1996–97	234.0	191.9	22.9	19.2
1997–98	198.4	163.9	19.0	15.5
1998–99	173.5	144.6	16.7	12.2
1999/2000	178.3	146.2	18.8	13.4
2000–01	207.7	173.3	20.8	13.6
2001–02	210.1	173.1	21.5	15.5

Note:

Figures are in thousands and rounded to the nearest hundred.

Source:

IAD Information Centre, data taken from 5 per cent. sample (1 June–31 May each year).

Number of Disability Living Allowance awards granted on initial application where the main disabling condition is deafness or deaf and blind in England, Scotland and Wales since 1997

Thousand

	All	*England*	*Scotland*	*Wales*
1996–97	1.7	1.4	[1]0.1	[1]0.1
1997–98	2.3	2.1	[1]0.1	[1]0.1
1998–99	1.8	1.6	[2]—	[1]0.1
1999–2000	2.0	1.8	[1]0.1	[1]0.1
2000–01	2.0	1.8	[1]0.1	[1]0.1
2001–02	1.9	1.6	[1]0.2	[1]0.1

[1] Less than 500 and subject to a high degree of sampling variation.

[2] Nil or negligible.

Note:

Figures are in thousands and rounded to the nearest hundred.

Source:

IAD Information Centre, data taken from 5 per cent sample (1 June–31 May each year).

Number of Disability Living Allowance awards successful on reconsideration in Great Britain since 1997

	All
1996–97	68,710
1997–98	65,950
1998–99	51,650
1999–2000	42,755
2000–01	33,895
2001–02	30,960

Note:

Figures are rounded to the nearest 5.

Source:

IAD Information Centre, data taken from 100 per cent. monthly MIS data (1 June–31 May each year).

Successful includes awards which were increased and awards which were allowed.

Disability Living Allowance (Deaf Recipients)

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many disability living allowance recipients, whose main disabling condition is deafness, are aged between *(a)* 0 to 16 years and *(b)* 16 to 64 years and live in (i) England, (ii) Wales and (iii) Scotland. [92811]

Maria Eagle: The information is in the table.

Number of recipients of disability living allowance aged under 16 and 16 to 64 whose main disabling condition is deafness or deaf and blind at 31 August 2002.

Thousands

	England	*Wales*	*Scotland*
0–15	7.9	0.6	0.6
16–64	15.6	1.0	1.8

Note:

Figures are in thousands and rounded to the nearest hundred

Source:

IAD Information Centre, data taken from 5 per cent. sample as at 31 August 2002.

Disability Living Allowance (Fraud)

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what investigations were *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* completed in 2002 into fraud in disability living allowance claims. [93559]

Malcolm Wicks: During 2001–02, a total of 2,021 disability living allowance benefit fraud cases were investigated, and of these, 1,172 resulted in identification of an overpayment. In addition, a total of 404 disability living allowance instrument of payment fraud cases were investigated, and of these, 229 resulted in identification of an overpayment.

Source:

Disability and Carers' Benefit Unit management information.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what his assessment is of the level of fraud and the amount of money defrauded in disability living allowance in 2002. [93561]

Malcolm Wicks: The most recent assessment of the level of fraud in disability living allowance found confirmed fraud in 1.5 per cent. of cases. This equates to approximately £78 million per year.

Source:

National Benefit Review of Disability Living Allowance, published February 1997.

European Year of Disabled People

Sir Archy Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many regional and local projects to be funded as part of the European Year of Disabled People are based in *(a)* the Scottish Borders and *(b)* Scotland. [92624]

Maria Eagle: Of the 171 projects in the UK, 22 are based in Scotland. There are no projects based in the Scottish Borders but three of the 22 projects cover the whole of Scotland and will therefore benefit the Scottish Borders.

Fair Trade Criteria

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what fair trade criteria he sets when deciding upon what suppliers to use. [89915]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: I refer to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary on 9 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 92W, which sets out the Government-wide position.

The Department for Work and Pensions is committed to fair trade and ethical supply routes. There are no prescribed fair trade criteria, and each contract is considered individually on its merits in line with EC procurement regulations and Government policy regarding value for money. However, our supply policy is that supply decisions must be based on a balanced assessment of benefits which must include value for money and ethical issues across the whole supply chain. This policy allows individual procurement exercises to set the right criteria, including fair trade criteria, that are appropriate to the business requirement and the commodity or service being procured.

Income Support

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) how many people in receipt of income support have full refugee status; [89111]

(2) how many non-UK citizens who have been granted exceptional leave to remain in the United Kingdom are in receipt of income support; [89112]

(3) how many non-UK citizens are in receipt of income support by reason of their status of having suffered a recent upheaval in their country. [89118]

Malcolm Wicks: The information requested is not available.

Nationals from a country which my right hon. Friend, the Home Secretary, has declared a "country of upheaval" may claim asylum in this country. Asylum seekers no longer have access to income-related benefits, such as Income Support, as the National Asylum Support Service now deals with any claim for financial support.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many persons have claimed the minimum income guarantee in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire in each year since 1997. [93087]

Mr. McCartney: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available relates to the number of people receiving Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) and is shown in the table.

Minimum Income Guarantee: number of people receiving MIG as at August each year from 1997 to 2002

	County of Shropshire	*Parliamentary constituency of Shrewsbury and Atcham*
1997	7,900	2,900
1998	7,700	2,800
1999	7,600	2,800
2000	7,400	2,700
2001	7,800	2,900
2002	8,100	2,700

Minimum Income Guarantee (Pensioners)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many pensioners have benefited from the minimum income guarantee in *(a)* Coventry and *(b)* West Midlands. [92346]

Mr. McCartney: As at August 2002 there were 13,700 people benefiting from the Minimum Income Guarantee in Coventry and 219,800 in the West Midlands region.

Source: Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, August 2002

New Deal

Sir Archy Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what number and proportion of those on each option of the New Deal for Young People and for those aged over 25 years went into a sustained job, in the most recent period for which figures are available. [90373]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The information is in the tables.

New Deal for young people (from January 1998 to September 2002)

Stage of leaving	*Number of people leaving the New Deal*	*Number who left New Deal for a sustained, unsubsidised job*[1]	*Proportion of leavers who moved into a sustained, unsubsidised job (per cent.)*
From the gateway	429,500	187,400	43.6
After entering each option:			
Subsidised employment	58,800	28,600	48.6
Full-time education and training	100,500	31,000	30.8
Voluntary sector	58,700	18,900	32.2
Environment Task Force	56,700	17,400	30.7

In addition to these job outcomes, we know from survey findings that around 56 per cent. of young people who leave the New Deal for unknown destinations do, in fact, find work.

Pre-April 2001 New Deal 25 plus (from July 1998 to September 2002)

Stage of leaving	*Number of people leaving the New Deal*	*Number who left New Deal for a sustained, unsubsidized job*[1]	*Proportion of leavers who moved into a sustained, unsubsidised job (per cent.)*
From gateway	304,800	42,200	13,8
After entering each option:			
Subsidised employment	16 900	1 800	10.7
Full-time education and training	7,400	1,100	14.9
Work based learning for adults	23.100	2,500	10.8

In April 2001, New Deal 25 plus was extended and enhanced to provide a flexible, more individually-tailored service to help more people get jobs and remain in them. This included the introduction of an Intensive Activity Period (IAP) for participants after an initial Gateway period. The IAP provides a wider package of tailored help, which might combine, for example, work experience, work-focused training, help with motivation and soft skills, and help with job search. From April 2001, all those eligible for New Deal 25 plus joined this re-engineered programme.

Re-engineered New Deal 25 plus (from April 2001 to September 2002)

Stage of leaving	*Number of people leaving the New Deal*	*Number who left New Deal for a sustained, unsubsidised job*[1]	*Proportion of leavers who moved into a sustained, unsubsidised job (per cent.)*
From gateway	82.100	24.900	30.3
After entering each option:			
Subsidised employment	5,600	700	12.5
Basic employability training	4.300	800	18.6
Self employment	1,500	500	33.3
Education/Training opportunity	700	200	28.6
Work experience	8,500	1,900	22.4
Intensive activity period training	9.300	2.100	22.6
Other (includes training for work)	200	40	20.0

[1] Sustained employment is when a client has not returned to claim JSA within 13 weeks of leaving the programme.

Source:

New Deal Evaluation Database

Occupational Pension Schemes

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions whether the changes to the priority order for winding up occupational pensions proposed in his Pensions Green Paper will apply retrospectively. [illegible]3056]

Mr. McCartney: Changing the priority order would increase protection on winding up for some scheme members but others would receive less. This being the case, we do not currently propose to introduce regulations on a retrospective basis because, for some, this would mean reducing pension already promised or in payment.

However, this is a difficult and complex area and we will look very carefully at it during the consultation on the Pensions Green Paper.

Payments Programme

Sir Archy Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, if he will make a statement on the results of the recent review of the modernisation of the payments programme. [86704]

Malcolm Wicks: The gated review process within the Department allows for a number of formal reviews. The Payment Modernisation Programme successfully navigated through the Operational Readiness Review approval gateway during September and October.

This enabled the Programme to commence the first phase in the move towards Direct Payment, including mailings sent to Veterans Agency customers from 7 October and Child Benefit customers from 28 October 2002.

Pensions

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what his estimate is of the change as a percentage of gross domestic product in spending on pensions necessary to bring the average pension in the United Kingdom in line with that in *(a)* the Netherlands, *(b)* the USA, *(c)* Australia, *(d)* Japan, *(e)* Italy, *(f)* Germany, *(g)* France, *(h)* Sweden and *(i)* the average in the EU. [90124]

Mr. McCartney: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information that is available is set out in the following table.

Comparable cross-country data on public and private pensions expenditure are available only for European Union countries. According to data produced by Eurostat, the highest rate of old-age pension expenditure per capita is in the UK.

Expenditure on old age pensions at 1995 constant prices (index of EU average 1990 = 100) per head (population over 65)

	1999
France	111
Germany	102
Italy	113
Netherlands	108
Sweden	—
UK	134
EU-15	114

Notes:

1. Production of comparable cross-country estimates is extremely difficult due to substantially different rules in various countries. Eurostat say about their numbers:

"This indicator is not perfect. Old-age pensions may cover different areas in different countries, and the retirement age differs from country to country (for both the legal age and the effective age)."

However, Eurostat's: "European Social Statistics—Social Protection Expenditure and Receipts" (ESSPROS) is regarded as the best available measure.

2. The definition of pensions in the ESSPROS methodology includes basic and supplementary schemes, sometimes known as first-pillar and second pillar schemes, but excludes third-pillar arrangements, for example personal pensions in the UK. The ESSPROS pensions aggregate comprises of only part of periodic cash benefits under the disability, old-age, survivors and unemployment functions in ESSPROS.

3. In the case of the UK, the pensions aggregate recorded in ESSPROS comprises of benefits payable under the disability, old-age and survivors' functions and occupational pensions. It excludes lump-sum benefits payable on retirement (approximately 0.7 per cent. of GDP in 1999). Personal pensions are also not included in the ESSPROS social protection definition of pensions (approximately 1.5 per cent. of GDP in 1999).

4. Data are not available for Sweden.

Source:

Eurostat-ESSPROS, Statistics in Focus, June 2002, ISSN 1024-4352 www.europa.eu.int

Post Office Card Accounts

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what information the Government's public information campaign on the payment and banking options available for benefit customers has disseminated, with particular reference to the personal invitation documents for the Post Office card account. [91134]

Malcolm Wicks: The Government's information campaign, to support the move to Direct Payment, provides customers with factual information on the banking options available to them, including information on the Post Office card account. The information is presented in a way that enables customers to decide which option is best for their individual circumstances. Customers who want to open a Post Office card account are advised to contact the Department for Work and Pensions, who will issue them with a personal invitation document.

Prosecuting and Charging Standards

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will place in the Library the code for prosecutors and charging standards used by his Department when acting as a prosecuting authority. [88472]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Departmental officials follow the Code for Crown Prosecutors when taking the decision to prosecute and deciding what charges should be brought. The code is issued by the Director of Public Prosecutions under section 10 of the Prosecution of Offences Act 1985, and a copy is available in the Library.

Public-private Partnerships

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many departmental Minutes issued by his Department were outstanding on 30 November 2002 that referred to public-private partnerships, as included in Table B14 of the Consolidated Fund and National Loans Fund Accounts; and what their value was. [89417]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 13 January 2003]:* There were no departmental Minutes outstanding on 30 November 2002 that refer to public-private partnerships, as included in Table B14 of the Consolidated Fund and National Loans Fund Accounts.

Racial Harassment

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what rights victims of alleged racial harassment in the workplace have to paid legal representation in employment tribunals. [91949]

Alan Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

Generally, legal representation in employment tribunal proceedings in England and Wales is excluded from the scope of public funding, though funding for general legal advice falling short of advocacy is available under the Legal Help Scheme. However the Lord Chancellor has the power under Section 6(8)*(b)* of the Access to Justice Act 1999 to authorise funding in exceptional cases where the Legal Services Commission asks him to do so. In Scotland representation before an employment tribunal is available to anyone who meets the statutory tests for Assistance by Way of Representation (ABWOR). ABWOR allows a solicitor to appear on behalf of a client before the Tribunal.

In addition, under section 66 of the Race Relations Act (RRA) 1976, the Commission for Racial Equality has discretion to provide paid legal representation.

Same-sex Couples

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) what estimate has been made of the number of same-sex couples in long-term relationships living together who are currently treated as separate households for the purpose of state pension and other benefits; [89697]

(2) for which benefits heterosexual unmarried couples living together as husband and wife are treated as a couple when same-sex couples are treated as individuals; and for each of these benefits what estimate he has made *(a)* of the cost of treating same-sex couples as individuals and *(b)* the savings made by not treating such heterosexual couples as individuals. [89698]

Mr. McCartney *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* There is very little information about same-sex couples in this country. The Labour Force Survey suggests that there are about 50,000 cohabiting same-sex couples in the UK. Around one in twenty of the individuals in these couples say they are claiming income related benefits or tax credits. There appear to be very few who are pensioners. Same sex couples are treated as individuals for the purposes of determining entitlement to income related benefits.

We already treat same sex couples as individuals for the purpose of determining entitlement to income related benefits. Any estimate of the savings made from treating unmarried heterosexual couples as couples rather than as individuals would depend on assumptions about, for example, the number of individuals who would otherwise choose to claim benefit and about whether benefit would be paid for their children.

Notes:

a. Information is taken from the Labour Force Survey, spring 2002 and the Family Resources Survey 2001–02. However, they are very likely to under record the extent of same sex partnerships. In addition they will not necessarily capture all benefit recipients.

b. Definition of benefits includes all unemployment related benefits, including JSA (IB), IS, family related benefits or [illegible] credits and housing or council tax benefit.

c. There are very few pensioners recorded in the Family Resources Survey as being in same sex couples.

d. Estimated costs are based on the information in the Labour Force Survey and assumes that the proportion of working age individuals receiving benefit is the same for those in same-sex couples as in the wider population.

Standard Housing Allowance Pilot

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will estimate the cost of his standard housing allowance pilot in each of the next five financial years, identifying separately the cost of the evaluation of the pilots; and if he will estimate the eventual cost of the scheme if it were to apply to *(a)* all private rented accommodation nationwide and *(b)* all private or social rented accommodation nationwide. [93631]

Malcolm Wicks: Ten local authorities have been invited to be pathfinders for the standard local housing allowance pilot. We estimate that the pilot will cost around £20 million per year in additional benefit spending. Evaluation will cost around £2 million over the course of the project. We will be in a position to quantify the cost of supporting the pathfinder authorities in setting up and administering the scheme once all of the details of the pilot are worked out.

The cost of a nationwide scheme for the private rented sector would depend on the design of the scheme, which will be informed by the results from the pathfinders. We cannot, therefore, estimate the potential cost at this time.

It is not possible to estimate the cost of a housing allowance for social rented accommodation, which would have to be designed along different lines from the private rented sector pilot.

Targeting Fraud Campaign

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions by what means he assesses the effectiveness of the Targeting Fraud advertising campaign; and what his assessment is of its effectiveness. [92499]

Malcolm Wicks: The effectiveness of the Targeting Fraud advertising campaign is subject to a full evaluation after each major phase. In October 2001, a copy of the summary of the evaluation of the March 2001 burst of the Targeting Fraud campaign was placed in the Library. Evaluation shows that public attitudes are moving in a positive direction as a result of the campaign.

Tenancies

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, how many households in *(a)* private regulated tenancies and *(b)* private deregulated tenancies there were in each English region in each year since 1996. [91690]

Mr. McNulty: I have been asked to reply.

The private rented sector is now only some 10 per cent. of the whole housing market, and regulated tenancies have become only a small part of the private rented sector. This means that even though the Survey of English Housing is a large survey, the sample of regulated private tenancies is not large enough to allow reliable figures to be produced for individual regions and for individual years. Tabled is the estimated annual average number of regulated and deregulated tenancies for the period 1998–99 to 2001–02 for London, and for broad regional groupings. Annual estimates of regulated and deregulated tenancies in England are also shown from 1996–97 to 2001–02. There is no reason to expect that the trends in individual regions have been significantly different from those for England as a whole.

Regulated and deregulated[1] private tenancies

Thousands

	Regulated	*Deregulated*
Regional grouping: annual average (1998–99 to 2001–02)		
North[2]	39	402
Midlands[3]	22	222
South[4] except London	50	546
London	34	330
England	145	1,499
England: annual series		
1996–97	242	1,406
1997–98	205	1,486
1998–99	189	1,477
1999–2000	154	1,517
2001–01	122	1,434
2001–02	120	1,511

[1] Assured and assured short hold tenancies.

[2] North East, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber.

[3] East Midlands, West Midlands.

[4] East, South East, South West.

Source:

Survey of English Housing, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Winter Fuel Allowance

David Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many people over 60 qualify for the £200 Winter Fuel Allowance in Telford. [93282]

Mr. McCartney: The information is not available in the format requested. Most, but not all, people aged 60 and over are eligible for a Winter Fuel Payment. The vast majority of those eligible receive their payment automatically, without the need to claim. Of those who need to claim, it is up to the individual to choose whether to do so.

However, for winter 2001–02, payments of £200 were made to some 6,500 people living in Telford.

Note:

Figure is rounded to the nearest hundred.

Source:

Matching Intelligence Data Analysis Service Winter Fuels Payment 2001–02.

HEALTH

ACT

Mr. Tynan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research regarding changes to corporate investment behaviour consequential to the changes to ACT announced in the 1997 Budget has been *(a)* carried out and *(b)* commissioned by his Department. [92316]

Dawn Primarolo: I have been asked to reply.

The abolition of ACT was part of a package of measures introduced over the period 1997 to 1999 aimed at creating an improved climate for long term investment. Subsequent tax changes have also been designed to promote enterprise and encourage economic growth. There are practical difficulties in assessing the impact of these changes, and in any case, it does not make sense to evaluate the impact of one part of this series of measures in isolation.

Acute Beds

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the level of occupancy of *(a)* general and *(b)* acute beds in the NHS is. [91596]

Mr. Hutton: The average occupancy of beds in general and acute wards in 2001–02 was 86 per cent. This information is published annually on the Department's website at http://www.doh.gov.uk/hospitalactivity.

Acute Hospital Services

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the strategic reviews into the provision of acute hospital services that are taking place in the NHS in England; and when those reviews are due for completion. [91479]

Mr. Hutton: All strategic health authorities are in the process of developing local delivery plans for the next three years. These will show systematically how improvements will be made locally to deliver the increases in capacity and quality set out in the priorities and planning framework 2003–06 and will include acute hospital services.

Plans are due to be submitted to the Department by the end of March 2003.

Acute Hospitals

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects the changes to working patterns resulting from the Agenda for Change settlement will take effect in acute hospitals. [87535]

Mr. Hutton: Subject to the outcome of staff side consultation, the new national health service pay system is expected to be introduced in 'early implementer' sites, including some acute hospitals, in June 2003 and will be implemented across the rest of the NHS from October 2004. The new pay system will give NHS organisations much greater flexibility to design jobs and working practices around the needs of NHS patients both in the short term following implementation and on an ongoing basis in the future.

Ambulance Services

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the diversion policies operated by ambulance services. [88162]

Mr. Lammy: National health service ambulance services will decide to which accident and emergency department they will take a patient depending on the local circumstances prevailing at the time. They will use local information to make that decision.

Anit-smoking Campaigns

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will take steps to ensure that forthcoming public information anti-smoking campaigns will raise awareness of the link between smoking and stroke; and what targets have been set to reduce the number of stroke deaths caused by smoking. [90553]

Ms Blears: The Department's current television advertising campaign is based on testimonials in which real people describe the effects of their illnesses and their feelings about having smoked.

Since January 2002, one of the testimonials we are showing has featured a 38-year-old man who describes how his life has been devastated by a series of smoking related strokes.

One of the warnings required to appear on cigarette packets in accordance with the Tobacco Products (Manufacture, Presentation and Sale) (Safety) Regulations 2002 warns that, "Smoking clogs the arteries and causes heart attacks and strokes".

Although no specific targets have been set for stroke deaths, we have a series of smoking prevalence targets. By reducing the overall level of smoking we will tackle all smoking related illness, including strokes. My officials have recently met with the Stroke Association to examine what more can be done to raise awareness of the risks of smoking related strokes.

Body Piercing

Ms Munn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will introduce legislation to prohibit body piercing of minors without their parents' or guardians' consent; if he will list the statutory provisions which cover the body piercing of minors. [92520]

Ms Blears: The Government have no current plans to introduce legislation to make the body piercing of minors without their parents' or guardians' consent a criminal offence, as this might lead to them piercing themselves or each other in an unsafe and unhygienic manner or to going to disreputable businesses. We keep the position under review.

There are no statutory provisions relating specifically to the cosmetic body piercing of minors. The following statutory provisions are relevant to the regulation of cosmetic body piercing businesses:

London Local Authorities Act 2000

London Local Authorities Act 1995

London Local Authorities Act 1991

Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982 (relates to ear piercing)

Greater London Council (General Powers) Act 1981

In general, body piercing organisations and local authorities take the good practice view that children, either under 16 or under 18 years of age (depending on viewpoint), should not have body piercing without parental consent. However, practice by individual businesses may vary.

Ms Munn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received on the need for further regulation of body piercing; what plans he has for the further regulation of body piercing; and what recent consultations the Government have had with local authorities concerning the body piercing of minors. [92521]

Ms Blears: Since January 2002, we have received a small number of representations about the regulation of body piercing businesses.

We intend to introduce primary legislation to give local authorities outside London specific powers to regulate cosmetic body piercing business, when parliamentary time allows.

We have had no recent consultations with local authorities about the cosmetic body piercing of minors.

Cancelled Operations

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cancelled operations there were at each NHS hospital in each of the past four quarters. [91480]

Mr. Hutton: I refer the hon. Member to the response I gave him on Wednesday 15 January 2003, *Official Report*, at column 676W.

Child Offenders

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children have *(a)* been convicted, *(b)* been in the care of a local authority for a year or more, *(c)* received a reprimand and *(d)* received a final warning, in each year since 1997. [85639]

Mr. Denham: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested is contained in the tables.

Number of 10 to 17 years cautioned, given final warnings or reprimands, and found guilty of all offences at all courts 1997 to 2001[1]

Number

	Cautioned	*Given final warning*	*Reprimanded*	*Found guilty*
England and Wales				
1997	104,520	—[2]	—[2]	79,151
1998	109,725	—[2]	—[2]	86,506
1999	103,978	—[2]	—[2]	90,280
2000[3]	36,764	42,773	18,004	91,423
2001	—[2]	66,538	31,504	95,530

[1] These data are on the principal offence basis.

[2] Not applicable.

[3] Final warnings and reprimands were implemented nationally from 1 June 2000.

Children who ceased to be looked after by local authorities during the years ending 31 March 1997 to 2001

Number

	Number of children	*Of which looked after for 1 year or more*
England		
1997	30,300	9,700
1998	29,000	9,600
1999	27,100	8,500
2000	26,800	10,100
2001	25,100	10,700

Source:
Department of Health

Child Organs

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to ensure that families of children whose organs were retained without their consent receive compensation on a consistent basis across the country, regardless of which hospital was involved; and if he will make a statement. [92813]

Mr. Lammy: The NHS Litigation Authority is dealing with the retained organs litigation action and negotiations are subject to a confidentiality agreement between all parties. Both the Liverpool and nationwide group actions will be dealt with on their legal merits and any settlement will reflect this principle.

Children (Mental Health Problems)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will make a statement on his assessment of the risk factors increasing the likelihood of mental health problems in children; [91989]

(2) if he will list for each year since 1997 the percentage of children who were diagnosed as suffering from each category of mental disorder. [91988]

Jacqui Smith: A survey of the mental health of children and adolescents in Great Britain was carried out in 1999 by the Office for National Statistics on behalf of the Department of Health, Scottish National Executive and National Assembly for Wales. Prevalence rates were produced for five to 15-year-olds in the three main categories of mental disorder; ie, conduct disorder, hyperactivity and emotional disorder.

The key findings on prevalence were that:

about 10 per cent. of children aged five to 15 in Great Britain had a mental disorder in 1999;

5 per cent. had conduct disorders (eg aggressive and antisocial behaviour), 4 per cent. had emotional disorders (eg anxiety, depression) and 1 per cent. were hyperkinetic (inattention, over-activity);

mental disorders were significantly more common in boys than girls in both the five to 10 and the 11 to 15-year-old age groups.

The survey also found that mental disorders were more likely among children:

in lone parent compared with two parent families

who had a parent with a mental disorder

in families of social class V (unskilled occupations) compared with social class I (professional occupations)

in families with a gross weekly household income of less than £200 compared with £500 or more

who had a physical health complaint

who had special educational needs.

The prevalence of mental disorders in children were not unexpected nor were the associations between the risk factors and levels of disorder. They are in line with similar studies in Western Europe and the United States. This information has proved very useful in providing a benchmark for further work, such as that being undertaken by the child and adolescent mental health module of the Children's National Service Framework.

Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what remuneration *(a)* the Chairman *(b)* the Chief Executive and *(c)* each commissioner of the new Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health will receive. [92594]

Mr. Lammy: The Chair of the Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health receives £25,000 per annum. Each commissioner receives £5,305 per annum. The Chief Executive post was advertised at between £80,000 to £100,000 per annum.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will name those people who took part in the interview and selection process for the position of Chairman at the new Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health; and how many people applied for the position. [92597]

Mr. Lammy: The selection and interview panel consisted of Sir William Wells, chair of the national health service independent appointments commission, Sarah Mullally, chief nursing officer at the Department of Health, and Harry Cayton, chief executive of the Alzheimers Society and the director for patients' experience and public involvement at the Department of Health.

The independent assessor, supplied by the office of the commissioner for public appointments, was Cindy Butts. 52 people applied for the position.

Congestion Charge

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received from within the NHS in London about the impact of the congestion charge. [91477]

Mr. Hutton: I have received three letters from national health service professionals employed in London about the impact of the congestion charge. No representations have been received from NHS organisations.

Correspondence

Mrs. Roe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when the hon. Member for Broxbourne will receive a reply to her letters of 11 September, 8 October, 7 November and 5 December, relating to her constituent, Miss P. V. Kennion; [87005]

(2) when he will reply to the letters from the hon. Member for Broxbourne of *(a)* 11 September 2002, *(b)* 8 October 2002, *(c)* 7 November 2002, *(d)* 5 December 2002 and *(e)* 7 January relating to Miss P. V. Kennion of Broxbourne, a constituent. [90222]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answers 16 December 2002 and 13 January 2003]:* I understand that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs sent a reply on 21 January.

Delayed Discharges

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many beds were subject to delayed discharge in each hospital trust in England as at *(a)* 31 December 2002 and *(b)* 31 December 2001. [89936]

Jacqui Smith: The table shows the data for England from September 2001 to September 2002. Information for December 2002 is not yet available. The detailed breakdowns of these figures by health authorities and primary care trusts have been placed in the Library.

England: numbers of delayed discharges of patients of all ages by primary care trust[1]

	Number	*Rate (percentage)*
September 2002	5,385	5.1
June 2002	5,489	5.1
March 2002	5,473	5.2
December 2001	6,419	6.1
September 2001	7,065	6.6

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[1] March 2002, December 2001 and September 2001 figures were collected by health authorities.

Departmental Performance Report

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will publish his Department's Autumn Performance Report, Service Delivery Agreements and Departmental Investment Strategy. [92157]

Mr. Lammy: In December 2002, the Department published the chief executive's Report to the National Health Service, setting out progress during 2001–02 and for the first six months of the year.

This report sets out clearly how the increased resources within the NHS are being used improve performance by providing more care for patients, improving quality and providing investment for the future. We intend to link this report to Her Majesty's Treasury website and will review it to ensure it covers reporting of public service agreement performance in full.

The Departmental Investment Strategy, which explains the Department's capital investment plans for the years 2003–4 to 2005–6, will be published shortly, before Her Majesty's Treasury's March Budget Announcement.

Departmental Running Costs

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the running costs of *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of its sponsored agencies were in (i) 1997 and (ii) the most recent year for which figures are available. [90711]

Mr. Lammy: Detailed information on administration costs for the Department of Health administration costs expenditure and its agencies, going back to 1998–99 and with projections to 2003–04, is set out in Figure 8.1 of the 2002 Departmental Report (CM5403). Copies are available in the Library.

Data for years before 1998–99 are not available on the same basis. Provisional out-turn for gross and net administration costs limits were published in Public Expenditure 2001–02 provisional out-turn (Cm 5574), Tables 4 and 5. Updated information, with plans to 2005–06 will be published in the 2003 Departmental Report in the spring.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the distribution of his Department's wholetime equivalent staff was, including the staff in agencies and other bodies reporting to him was in each Government office region and nation of the UK *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the most recent available period. [90477]

Mr. Lammy: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State at the Cabinet Office (Mr. Alexander) on 15 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 609W.

Draft Mental Health Bill

Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what proportion of the responses to the draft Mental Health Bill consultation came from Wales; [87732]

(2) when he plans to publish a summary of the responses to the draft Mental Health Bill consultation. [87731]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answers 17 December 2002]:* We have received over 1,900 responses to the consultation on the draft Mental Health Bill. We are currently considering them carefully. The results of the consultation will be made public in due course. Approximately 17 per cent., have been identified as from people and organisations based in Wales.

Drugs Budget

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to the Answer of 8 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 277W, on the drugs budget, what the budgets were for this provision. [91592]

Mr. Hutton: The answer of 8 January, 2003 *Official Report*, column 277W, gave figures for the total expenditure on drugs for National Health Service trusts in England between 1998–99 and 2001–02.

The Department does not hold information on resources set aside by NHS trusts for the provision of drugs.

The resource amounts set aside from the unified allocation for drugs are essentially a local decision for NHS trusts to agree, in collaboration with primary care trusts, strategic health authorities and pre 2002–03 health authorities. NHS trust drug budgets are held and managed locally.

Entertainment

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his estimate is of the total spending of his Department on entertainment in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92383]

Mr. Lammy: Expenditure arises on hospitality and entertainment only in the context of promoting the Department's business objectives. All such expenditure is made in accordance with published departmental guidance on financial procedures and propriety, based on the principles set out in Government Accounting.

Information in the required form is only available from 1995–96. The total amount spent by the Department of Health on hospitality since 1995–96 is as follows:

	£
1995–96	73,516
1996–97	105,192
1997–98	90,883
1998–99	67,953
1999–2000	50,114
2000–01	93,091
2001–02	121,968
2002–03	88,503

The 2002–03 figure represents expenditure from April to December.

Fruit and Vegetable Consumption

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to the answer of 15 January (ref. 84461), what cost benefit analysis has been carried out on expenditure on promoting consumption of fruit and vegetables. [92006]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* Increasing intakes of fruit and vegetables could reduce the risk of deaths from chronic disease, such as heart disease, stroke and cancer, by up to 20 per cent.

The two major spending programmes to promote consumption, the national school fruit scheme and local Five-a-day community initiatives, are being funded by the new opportunities fund which will be commissioning detailed evaluations of their effect on diet including consumption of fruit and vegetables.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to the answer of 15 January (ref. 84461), by how much consumption of *(a)* fruit and *(b)* vegetables has changed since 2001. [92007]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* National trends in fruit and vegetable consumption since 2001 cannot as yet be fully ascertained due to the considerable time it takes to undertake dietary surveys and their analyses. The latest national food survey data shows that between 1999 and 2000, household weekly purchase of fruit and fruit juice continued to increase, from 1,063 g to 1,121 g, whereas household consumption of vegetables continued to decrease, from 1,095 g to 1,077 g. This information does not take account of wastage.

National evaluation of pilot five a day community initiatives—one year intervention between 2000 and 2001—showed that the initiatives stemmed a fall in fruit and vegetable intakes. There was no overall change in fruit and vegetable intake in the intervention group but there was a fall in intake by almost half a portion in the control group. The intervention was found to have had a positive effect in people with the lowest intakes. Those who ate less than five a day at baseline increased their intakes by one portion over the course of the study.

Detailed information on fruit and vegetable intakes was collected as part of the Health Survey for England for the first time during 2002. The collection of this information in future years will allow an examination of national trends by age, sex and geographic region.

Health and Safety

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what information he has collated on the application to his Department and its agencies of the checklist, circulated by letter by Sir Richard Mottram, referred to under Action Point 12 of the revitalising health and safety strategy statement; and if he will make a statement; [89492]

(2) whether his Department and its agencies have met the commitment arising from Action Point 13 of the June 2000 Strategy statement on revitalising health and safety to summarise health and safety performance and plans in annual reports from the year 2000–01 onwards. [89490]

Mr. Lammy: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State for Work and Pensions (Mr. Smith) on 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 85W.

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which senior officials within his Department and its agencies take responsibility for health and safety at board or equivalent level; and where their names are publicised. [89491]

Mr. Lammy: Hugh Taylor, the Director of Corporate Affairs, will shortly be appointed by the Chief Executive as the board member with specific lead responsibility for health and safety in the Department of Health. Details of the appointment will be publicised in the annual report and included in the revised health and safety policy statement for the Department. The policy statement will be available on the Department's website.

Roy Alder, Head of Executive Support, is responsible within the Medicines Control Agency (MCA). His name is publicised on the MCA website and in the Agency's published annual report and accounts.

Tom Crawley, Branch Head of Corporate Services, is responsible within the Medical Devices Agency (MDA). His name is publicised in the MDA's annual report, though without specific reference to health and safety.

Peter Wearmouth, Chief Executive of NHS Estates (NHSE), holds overall responsibility within NHSE. This is publicised in the Agency's annual report and to staff at their induction.

John Short, Health and Safety Officer for the NHS Estates Agency, is the executive officer responsible for ensuring Estates complies with British and appropriate European legislation concerning health and safety. This information is publicised on the Estates intranet, on the health and safety law poster and to staff at their induction.

Pat Corless, the acting Chief Executive, has framework document responsibility for health and safety within the NHS Pensions Agency (NHSPA). Nigel Holden, the Resource and Development Director, has board level responsibility for health and safety within NHSPA. Nigel Holden is named in the annual report as the lead on health and safety.

Chris Uden, the NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency's Director of Corporate Development, is the nominated board level lead for health and safety matters within the Agency. This is publicised within the Agency during staff induction sessions and in the minutes of the health and safety policy group meetings.

Heritage and Antique Assets

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what sales of heritage assets and antique assets have been made by his Department since May 1997; if he will list such assets; and if will estimate the total sales proceeds. [92384]

Mr. Lammy: The Department has not sold any heritage assets or antique assets in the period since May 1997.

This answer does not include information about the national health service.

Hospitals (Somerset)

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many tasks he has set for each hospital in Somerset; and when they are due to be completed. [91507]

Ms Blears: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has set no tasks specifically for hospitals in Somerset. Service delivery targets for the whole health system were set out in the NHS Plan.

HPA

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to maintain intelligence and service delivery in health protection after 1 April 2003 across the new structure for health protection. [90051]

Ms Blears: We propose to establish the Health Protection Agency as a special health authority from 1 April 2003. As outlined in my response of 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 130W, to the hon. Member, the Department has identified interim organisational arrangements to ensure that the HPA can maintain intelligence and service delivery at national level. Similar arrangements are being finalised at regional and local level, including the identification of interim leads on microbiology services at regional level, to co-ordinate and support the public health outputs of HPA and national health service microbiology laboratories.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the action plan for the creation of the HPA has been updated since 30 November 2002. [90063]

Ms Blears: The action plan is regularly updated.

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the ability of the HPA to respond to a biological attack on the UK during the first six months of its operations. [90070]

Ms Blears: We propose to establish the Health Protection Agency (HPA) as a special health authority from 1 April 2003. The establishment of the HPA will improve our ability to respond to the deliberate release of biological agents and other hazards. In particular, HPA will be able to tackle incidents in a very structured way, especially those where it is not clear at the outset what the nature of the problem might be.

We shall be looking to the HPA to deliver a robust service, including the response to outbreaks caused by deliberate release of biological agents. We envisage that local, regional and national public health teams will be assisted by better microbiological services consisting of a complementary network of local public health and regional microbiologists, working with others at the national level, all of whom will have responsibility for operational support in the event of a major incident, including biological attacks. Interim management arrangements are being put in place at national, regional and local level to ensure that the HPA will be able to address key threats from its inception.

Surveillance to detect untoward events and outbreaks will continue to be monitored by the communicable disease surveillance centre. This new, nationally consistent, coherent and co-ordinated approach offers better public health security to detect and respond to outbreaks of infection.

Lifestyle Survey

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to the answer of 15 January (ref. 84467 and 84461), if he will list the programmes and the amount of money spent on each. [92009]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* The Department commissions several annual surveys that include questions on lifestyle issues:

The Health Survey for England is a series of annual surveys about the health of people in England. This information is used to underpin and improve targeting of nation-wide health policies. The survey was carried out in 1991–1993 by the Office for Population Censuses and Surveys, which is now part of the Office for National Statistics (ONS). From 1994 onwards, the survey has been carried out by the joint survey unit of the national centre of social research and the department of epidemiology and public health at University College, London. The survey includes questions on smoking, drinking, obesity, fruit and vegetable consumption and in certain years, physical activity, but it extends beyond lifestyle questions and covers a wide range of subjects to do with the general health of the population.

The ONS general household survey, "Living in Britain", is a continuous survey which has been running since 1971 and is based each year on a sample of the general population resident in private; that is, non-institutional, households in Great Britain. It covers a wide range of topics of relevance to households, families and individuals, including questions on smoking and drinking.

The ONS omnibus survey is a multi-purpose survey carried out by the ONS for Government Departments and other public or non-profit making bodies.

Interviewing is carried out every month and each month's questionnaire covers a variety of topics, reflecting different user's requirements. Included among these from time to time will be questions on smoking, drinking and contraception.

The annual survey of drug use, smoking and drinking among young people in England is part of a series established in 1982 and provides national estimates of the proportion of young people aged 11–15 who smoke, drink alcohol and/or take illegal drugs.

Costs in 2001–02

	£ million
Health Survey for England	2.75
General Household Survey	[1]0.26
Omnibus Surveys	[1]0.24
Drug Use Smoking and Drinking[1]	0.18

[1] Represents the cost of the Department of Health contribution to the ONS.

M&M Impact Ltd.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) which NHS trusts in the North West have contracts with M&M Impact Ltd., formerly known as M&M Associates; [88012]

(2) when the tendering process took place for the public relations contract with *(a)* Warrington Hospital NHS Trust and *(b)* North Cheshire Hospital NHS Trust; and in each case, (i) where advertisements inviting tenders were placed, (ii) how many applications were received and (iii) how many applications were received from firms based in Warrington. [88013]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answers 19 December 2002]:* The tendering process for the public relations contract with Warrington Hospital took place in December 1994 and there has been no subsequent re-tendering for this contract. Invitations to tender were issued to three external organisations and one in-house bidder. Information regarding any advertisements which may have appeared eight years ago is no longer available.

Four applications were received; in additional to the in-house bid there was one bid from a company based in Warrington. The lowest bid was successful.

M&M Impact Ltd. and M&M Associates are separate companies. M&M Impact is a design consultancy. None of the national health service trusts in the Cheshire and Merseyside Strategic Health Authority area hold contracts with M&M Impact.

Three NHS trusts within the StHA area hold contracts with M&M Associates: North Cheshire Hospitals; Wirral Hospitals and Cheshire and Wirral Partnership. In addition, Bebington and West Wirral and Birkenhead and Wallasey Primary care trusts are honouring a contract previously held by the former Wirral Health Authority, which ends in March 2003.

Mersey Regional Ambulance Service

Helen Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place a copy of the report by Dr. Kirkup on Mersey Regional Ambulance Service in the Library. [84283]

Jacqui Smith: I have today arranged for a copy of the Kirkup Report to be placed in the Library.

Milk

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what evidence he has assessed concerning the introduction of cows' milk in infant diets before the age of two and the incidence of iron deficiency anaemia. [91077]

Ms Blears: The Department undertakes regular surveys to monitor the diet and health of children. The National Diet and Nutrition Survey showed that more than one in ten children aged 1½ to 2½ years were anaemic. Early introduction of cow's milk is associated with increased risk of anaemia. The Infant Feeding Survey 2000 reported that by the age of nine months 54 per cent. had introduced cow's milk, compared to 61 per cent. in 1995, while 8 per cent. were giving cow's milk as a main drink, compared to 15 per cent. in 1995.

The Department recommends that unmodified cow's milk be given as a main drink only after the age of one year and may be used in small quantities in the preparation of solid foods in the second half of infancy. After one year, diet should include a variety of foods to ensure that it is adequate in iron, vitamin C and D.

Miller Group

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the property portfolio being transferred to Miller Group as part of the acquisition of inventures. [92526]

Mr. Lammy: The list of properties in the portfolio being sold to Miller/HBOS is still in the process of being finalised.

Minimum Wage

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the impact of increasing the minimum wage *(a)* in line with average earnings, *(b)* to £4.17 per hour, *(c)* to £4.87 per hour, *(d)* to £5.00 per hour and *(e)* to £5.30 per hour, on the cost of salaries of departmental employees (i) in total and (ii) for each nation of the United Kingdom in the next financial year. [90607]

Mr. Lammy: We are unable to provide data on the impact of increasing the minimum wage in line with average earnings as these statistics are not collected centrally.

There would be no impact on the Department of Health of increasing the minimum wage by the amounts listed.

The minimum wage in the Department of Health, as of August 2002, is 11,100 (Full time equivalent).

For staff based in London (36 hours per week) this works out to be 5.90 per hour.

For staff based outside of London (37 hours per week) this works out to be 5.74 per hour.

Ministerial Visits

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he next plans to visit a children's hospice. [87470]

Ms Blears: There are no current plans in my right hon. Friend's official diary to visit a children's hospice. Should a request to do so be received in the Department, he will give it his full consideration.

Mixed Sex Wards

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which hospitals in the south west have mixed-sex wards. [88004]

Ms Blears: The information requested is not collected at individual hospital level but at trust level.

The reasons for measuring at trust level is because hospital wards generally care for both men and women. To provide the required levels of privacy and dignity for patients, wards are split into single sex bays, or single rooms, or otherwise configured to provide adequate segregation of gender. It is the responsibility of each national health service trust to determine the most appropriate configuration to meet their specific requirements.

In 1998, we set three clear objectives which were designed to deliver separate sleeping areas and separate toilet and washing facilities for men and women, and to safeguard the privacy and dignity of patients who are mentally ill.

Today, 98 per cent. of NHS trusts provide single-sex sleeping accommodation and have robust operational policies in place which protect patients' privacy and dignity. 95 per cent. of NHS trusts have met additional criteria set for mental health facilities. The target to provide separate toilet and washing facilities for men and women will be met by the end of March. 93 per cent. of NHS trusts currently meet this requirement, and a further 2 per cent. of NHS trusts have works underway to deliver the required standard, affecting just 32 wards, which will be completed by the end of the March.

Nationally, over 98 per cent. of NHS wards meet privacy and dignity guidelines. New hospitals and hospital facilities currently being built will bring the remaining wards to the necessary standard.

Mortuary Provision

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what actions the Government have taken with regard to the provision of mortuary facilities in the NHS in the past year. [88425]

Mr. Hutton: The Government have published the NHS estates document, "Health Building Note 20 Facilities for mortuary and post-mortem room services", giving revised guidance on the planning and design of comprehensive NHS mortuary and post mortem facilities.

The document is available on www.nhsestates.gov.uk.

NHS Advertising

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the purpose was of the recent NHS advertisement in the German press entitled "Become one in a million". [91114]

Mr. Hutton: The aim was to attract suitably qualified senior doctors who were interested in working in the National Health Service.

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans there are for the NHS to advertise for consultants and general practitioners in the foreign media; and if he will list such campaigns since 1 May 1997. [91115]

Mr. Hutton: The Department did not undertake any advertising in foreign media before August 2001. Since that date the following advertisements have been placed.

In addition, national health service employers have placed advertisements for specific vacancies.

The Department plans to advertise the International Fellowship Scheme in March to April and September to October 2003. Plans for additional advertising have not yet been finalised.

Date	*Advertisement*	*Countries*
August 2001	Consultant recruitment	Spain
September 2001	General practitioner recruitment	Spain
September 2001	Consultant and general practitioner recruitment	Europe, North America, Australasia and the Middle East
January 2002	Consultant and general practitioner recruitment	Germany
March 2002	International Fellowship Scheme	Europe, North America and Australasia
August 2002	Consultant and general practitioner recruitment	Germany
September and December 2002	International Fellowship Scheme	Europe, North America and Australasia
September 2002	General practitioner recruitment	Europe
December 2002	Consultant and general practitioner recruitment	Europe
December 2002	Seminar publicity	Germany, Austria and Switzerland
December 2002	Consultant and general practitioner recruitment	Spain

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what will be the total cost of *(a)* the recent NHS advertisement in the German press entitled 'Become one in a million' and *(b)* the seminars referred to in the advertisement. [91116]

Mr. Hutton: The most recent advertisement that appeared in the German press entitled 'Become one in a million' cost £5,794 in total. The seminars referred to in the advertisement in Vienna and Salzburg will cost £5,500. Costs for the seminar in Dusseldorf have not yet been finalised.

NHS Direct

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the expected waiting time is for patients to speak to a doctor when calling NHS Direct. [86070]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answer 10 December 2002]:* There is no expected time for a patient to speak to a doctor when calling NHS Direct. NHS Direct is a nurse led service.

NHS Doctors

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the annual *(a)* total and *(b)* percentage increases in the number of NHS doctors have been in each year since 1992. [91593]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is shown in the table.

All NHS doctors[1] (excluding GP retainers) in England, 1992–2001

		Change	
Year	*Total*	*Year*	*Percentage*
1992	79,232	1992–93	1.9
1993	80,739	1993–94	0.7
1994	81,319	1994–95	3.9
1995	84,459	1995–96	2.5
1996	86,584	1996–97	3.5
1997	89,619	1997–98	2.5
1998	91,837	1998–99	2.3
1999	93,981	1999–2000	2.5
2000	96,319	2000–01	3.0
2001	99,169	—	—

[1] Includes NHS Hospital, Public Health Medicine, Community Health Service medical and dental doctors and General Medical Practitioners (GMS Unrestricted Principals, PMS Salaried GPs, PMS Contracted GPs, Restricted Principals, Assistants, GP Registrars, Salaried Doctors (Para 52 SFA) and PMS Others). GP Retainers were first counted in 1999 and have been omitted for comparability purposes.

Sources:

Department of Health General and Personal Medical Services Statistics. Data as at 1 October 1992–99 and 30 September 2000–01.

Department of Health non-medical workforce census. Data as at 30 September each year.

NHS Indicators

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to publish key indicators about NHS performance and staffing in 2003. [91478]

Mr. Hutton: As the independent regulator for national health service performance, the Commission for Health Improvement will be responsible for all future publications of NHS performance ratings. The next publication will be in summer 2003.

It is intended that statistics on NHS workforce numbers will be published before the end of the financial year. Vacancy data at March 2003 will be published in the second half of 2003.

NHS Staff (Herefordshire)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* general practitioners, *(b)* nurses and *(c)* consultants are employed in Herefordshire. [91736]

Mr. Lammy: The information requested is shown in the table.

All General Medical Practitioners[1], Nurses[2] and HCHS Consultants in Herefordshire Health Authority as at 30 September 2001

	Numbers (headcount)
General Medical Practioners	137
Nurses	1,071
Consultants	72

[1] Includes GMS Unrestricted Principals, PMS Contracted GPs, PMS Salaried GPs, Restricted Principals, Assistants, GP Registrars, Salaried Doctors (Para 52 SFA), PMS Other and GP Retainers.

[2] Includes HCHS qualified nurses and General Practice Nurses

Sources:

Department of Health General and Personal Medical Services Statistics

Department of Health medical workforce census

Department of Health non-medical workforce census

NHS Treatment Abroad

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions his Department has had with healthcare officials in Tunisia about possible treatment of NHS patients. [92535]

Mr. Hutton: The Department has not held any discussions with healthcare officials in Tunisia about possible treatment of national health service patients, nor has it any plans to do so.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether any of his officials have visited hospitals in Tunisia. [92536]

Mr. Hutton: No departmental officials have visited any hospitals in Tunisia, nor do they have plans to do so.

Nursing Vacancies (Somerset)

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many nursing vacancies there were in each Somerset NHS trust in *(a)* March 1997 and *(b)* December 2002; and if he will make a statement. [92561]

Ms Blears: The Department's three-month vacancy survey has been collected yearly since March 1999 and is therefore not available for 1997.

However, the numbers of nursing vacancies in each Somerset national health service trust for the two nearest dates (March 1999 and March 2002) are shown in the tables.

Department of Health Vacancies Survey, March 1999—vacancies in NHS trusts in England and Somerset Health Authority area by trust, qualified nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff—three month vacancy rates, numbers and staff in post

	Qualified nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff (excluding HA staff)			
	Three month vacancy rate (percentage)	*Three month vacancy (number)*	*Staff in post (whole-time equivalent)*	*Staff in post (headcount)*
England (excluding HA staff)	2.8	7,147	246,965	304,230
Somerset HA trusts total	1.6	31	1,857	2,333
Avalon Somerset NHS Trust	0.3	1	304	331
East Somerset NHS Trust	0.7	4	519	704
Taunton and Somerset NHS Trust	2.4	26	1,034	1,298

Notes:

1. Three month vacancy information is as at 31 March 1999.
2. Three month vacancies are vacancies which trusts are actively trying to fill, which had lasted for three months or more (whole time equivalents).
3. Three month vacancy rates are three month vacancies expressed as a percentage of three month vacancies plus staff in post.
4. Three month vacancy rates are calculated using staff in post from the Non-Medical Census, September 1998.
5. Staff in post data are from the Non-Medical Census, September 1998.
6. Staff in post data exclude staff employed by health authorities, as vacancy information was only collected from trusts.
7. Vacancy and staff in post numbers are rounded to the nearest whole number.
8. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.
9. Due to rounding, totals may not equal the sum of component parts.
10. Calculating the vacancy rates using the above data may not equal the actual vacancy rates.
11. HA figures are based on trusts, and do not necessarily reflect the geographical provision of healthcare.

Sources:

Vacancy numbers and rates: Department of Health Vacancies Survey March 1999

Non medical staff in post: Department of Health Non-Medical workforce census September 1998

Department of Health Vacancies Survey, March 2002—vacancies in NHS trusts in England and Somerset Health Authority area by trust, qualified nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff—three month vacancy rates, numbers and staff in post

	Qualified nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff (excluding HA staff)			
	Three month vacancy rate (percentage)	*Three month vacancy (number)*	*Staff in post (whole-time equivalent)*	*Staff in post (headcount)*
England (excluding HA staff)	3.1	8,394	265,717	329,981
Somerset HA trusts total	0.4	8	2,187	2,826
Somerset Coast PCT	3.3	6	181	269
Mendip PCT	0.0	0	132	175
East Somerset Hospital NHS Trust	0.0	0	570	756
Taunton and Somerset Hospital NHS Trust	0.3	3	975	1,263
Somerset Partnership NHS and Social Care Trust	0.0	0	329	363

Key notes:

1. Three month vacancy information is as at 31 March 2002.
2. Three month vacancies are vacancies which trusts are actively trying to fill, which had lasted for three months or more (whole time equivalents).
3. Three month vacancy rates are three month vacancies expressed as a percentage of three month vacancies plus staff in post.
4. Three month vacancy rates are calculated using staff in post from the Vacancy Survey, March 2002.
5. Staff in post data are from the Non-Medical Workforce Census, September 2001
6. Staff in post data exclude staff employed by health authorities, as vacancy information was only collected from trusts, PCTs and Special HAs.
7. Vacancy and staff in post numbers are rounded to the nearest whole number.
8. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.
9. Due to rounding, totals may not equal the sum of component parts
10. Calculating the vacancy rates using the above data may not equal the actual vacancy rates.
11. HA figures are based on trusts, and do not necessarily reflect the geographical provision of healthcare.
12. Avalon Somerset NHS Trust changed name to Somerset Partnership NHS and Social Care Trust on 1 April 1999.

Sources:

Vacancy numbers and rates: Department of Health Vacancies Survey March 2002.

Non medical staff in post: Department of Health Non-Medical workforce census September 2001.

Operation Cataract

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the unit cost was of cataract operations carried out at the Royal Lancaster Infirmary under Operation Cataract by a visiting South African team; and what the equivalent cost is *(a)* normally at the Royal Lancaster Infirmary and *(b)* on average in NHS hospital trusts in England. [92555]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is currently unavailable for cataract operations at the Royal Lancaster Infirmary.

A major procurement exercise for clinical services, including cataracts, is currently being undertaken at the Royal Lancaster Infirmary and as such is regarded as commercially confidential. However, the average unit cost of phakoemulsification cataract extraction with lens implant undertaken as a day case in a national health service trust in England is £632.

Overseas Surgical Teams

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost of utilising overseas surgical teams was for each trust up until 31 October. [84098]

Mr. Hutton: The information required is not available in the format requested. £24 million has been allocated for various overseas clinical teams initiatives for 2002–03.

Paper Supplies

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Health who the suppliers are of his Department's *(a)* paper and *(b)* paper products. [91899]

Mr. Lammy: The Department has three main avenues for the supply of paper and paper products.

Paper used in connection with normal business needs is supplied by the Department's contracted stationery supplier, Guilbert Niceday. Paper used in the production of bulk photocopying is supplied by our reprographics contractor, Xerox. Paper products used in publications and reports are not purchased separately but are provided as part of the contract by a range of print suppliers under competitively tendered framework agreements.

Parkinson's Disease

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received the extension of the exemption from prescription charges for sufferers from Parkinson's disease; what estimate he has made of the average annual cost of prescriptions to sufferers of Parkinson's disease; and if he will make a statement on the age profile of those who suffer from Parkinson's disease. [93203]

Mr. Lammy: Since January 2002 we have received 13 letters requesting that Parkinson's disease be included in the list of medical conditions conferring exemption from prescription charges.

There is no cost of prescriptions to sufferers from Parkinson's disease who are aged 60 or over, who are (or their partner is) receiving income support, income based Jobseeker's allowance or tax credits (where income is below a specified limit, currently around £226 net per week) or who have successfully claimed help under the national health service low income scheme. We estimate that most sufferers from Parkinson's disease who are not entitled to free prescriptions will have sufficient prescriptions each year to make purchase of a pre-payment certificate worthwhile. These cost £89 for 12 months.

There are more than 120,000 people with Parkinson's Disease in the United Kingdom. It is uncommon in people younger than 30; after that the risk of developing it increases with age. The incidence of Parkinson's Disease is approximately 1:1000 in the general population, rising to 1:100 over the age of 65 and 1:50 over the age of 80.

Parliamentary Questions

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to reply to the questions tabled by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham Refs. 83295, 83289, 86703, 86805 and 86807. [92593]

Mr. Hutton: I refer the hon. Member to the replies that the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) gave on 4 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 901W and on 10 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 304W and to the reply that the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears) gave on 15 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 688W. The other replies were sent on Monday 20 January and Tuesday 21 January.

Patients Forums

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients forums have been established. [92596]

Mr. Lammy: No statutory patients forums have yet been established.

PHLS Laboratories

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action has been taken to minimise the risks from disbanding the PHLS before the Health Protection Agency is fully functional. [90083]

Ms Blears: In England, most of the Public Health Laboratories Service (PHLS) laboratories which carry out general diagnostic microbiology are planned to transfer to national health service trusts by 31 March 2003. They are transferring with their current level of funding, which will be maintained for at least the first two years. Each transferring laboratory will have a public health microbiologist, who will work with consultants in communicable disease control, local authorities, the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre and other public health agencies. Service level agreements are being prepared to maintain this work. In addition, there will be a regional microbiologist in each of the nine public health regions, who will work with regional epidemiologists in the implementation of key infectious disease programmes as well as in the investigation of outbreaks of communicable disease. Regional microbiologists will also work to co-ordinate the work between the laboratories in the Health Protection Agency and the NHS. In Wales, PHLS laboratories and the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre Wales are transferring to the national public health service—Wales, on 1 April 2003.

The PHLS Board will remain in existence until primary legislation is changed. From 1 April 2003, we intend that it will be responsible for the production of media for microbiology laboratories, following the transfer of its other current functions to the HPA which we propose to create as a special health authority from the same date.

Pre-hospital Care

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health to what extent the National Health Service is bound by the Joint Royal College Ambulance Liaison Committee guidelines on pre-hospital care. [92529]

Mr. Lammy: The guidelines on pre hospital care were issued to all ambulance trusts and it was for them to decide whether or not to use them.

Harry Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost to public funds was of the preparation of the Joint Royal College Ambulance Liaison guidelines on pre-hospital care. [92530]

Mr. Lammy: There was no cost to public funds for the preparation of the Joint Royal Colleges Ambulance Liaison guidelines on pre hospital care.

Press Releases

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many press releases have been issued by his Department in each *(a)* year and *(b)* quarter from 1995–96 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92451]

Mr. Lammy: The information requested is shown in the table.

Financial Year	*Number of Press Releases Issued*
2002 to 20 January 2003	378
2001–02	609
2000–01	697
1999–2000	743
1998–99	559
1997–98	330
1996–97	296
1995–96	431

Quarterly figures for the past seven years could be supplied only at disproportionate cost.

Primary Care Trusts

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to the answer of 15 January (ref. 84461), for what reason primary care trusts need to supplement the national expenditure programme on promoting consumption of fruit and vegetables. [92008]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 20 January 2003]*: One of the roles of a primary care trust is to improve the health of their communities. This requires them to take the lead on public health issues in their area, develop health improvement and modernisation programmes based on health needs, and integrate service planning and health promotion. Their public health role encompasses, for example, smoking cessation, teenage pregnancy and healthy eating.

By 2004, primary care trusts will be managing up to 75 per cent. of the total national health service budget. They will use the money to commission services to meet the needs of their local population, which may include projects to increase fruit and vegetable consumption.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what criteria are applied in the selection of non-executive directors of PCTs. [92124]

Mr. Lammy: Details of the qualities required of all primary care trust non-executive directors have been placed in the Library. In addition, particular attributes can be sought for individual vacancies, to ensure that the board has an appropriate mix of skills and experience.

Prostate Cancer

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the causes of the regional differences in the incidence of prostate cancer in Great Britain. [89670]

Ms Blears: Rates of prostate cancer per 100,000 population in 1999, broken down by region, are shown in the table.

Health regional office of residence	*Rate of prostate cancer per 100,000 population (1999)*
Northern and Yorkshire	82.3
Trent	70.0
Eastern	92.1
London	71.4
South East	93.9
South West	101.3
West Midlands	89.8
North West	80.3
England	84.9

Source:

Cancer statistics registrations: Registration of cancer diagnosed in 1999, England (Office for National Statistics 2002)

Prostate cancer is related to affluence. It is also possible that these figures reflect in part differential take-up of prostate specific antigen testing in different parts of the country.

Public Information

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to the answer given to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham on 7 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 208W, on public information, how much it cost to establish his Department's Customer Services Centre; and how many staff work here. [92600]

Mr. Lammy: The team has been established within existing resources. There are 38 members of staff managing correspondence from hon. and right hon. Members and members of the public, departmental e-mails and the call centre.

Public Service Agreements

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will publish his autumn departmental reports on public service agreement targets; and if he will make a statement. [91007]

Mr. Lammy: In December 2002, the Department of Health published the chief executive's report to the National Health Service, setting out progress during 2001–02 and for the first six months of the year. This report sets out clearly how the increased resources within the NHS are being used improve performance by providing more care for patients, improving quality and providing investment for the future.

We intend to link this report to Her Majesty's Treasury website and will review it to ensure that it covers reporting of Public Service Agreement performance in full.

Reconfiguration of Hospitals

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 8 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 277W, if he will make a statement on his reference to thinking about how to reorganise services safely and effectively as moved on; what his policy is on the ideal population size to be served by an acute hospital; when the consultation exercise for the new project will be published; and what impact he expects that consultation to have on future plans for the NHS. [91595]

Dr. Richard Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the document on reconfiguration of hospitals will be published; and whether it includes an assessment of the place of foundation hospitals in the reorganisation of hospital services. [91503]

Mr. Hutton: A document on the configuration of hospital services is to be published shortly. The document will be relevant to all parts of the national health service.

Roaccutane

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many people in the UK have been prescribed roaccutane in each of the past five years; and what proportion of those people have reported symptoms of depression or psychiatric disorders; [91831]

(2) what assessment he has made of the European Committee for Proprietary Medicinal Products' review of safety information for roaccutane. [91832]

Ms Blears: It is not possible to estimate the precise number of patients who have received Roaccutane (isotretinoin) in the United Kingdom in the last five years. However, it has been estimated that approximately 375,000 treatment courses of isotretinoin have been prescribed between 1983 and May 2002.

The table provides the total number of suspected psychiatric disorders reported during each of the past five years through the Yellow Card Scheme for Roaccutane. It also shows the number of reports of symptoms of depression, which forms part of the total psychiatric disorders.

	1998	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
Psychiatric disorders	48	44	50	26	25
Depression	23	17	17	11	11

A report of a suspected adverse reaction does not necessarily mean that it was caused by the medicine. The number of reports received should not be used as a basis for determining the incidence of a reaction as neither the total number of reactions occurring, nor the number of patients using the drug is known.

With expert advice from the Committee on Safety of Medicines, the Medicines Control Agency is currently leading a European-wide review of the product information of isotretinoin products, including Roaccutane, with the aim to ensure that up to date and consistent information is provided to health professionals and patients to optimise its safe use. This review is likely to take some months to complete. Any new advice will be communicated to health professionals and patients.

Single-sex Wards

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether his Department has met in full its three objectives regarding single sex wards. [92584]

Mr. Hutton: I refer the hon. Member to the written ministerial statement made on 14 January 2003, Official Report, column 24WS.

West Midlands Hospitals (Red Alert)

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many hospitals within the West Midlands (South) Strategic Health Authority area were on red alert on each day since 1 December 2002; and if he will make a statement; [90348]

(2) on how many days since 1st December 2002 hospitals within the Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust were on red alert; and if he will make a statement. [90349]

Mr. Lammy: The term "red alert" is used by a few National Health trusts. It does not have a standard definition.

Since 1 December 2002, a total of seven red alerts on seven separate days were issued by the Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust. No other hospital trusts within the West Midlands South Strategic Health Authority (StHA) area have issued red alerts in the period.

During this period, the trust experienced a significant amount of pressure, largely due to diarrhoea and vomiting outbreaks, in addition to an increase in thelevels of emergency admissions. Each health community within the StHA has an agreed escalation policy described in winter plans. Each phase of escalation policy is triggered by specific operational difficulties. When the circumstances deteriorate to such a level, patients are diverted to a nearby, alternative hospital, often within the same trust.

It is the StHA's view that the steps that were taken by the Worcestershire health economy were acceptable within the local guidelines and in line with the escalation policy.

Worcestershire Acute Hospital NHS Trust

Dr. Richard Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost was to the Worcestershire Acute Hospital, NHS Trust of their preparations for the recent inspection by the Commission for Health Improvement. [91504]

Mr. Lammy: The Worcestershire Acute Hospitals National Health Service Trust did not collect this information at the time of the inspection, nor is it collected centrally.

Dr. Richard Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what costs have been incurred by the Worcestershire Acute Hospital NHS Trust since September 2000 as a consequence of suspension of consultants. [91505]

Mr. Lammy: The Worcestershire Acute Hospitals National Health Service Trust has had one consultant suspension during the period. During that suspension, a locum consultant was employed by trust at NHS locum rates. In this particular case the costs amounted to approximately £30,000.

Source:

Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Speeding (Motorways)

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were convicted of motorway speeding offences, broken down into speed bands, in each of the last five years. [92712]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Information held centrally on the number of convictions for speeding offences does not distinguish the classification of road on which the offence took place nor the speedband registered.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many anti-social behaviour orders have been made in the Easington constituency; and if he will make a statement. [91608]

Mr. Denham: The number of notifications received by the Home Office of anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) issued, from 1 April 1999 up to 30 September 2002 (latest available), within the Easington district council area, (in which the Easington constituency is situated), are four.

We are aware that the numbers of ASBOs made nationally have been consistently under reported in returns made by magistrates courts and are considering how reporting can be improved.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to ensure that it is easier for the police to issue behaviour orders. [92018]

Mr. Denham: Changes under the Police Reform Act 2002 make it easier for all relevant authorities to obtain anti-social behaviour orders (ASBO). Interim orders are now available, as are orders on conviction in the criminal courts. From April orders will also be available in the county courts. In addition, the British Transport Police can now apply directly for orders. The Home Office has issued guidance on these changes to assist practitioners in their implementation.

Measures to further improve ASBOs are being introduced under the forthcoming anti-social behaviour bill.

Asylum Seekers (EU Fingerprinting)

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the launch of the EU's centralised fingerprinting system aimed at asylum seekers. [92100]

Beverley Hughes: The Government welcome the implementation on 15 January of the centralised EURODAC fingerprint database. Fingerprint technology is an important tool to cut fraud and prevent abuse of national immigration and asylum systems. Co-operation with our European partners through the EURODAC system builds on this and EURODAC will provide a valuable resource to tackle multiple asylum applications. As it becomes established EURODAC will help speed up the processing of asylum cases under the Dublin Convention and its replacement, the Dublin II Regulation, by improving the detection of multiple asylum applications made within the EU or Norway and Iceland.

Asylum Seekers (Infant Formula Milk)

Mr. Cameron: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether vouchers for infant formula milk are provided for asylum seekers with young children; and if he will make a statement. [91828]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 22 January 2003]:* Asylum seekers and their dependants are not eligible to obtain milk tokens under the Welfare Food Scheme Regulations 1996. On 5 November my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced that the asylum support regulations 2000 would be amended to allow for additional payments to be made to supported pregnant women and children under the age of three. Supported pregnant women and children aged one to three will each receive £3 per week. Babies under the age of one will receive £5 per week.

Asylum Seeking Children

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many unaccompanied children applied for asylum within the UK in each year since 1997, broken down by country of origin. [91992]

Beverley Hughes: Reliable information on the entry routes of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC), including when UASCs first enter the UK, is not available. However, information on the nationality of UASC applicants who applied at port and in-country between 1997 and 2001, inclusive, is given in the table. Annual figures for 2002 are not yet available.

Information on asylum applications from unaccompanied children is published annually. The next annual publication will be available later this year.

Information on asylum applications and initial decisions is published quarterly. The next publication will present data for the final quarter of 2002, and will be available from 28 February 2003 on the Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate website at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html.

Unaccompanied[1,2,3] children, aged 17 or under, applying for asylum in the United Kingdom by nationality, 1997 to 2001

	1997			1998		
Nationality	*Total*	*Applied at port*	*Applied in country*	*Total*	*Applied at port*	*Applied in country*
Albania	39	15	24	49	33	16
Czech Republic	2	2	—	6	6	—
FRY	119	—	119	1,529	259	1,270
Macedonia	—	—	—	1	1	—
Poland	18	18	—	44	44	—
Romania	32	3	29	68	5	63
Russia	2	—	2	2	1	1
Turkey	48	47	1	107	100	7
Ukraine	—	—	—	2	—	2
Other Former USSR	27	9	18	36	15	21
Other Former Yugo.	107	66	41	23	2	21
Europe other	15	15	—	9	9	—
Europe total	409	175	234	1,876	475	1,401
Colombia	26	25	1	9	9	—
Ecuador	4	4	—	5	4	1
Jamaica	1	1	—	4	4	—
Americas other	2	2	—	2	1	1
Americas total	33	32	1	20	18	2
Algeria	21	7	14	50	10	40
Angola	12	8	4	10	9	1
Burundi	3	—	3	6	4	2
Congo	2	1	1	1	—	1
Dem. Rep. Congo	27	16	11	19	9	10
Eritrea	45	20	25	91	33	58
Ethiopia	23	9	14	66	38	28
Gambia	—	—	—	—	—	—
Ghana	1	1	—	2	2	—
Ivory Coast	—	—	—	1	—	1
Kenya	9	7	2	23	17	6
Nigeria	18	8	10	53	34	19
Rwanda	7	2	5	13	7	6
Sierra Leone	14	8	6	23	11	12
Somalia	158	122	36	153	88	65
Sudan	3	2	1	4	4	—
Tanzania	1	1	—	3	2	1
Uganda	5	1	4	9	4	5
Zimbabwe	1	1	—	—	—	—
Africa other	18	12	6	8	3	5
Africa total	368	226	142	535	275	260
Iran	7	6	1	8	6	2
Iraq	20	17	3	30	26	4
Middle East other	12	7	5	7	5	2
Middle East total	39	30	9	45	37	8
Afghanistan	109	101	8	124	108	16
Bangladesh	3	—	3	2	—	2
China	78	49	29	301	69	232
India	6	6	—	9	9	—
Nepal	—	—	—	—	—	—
Pakistan	4	3	1	12	11	1
Sri Lanka	40	36	4	91	69	22
Asia other	4	4	—	10	—	10
Asia total	244	199	45	549	266	283
Nationality not known	9	9	—	12	12	—
Grand total	1,102	671	431	3,037	1,083	1,954

	1999			2000		
Nationality	*Total*	*Applied at port*	*Applied in country*	*Total*	*Applied at port*	*Applied in country*
Albania	126	116	10	94	25	69
Czech Republic	29	29	—	18	18	—
FRY	1,522	188	1,334	666	70	596
Macedonia	—	—	—	—	—	—
Poland	47	47	—	13	13	—
Romania	86	1	85	40	8	32

Nationality	1999 Total	1999 Applied at port	1999 Applied in country	2000 Total	2000 Applied at port	2000 Applied in country
Russia	3	—	3	2	—	2
Turkey	116	107	9	153	136	17
Ukraine	1	—	1	4	1	3
Other Former USSR	26	20	6	24	15	9
Other Former Yugo.	32	20	12	36	1	35
Europe other	8	8	—	3	2	1
Europe total	1,996	536	1,460	1,053	289	764
Colombia	18	16	2	5	6	—
Ecuador	13	12	1	7	6	1
Jamaica	6	6	—	3	3	—
Americas other	3	3	—	1	1	—
Americas total	40	37	3	16	15	1
Algeria	12	5	7	23	9	14
Angola	42	24	18	102	34	68
Burundi	12	1	11	21	10	11
Congo	7	5	2	12	4	8
Dem. Rep. Congo	33	28	5	47	35	12
Eritrea	93	49	44	85	34	51
Ethiopia	54	31	23	62	25	37
Gambia	—	—	—	—	—	—
Ghana	1	—	1	10	9	1
Ivory Coast	1	1	—	5	2	3
Kenya	12	7	5	8	5	3
Nigeria	45	38	7	24	20	4
Rwanda	35	11	24	49	5	44
Sierra Leone	65	57	8	74	60	14
Somalia	189	156	33	177	99	78
Sudan	6	5	1	9	8	1
Tanzania	1	1	—	3	2	1
Uganda	10	—	10	26	1	25
Zimbabwe	6	6	—	34	32	2
Africa other	8	8	—	28	23	5
Africa total	632	433	199	799	417	382
Iran	14	13	1	65	50	15
Iraq	58	52	6	112	86	26
Middle East other	16	14	2	14	10	4
Middle East total	88	79	9	191	146	45
Afghanistan	213	194	19	300	264	36
Bangladesh	4	3	1	4	1	3
China	166	44	122	117	58	59
India	13	11	2	14	13	1
Nepal	—	—	—	1	—	1
Pakistan	19	15	4	25	19	6
Sri Lanka	127	104	23	170	142	28
Asia other	10	1	9	24	11	13
Asia total	552	372	180	655	508	147
Nationality not known	41	41	—	19	19	—
Grand total	3,349	1,498	1,851	2,733	1,394	1,339

Nationality	2001[4] Total	2001[4] Applied at port	2001[4] Applied in country
Albania	85	10	75
Czech Republic	22	22	—
FRY	477	19	458
Macedonia	99	4	95
Poland	23	23	—
Romania	49	16	33
Russia	4	1	3
Turkey	95	83	12
Ukraine	2	1	1
Other Former USSR	48	14	34
Other Former Yugo.	79	2	77
Europe other	—	—	—
Europe total	983	195	788

Nationality	2001[4] Total	2001[4] Applied at port	2001[4] Applied in country
Colombia	7	5	2
Ecuador	4	3	1
Jamaica	2	—	2
Americas other	7	4	3
Americas total	20	12	8
Algeria	20	3	17
Angola	147	32	115
Burundi	20	7	13
Congo	30	10	20
Dem. Rep. Congo	82	28	54
Eritrea	111	27	84
Ethiopia	141	23	118

Nationality	*Total*	*2001*[4] *Applied at port*	*Applied in country*
Gambia	2	1	1
Ghana	4	3	1
Ivory Coast	6	—	6
Kenya	15	6	9
Nigeria	37	28	9
Rwanda	38	4	34
Sierra Leone	129	80	49
Somalia	198	57	141
Sudan	6	3	3
Tanzania	1	—	1
Uganda	47	3	44
Zimbabwe	35	31	4
Africa other	48	16	32
Africa total	1,117	362	755
Iran	23	18	5
Iraq	182	129	53
Middle East other	20	12	8
Middle East total	225	159	66
Afghanistan	673	620	53
Bangladesh	14	1	13
China	137	84	53
India	19	16	3
Nepal	2	—	2
Pakistan	25	18	7
Sri Lanka	138	102	36
Asia other	92	54	38
Asia total	1,100	895	205
Nationality not known	24	24	—
Grand total	3,469	1,647	1,822

[1] Unaccompanied at the point of their arrival, and not known to be joining a close relative in the United Kingdom.

[2] May exclude some cases lodged at Local Enforcement Offices between January 1999 and March 2001.

[3] Figures exclude disputed age cases.

[4] Provisional figures.

Blueprint Research Programme

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the current status of the Blueprint research programme is; and if he will make a statement. [92268]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Blueprint is a drug prevention programme for 11 to 13-year-olds based on the principles that underpin effective school-based drug education. The project aims to recruit 30 schools to the project by April 2003. Invitations to participate in the project (dated 13 January 2003) have been sent to 122 secondary schools across eight local education authorities (Birmingham, Cheshire, Derby, Derbyshire, Lancashire, Leeds, Staffordshire and Stoke). The project is on target.

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with the Department for Education and Skills regarding the Blueprint research programme. [92269]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Blueprint is a partnership of the Home Office, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Department of Health. The Home Office is the budget holder. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health endorsed the programme in October 2001. Subsequently, DfES have been involved at both ministerial and official level in every stage of the project.

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department show much his Department has invested in the Blueprint research programme. [92270]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The expected expenditure for Blueprint in the financial year 2002–03 is £397,117 out of a total budget of £5 million. Expenditure will continue until the end of the third quarter of the financial year 2007–08.

Caythorpe Court

Mr. Hogg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when he will reply to the letter of 11 December 2002 from the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham regarding the possible use of Caythorpe Court, Lincolnshire for the accommodation of asylum seekers; [92087]

(2) what plans his Department and its agencies have to use Caythorpe Court, Caythorpe, Lincolnshire for the accommodation of asylum seekers; and if he will make a statement. [92089]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* I replied to the right hon. Member on 17 and 20 January 2003. As I explained the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) is considering the use of Caythorpe Court as emergency accommodation for asylum seekers while their application for support and dispersal elsewhere is considered. No decision has yet been made.

CCTV

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to increase funding to police authorities to extend CCTV schemes. [92017]

Mr. Denham: Under the Crime Reduction Programme Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) Initiative over £170 million is being spent funding 684 CCTV schemes. More than 540 of these schemes are already fully operational, with further schemes coming on line weekly.

Although this strand of funding is now closed, other opportunities for funding of CCTV schemes currently exist through the funds available to Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, on which the police are partners. Funding of £94 million was announced on January 21 as being available to partnerships for 2003–04. Potential funding is also available through the Small Retailers in Deprived Areas initiative.

General Police Grants will increase by 4.3 per cent. to £7.3 billion in 2003–04. These grants are used by police authorities and chief officers to support their policing programme and plans.

Community Beat Wardens

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of community beat wardens in helping reduce nuisance and crime. [92016]

Mrs. Roche: I have been asked to reply.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister warden schemes work in partnership with local communities and are still relatively new. Robust evaluation is not yet available, but interim findings are positive and show that warden schemes can contribute to improving the liveability of neighbourhoods and the reduction of crime and fear of crime. Residents report significant improvements in community spirit and the quality of life in their neighbourhoods where wardens have proven beneficial and popular.

Community Cohesion (Lancashire)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps the police in Lancashire are taking to promote community cohesion; and if he will make a statement. [91185]

Mr. Denham: Lancashire Constabulary has conducted successful operations to deal with major criminal activities which affect the community, such as drug dealing, burglary and car crime. The Chief Constable's July 2002 Constabulary Ambition Statement for Lancashire gives priority to leadership, resource management, communication, community engagement and delivering results. All are important for the promotion of community cohesion, which is central to the work of the police across the country and particularly in areas with fragmented communities.

Specific steps being taken by Lancashire Constabulary include:

> community beat managers in strategic areas around the county, particularly in Burnley and Pendle, each with responsibility for a particular area, providing a constant link with the public, dealing with community issues and reducing crime; they are also the best link with young people, and help respond to rumours and provide reassurance. To raise their profile, they are having a new uniform insignia, and commitment is being made to continuity by not redeploying them to other duties and by maintaining individuals in post for a minimum of two years;
>
> the proactive work of the newly-formed hate crime unit in Burnley and Pendle, which has significantly improved detection rates for racially aggravated violent crime, enhancing community confidence;
>
> the community and race relations (CRR) strategy incorporates youth issues, responses to racial incidents and crimes, ensuring equitable service delivery and developing the recruitment, retention and progression of staff with regard to CRR and cohesion issues through training;
>
> intelligence-led problem-oriented approaches, at all levels of policing and in all departments, which involve monitoring tension indicators and other threats to public safety and working in partnership with outside agencies and members of the public; and
>
> community safety teams in each of the six divisions, with a central strategic team at headquarters, dedicated to working on community-based projects, particularly those that relate to minority communities; the teams work to reassure the public, provide communities with a link to the police, deal with hate crime and gather intelligence on community tensions.

I would like to express appreciation of the work of Lancashire Constabulary in these and other measures implementing the recommendations of the Burnley Taskforce (Clarke report), of the Cantle report and of the Ministerial Group on Public Safety and Community Cohesion following the summer 2001 disturbances in Burnley. This has been taken forward by a multi-agency forum with local authorities and other agencies, [illegible] view to ensuring effective partnership working.

Correspondence

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when his Department intends to reply to the letters from the hon. Member for Manchester, Central dated *(a)* 28 August 2002, regarding Mr. KK, reference 17982/2, *(b)* 11 September 2002, regarding Mr. YMY, reference 18812/2, *(c)* 20 September 2002, regarding Ms NM, reference 19649/2, *(d)* 7 October 2002, regarding Mr. MA, reference 21454/2, *(e)* 9 October 2002, regarding Mr. NAM, reference 20892/2, *(f)* 9 October 2002, regarding Mr. AH, reference 21152/2, *(g)* 11 October 2002, regarding Miss GM, reference 21144/2, *(h)* 15 October 2002, regarding Mr. MM, reference 21484/2, *(i)* 16 October 2002, regarding Mr. FM, reference 21379/2, *(j)* 16 October 2002, regarding Mr. IK, reference 21489/2, *(k)* 24 October 2002, regarding Mr. RBZ, reference 23242/2 and *(l)* 28 October 2002, regarding Mr. SARR, reference 23136/2. [91055]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* The information is as follows:

(a) I wrote to my hon. Friend on 16 January 2003.

(b) My noble Friend (Lord Filkin) wrote on 9 January 2003.

(c) I wrote to my hon. Friend on 23 January 2003.

(d) I wrote to my hon. Friend on 9 January 2003.

(e) I wrote to my hon. Friend on 23 January 2003.

(f) I wrote to my hon. Friend on 23 January 2003.

(g) I wrote to my hon. Friend on 23 January 2003.

(h) I wrote to my hon. Friend on 23 January 2003.

(i) I will write to my hon. Friend shortly.

(j) I wrote to my hon. Friend on 23 January 2003.

(k) I wrote to my hon. Friend on 23 January 2003.

(l) I wrote to my hon. Friend on 10 January 2003.

Czech Roma

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Roma from the Czech Republic have *(a)* sought and *(b)* been granted asylum in the UK in each year since 1997. [91869]

Beverley Hughes: It is not possible to say how many asylum applicants from the Czech Republic are of Romany origin. Data on the ethnic origin of asylum seekers are not collated centrally and are therefore not available; the number of those who applied would be available only by examination of individual case-files at disproportionate cost.

The tables show the number of applications and initial decisions of nationals of the Czech Republic from 1997 to September 2002.

Asylum applications[1] received in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, and initial decisions[2] on applications, 1997–2001 and January to September 20[illegible] nationals of Czech Republic

Principal applicants

		Applications[3]				
Czech Republic	*Total*	*Port*	*In Country*	*Total initial decisions*	*Grants of asylum*	*Grants of ELR*
1997	240	220	20	210	—	—
1998	515	490	25	180	—	—
1999	1,790	1,750	40	275	*	—
2000	1,200	1,135	65	1,800	10	10
2001[4]	880	795	85	895	—	5
2002[5]	1,290	1,220	70	975	—	

Asylum applications[1] received in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, and initial decisions[2] on applications, 1997–2001 and January to September 2002, nationals of Czech Republic

Principal applicants

	Initial decisions						
Czech Republic	*Total refusals[6]*	*Certified refusals*	*Other refusals*	*Third country refusals[7]*	*Non-compliance refusals[8]*	*Grants of ELR under backlog criteria[9, 10]*	*Non compliance refusals under backlog criteria[9, 11]*
1997	210	105	25	70	10	—	—
1998	180	170	10	*	*	—	—
1999	275	115	120	10	30	*	—
2000	1,775	N/a	1,495	5	205	*	—
2001[4]	890	325	475	—	90	—	—
2002[5]	970	320	535	*	110	—	—

[1] Figures rounded to nearest 5, with '*' = 1 or 2

[2] Information is of initial determination decisions, excluding the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decisions

[3] May exclude some cases lodged at Local Enforcement Offices between January 1999 and March 2000

[4] Provision data

[5] January-September 2002—provisional data

[6] May include some refusals under non compliance grounds

[7] Refused on the grounds that the applicant had arrived from a safe third country

[8] Paragraph 340 of Immigration Rules. For failure to provide evidence to support the asylum claim within a reasonable period, including failure to respond to invitation to interview

[9] Cases decided under pragmatic measures aimed at reducing the pre-1969 asylum backlog

[10] May include a small number of cases where asylum has been granted

[11] May include a small number of vases where asylum has been refused on substantive grounds

Deportations

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were deported last year having served a custodial sentence in a UK prison. [92619]

Beverley Hughes: 634 persons were deported during 2002 on completion of a custodial sentence.

DNA Data

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what DNA data are held on people with criminal convictions; and if he will make a statement. [91155]

Mr. Denham: The DNA profile of people with criminal convictions is held on the National DNA database. The profile is derived from a sample taken by the police from the offender. A part of the original sample is also preserved for possible use in the future. This is to enable the profile to be upgraded if necessary in the light of advances in DNA technology and for quality assurance purposes.

Domestic Violence

Margaret Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to consult on guidance to police authorities on dealing with perpetrators of domestic violence by police officers. [86422]

Mr. Denham: Work is continuing to produce guidance on dealing with perpetrators of domestic violence within police ranks. Consultation will take place with relevant bodies later this month, and guidance issued in spring. Work is also being done to ensure that police discipline procedures complement the guidance when it is issued.

Drug Treatment Testing Orders

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what proportion of drug treatment testing orders in *(a)* Tunbridge Wells and *(b)* Kent have been breached; [92105]

(2) how many drug treatment and testing orders have been made in *(a)* Tunbridge Wells and *(b)* Kent; [92107]

(3) what proportion of those given drug treatment testing orders in *(a)* Tunbridge Wells and *(b)* Kent have subsequently reoffended; [92106]

(4) what estimate he has made of the cost of drug treatment testing orders in *(a)* Tunbridge Wells and *(b)* Kent. [92104]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: No unit cost information is available for the specific costs of drug treatment and testing orders (DTTO) in Kent and Tunbridge Wells. The assessed national average unit cost of a DTTO is £6,000, of which £2,400 is retained by the probation service to cover supervision, enforcement and other related costs. The balance of £3,600 per order is transferred to the Department of Health pooled treatment budget to cover treatment and related costs. 234 orders have been commenced in Kent since the national roll-out of DTTOs in October 2000. Kent probation area has been set a target of 160 DTTOs in the current year and 86 orders have been made to 30 November 2002 including six orders in Tunbridge Wells.

It is increasingly the practice of the courts when considering a breach of an order, to allow the DTTO to continue where good progress has otherwise been shown. Information is collected centrally on the total number of breach actions initiated but is not available in a form which allows the incidence of breaches to be linked to an individual order.

Since national roll-out in October 2000, Kent probation has initiated breach action which resulted in the revocation of 121 orders: 91 for failure to comply, and 30 following a conviction for another offence. However, some of these offences were committed before the order began. Results from local intelligence sources, including the police, suggest that the volume of offending for this chaotic group of offenders is reduced and maintained over time for those responding to their treatment.

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of each type of crime in *(a)* Tunbridge Wells and *(b)* Kent in each of the past five years was deemed to be drug-related. [92116]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Recorded crime figures include statistics on drugs offences, such as possession, and on acquisitive crimes, such as burglary, but do not record whether the latter are related to an offender's drug habits.

However, the New English and Welsh Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (NEW-ADAM) research programme, which involves interviewing and drug testing those arrested by the police, confirms a link between drug misuse and crime, although the conclusions do not relate specifically to Kent. Analysis of the data from the first eight sites in the survey, collected during 1999–2000, shows that 65 per cent. of arrestees provided a urine sample that tested positive for one or more illegal drug. The analysis also shows that up to 29 per cent. of arrestees tested positive for opiates (including heroin) and/or cocaine (including crack).

As a guide to the proportion of crime that is drug-related, analysis of the NEW-ADAM self-report data indicates that while only 21 per cent. of non-drug using arrestees reported having previously offended in the past 12 months, this figure rises to 75 per cent. for those arrestees who use heroin and/or cocaine/crack. Moreover, while users of both heroin and cocaine/crack represented just under one quarter of all arrestees interviewed, they were responsible for more than three fifths of all the illegal income reported.

In support of this, 55 per cent. of arrestees who reported using one or more drugs in the last 12 months and committing one or more acquisitive crimes, acknowledged a link between their drug use and their offending behaviour. This proportion rose to 78 per cent. for arrestees who said they had used heroin and cocaine/crack.

Drug-related Offences (Durham)

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions there were for drug-related offences in the Peterlee sub division of the Durham police in *(a)* 2001 and *(b)* 2002; and if he will make a statement. [91609]

Mr. Denham: The available information relating to illegal drugs, is given in the table.

Persons[1] proceeded against in the Easington petty sessional area for the possession of and dealing in a controlled drug, 1999, 2000 and 2001

	Easington petty sessional area
Possession of a controlled drug	
1999	21
2000	61
2001	118
Dealing in a controlled drug[2]	
1999	*21*
2000	*61*
2001	*32*

[1] Persons for whom these offences were the principal offence for which they were dealt with.

[2] Includes offences of importation/exportation, production, supplying, possession with intent to supply etc.

The number of arrests within the Peterlee sub division of Durham constabulary are not available centrally. The 'use' of illegal drugs is not an offence.

Statistics for 2002 will be available in the autumn. 2001 Criminal statistics is available on the Stationary Office website (http:www.homeoffice.gov.uk.rds. pdfs2hosb402.pdf), and copies are available in the Library.

Examining Officers' Powers

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 19 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 987W, on examining officers' powers, when he will respond to Lord Carlile of Berriew QC on the issue raised in his report on the operation in 2001 of the Terrorism Act 2000; when he will report his response to the House; and if he will make a statement. [92360]

Mr. Blunkett *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* I will be giving my full consideration to all of these proposals, including examining officers' powers, and I will be responding to Lord Carlile on the issues raised imminently. I will, of course, report my response to the House.

Firearms

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* prosecutions and *(b)* convictions have been recorded in each of the last three years for (i) carrying a loaded firearm in a public place, (ii) acquiring a firearm under the age of 17, (iii) a person under 14 possessing an airgun or ammunition, (iv) a person under 17 having an air weapon in a public place, (v) a person under 14 making improper use of an airgun when under supervision, (vi) supplying an air weapon to a person under 14, (vii) discharging a firearm within 50 feet of the centre of a highway, and (viii) an adult supervisor of a person under 14 making improper use of an airgun. [92267]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The information contained in the table gives the number of defendants proceeded against and convicted of the various firearms offences requested, in England and Wales, 1999 to 2001, apart from 'discharging a firearm within 50 feet of a highway', which is not separately identifiable on the Home Office Court Proceedings database.

Statistics for 2002 will be published in the autumn.

Number of defendants proceeded against at magistrates courts and convicted at all courts for certain firearms offences, England and Wales 1999 to 2001[1]

		1999		*2000*[2]		*2001*	
Offence description	*Statute*	*Proceeded against*	*Convicted*	*Proceeded against*	*Convicted*	*Proceeded against*	*Convicted*
(See footnote (3) for definition of Firearm Groups)							
Carrying a loaded firearm in a public place							
Carrying loaded firearm in public place etc.(Group I).	Firearms Act 1968 sec. 19 amended by the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 sec. 157 sch. 8 part III	81	63	71	49	66	52
Carrying loaded firearm in public place etc. (Group II).	Ibid.	25	21	22	17	22	13
Carrying loaded firearm in public place etc.(Group III).	Ibid.	237	176	213	170	241	180
Total		343	260	306	236	329	245
Acquiring a firearm under the age of 17							
Person under 17 acquiring firearm (Group I)	Firearms Act 1968 section 22(1).	3	3	2	1	2	2
Person under 17 acquiring firearm (Group II)	Ibid.	1	1	—	—	1	—
Person under 17 acquiring firearm (Group III)	Ibid.	3	1	3	3	2	1
Total		7	5	5	4	5	3
Person under 14 having with him an air weapon or ammunition therefore, (Group III).	Firearms Act 1968 section 22(4)	13	12	21	16	12	3
Person under 17 having with him an air weapon in a public place, (Group III)	Firearms Act 1968 section 22(5)	68	54	66	52	66	46
Person under 14 making improper use of air weapon when under supervision, (Group III)	Firearms Act 1968 section 23(1)*(a)*	—	—	1	1	1	1
Supplying air weapon to person under 14, (Group III)	Firearms Act1968, sec. 24(4)	2	2	4	2	2	2
Person supervising person under 14, permitting improper use of air weapon, (Group III)	Firearms Act 1968 section23(1)*(b)*	-	—	2	2	—	—

[1] These data are on the principal offence basis.

[2] Staffordshire Police Force were only able to submit sample data for persons proceeded against and convicted in the magistrates courts for the year 2000. Although sufficient to estimate higher orders of data, these data are not robust enough at a detailed level and have been excluded from the table.

[3] For the purposes of recording offences, firearms are divided into three groups as below:

Group I—All firearms etc. other than those described in Groups II and III.

Fraud (Asylum Support)

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many investigations have been commenced into suspected fraud concerning Asylum Support, and what the outcomes have been; and if he will make a statement about the arrangements in place to prevent Asylum Support fraud; [91210]

(2) pursuant [illegible] his answer of 8 January, ref. 88475, how many fraud investigators are employed by or contracted to the National Asylum Support Service; and

what arrangements are in place for advice and assistance from the Benefit Fraud Investigation Service to NASS; [91212]

(3) what arrangements are in place for referrals from the Benefit Fraud Hotline and the Targeting Fraud Website to be made to NASS fraud investigators in respect of cases of suspected Asylum Support fraud; and how many reports of suspected fraud have so far been received by NASS. [91211]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* About 40 staff are employed directly by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) to undertake fraud investigations. In the period April-December 2002 investigations were carried out into 3,161 cases of alleged benefit fraud. As a result of the investigation 1,286 support claimants had their NASS support terminated.

All asylum seekers are being issued with Application Registration Cards (ARCs) which contain photographs and biometric data. Arrangements are under way for NASS support to be paid via the person's ARC. This represents a more secure method of payment and will help to prevent fraud.

NASS has a full time liaison officer on secondment from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to establish closer working links with that Department's Benefits Fraud Investigations unit. In addition NASS contributes to multi-agency operations aimed at combating illegal working in partnership with other Government Departments including the Department for Work and Pensions.

There are no formal arrangements for referring calls to the Benefit Fraud Hotline and the Targeting Fraud Website to NASS.

Gwent Police

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will send to Mr. Alan Bolton, ex-Superintendent of Gwent Police, the final report of assistant chief constable Drane on alleged breaches of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 which was presented to the Gwent Police Authority on 11 July 2002. [91537]

Mr. Denham: The report referred to is the property of the Chief Officer of Gwent and it is for him to decide whether a copy should go to Mr. Alan Bolton. I am advised by Gwent Police that the report will not be disclosed. The report is currently in the hands of the Police Complaints Authority who will inform Mr. Bolton of the outcome of the investigation into his allegations.

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the report of the inquiry into the conduct of ex-Acting Chief Constable Richard Thomas of Gwent Police will be published. [91543]

Mr. Denham: The report referred to is the property of Gwent Police Authority and it is for them to decide whether it should be published. I am advised by Gwent Police that the report will not be published.

Identity Cards

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the possibility of introducing identity cards in the UK. [92015]

Beverley Hughes: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary launched a consultation exercise on 3 July 2002, with the publication of a consultation paper on Entitlement Cards and Identity Fraud. *Official Report*, columns 227–42.

There are strongly held views on all sides of the debate on entitlement or identity cards. The Government have made it clear that the introduction of an entitlement card would be a major step and that we would not proceed without consulting widely and considering all the views expressed very carefully.

The consultation period will last until 31 January 2003 after which, the Government will assess and evaluate all the responses received before reaching a conclusion.

Immigration Detainees

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will take steps to prevent immigration detainees who have not been charged with a criminal offence from being held in prison. [93332]

Beverley Hughes: Our policy on the use of prisons to hold immigration detainees was set out in the White Paper "Secure Borders, Safe Haven—Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain". We made it clear that, although the routine use of prison accommodation for immigration detainees had ended, there would remain a need to hold small numbers of individual detainees in prison for reasons of security and control. There has been no change in that policy.

Juvenile Motor Bike Riders

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with the police about means of controlling nuisance by juvenile riders of off-road motor bikes; and if he will make a statement. [92079]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 22 January 2003]:* The Government have responded to public concerns about the nuisance and distress caused by juveniles riding off-road motor bikes across public parks, village greens or the countryside without authority by securing new powers for the police to deal with the anti-social use of any motor vehicle whether on- or off-road. The new powers are contained in section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002 and the Police (Retention and Disposal of Motor Vehicles) Regulations 2002, both of which came into force on 1 January.

The new powers build on existing road traffic legislation by enabling the police to seize any vehicle being driven carelessly or inconsiderately or off-road without authority and in such a way as to cause alarm, distress or annoyance. This will enable the police to deal more immediately and more effectively with the nuisance. The new powers will inconvenience those who misuse their vehicles and see them liable to meet the costs involved in seizure and storage in order to recover them.

The Home Office has written to all chief officers of police, drawing their attention to the new provisions and advising them on application.

Minimum Wage

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the impact of increasing the minimum wage *(a)* in line with average earnings, *(b)* to £4.17 per hour, *(c)* to £4.87 per hour, *(d)* to £5.00 per hour and *(e)* to £5.30 per hour, on the cost of salaries of departmental employees (i) in total and (ii) for each nation of the United Kingdom in the next financial year. [90603]

Mr. Blunkett: The information requested is in the table:

		Impact on the paybill			
Increase	*Total*	*England*	*Scotland*	*Wales*	*Northern Ireland*
(a) In line with inflation	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
(b) To £4.17 per hour	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
(c) To £4.87 per hour (percentage)	<0.01	<0.01	<0.1	<0.01	<0.1
(d) To £5.00 per hour (percentage)	<0.05	<0.05	<0.5	<0.05	<0.5
(e) To £5.30 per hour (percentage)	<0.1	<0.1	<1.0	<0.1	≈1.0

Orpheus Centre

Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he last met representatives of the Orpheus Centre; and if he will make a statement. [92044]

Mr. Blunkett: I attended a reception at the House of Commons on 13 January 2003, which was organised by the noble Lord Hunt of Wirral, in conjunction with the right hon. Member to celebrate the work of the Orpheus Centre. The Orpheus Centre is doing excellent work, not only by helping young disabled people to achieve their potential in music and drama, but also by drawing attention to the wasted talent that results from negative attitudes towards disability.

Paper Supplies

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department who the suppliers are of his Department's *(a)* paper and *(b)* paper products. [91904]

Mr. Blunkett: The contract to supply paper and paper products to the Home Department is held by the company Guilbert Niceday. In addition to the aforementioned contract the Prison Service also hold a contract with James McNaughton to supply paper and paper products to Prison Service industries.

In June 2002 the Home Office mandated all offices within the Department to use re-cycled paper in photocopiers, fax machines and printers, unless technical reasons precluded them from using this paper. The provision of re-cycled paper is part of the agreed contract with Guilbert Niceday.

Police (Herefordshire)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers are employed in Herefordshire. [91748]

Mr. Denham: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on 2 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 589W, setting out police strength for each Basic Command Unit for each force in England and Wales as at 31 March 2002.

The deployment of resources between the six territorial divisions and other specialist operational and support units of the West Mercia Constabulary is an operational matter for the Chief Constable.

Police Force (Civilian Staff)

Mr. Challen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many civilian staff have been employed in each police force in England and Wales in each year since 1996–97; and how many of these civilians have been employed as a consequence of the civilianisation of posts formerly performed by uniformed officers. [91080]

Mr. Denham: The figures for the number of civilian support staff employed by police forces since 1996–97 are provided in the table. Information for the number civilians employed as a result of the civilianisation of uniformed police posts is not available.

Police force	*March 1997*	*March 1998*	*March 1999*	*March 2000*	*March 2001*	*March 2002*
Avon and Somerset	1,438	1,393	1,424	1,436	1,452	1,611
Bedfordshire	484	523	483	490	491	524
Cambridgeshire	607	574	586	503	614	733
Cheshire	735	781	785	823	833	884
Cleveland	609	586	552	595	586	626
Cumbria	451	451	442	469	588	631
Derbyshire	723	[illegible]	818	826	875	953
Devon and Cornwall	1,159	[illegible]	1,215	1,343	1,453	1,639
Dorset	615	651	702	686	682	741
Durham	583	557	559	590	566	660

Police force	*March 1997*	*March 1998*	*March 1999*	*March 2000*	*March 2001*	*March 2002*
Dyfed Powys	322	341	341	359	401	459
Essex	1,199	1,252	1,273	1,348	1,447	1,571
Gloucestershire	435	423	504	484	506	545
Greater Manchester	2,612	2,661	2,623	2,822	2,858	3,135
Gwent	452	477	487	498	537	570
Hampshire	1,316	1,331	1,381	1,443	1,424	1,597
Hertfordshire	818	831	835	890	935	1,121
Humberside	718	789	840	840	808	816
Kent	1,384	1,470	1,582	1,647	1,796	1,958
Lancashire	1,126	1,143	1,198	1,422	1,369	1,442
Leicestershire	755	774	802	805	686	816
Lincolnshire	521	541	517	516	561	600
London, City of	347	334	314	285	233	247
Merseyside	1,343	1,502	1,356	1,458	1,418	1,532
Metropolitan Police	13,493	12,432	11,257	10,605	10,040	10,459
Norfolk	603	646	648	655	694	819
North Wales	476	479	508	519	498	645
North Yorkshire	519	543	541	492	591	743
Northamptonshire	554	577	587	599	694	742
Northumbria	1,365	1,362	1,443	1,417	1,344	1,403
Nottinghamshire	1,003	987	1,039	1,024	1,039	1,087
South Wales	1,206	1,132	1,223	1,081	1,270	1,435
South Yorkshire	1,291	1,243	1,273	1,391	1,312	1,352
Staffordshire	763	866	1,004	858	935	1,030
Suffolk	522	583	594	600	621	692
Surrey	727	743	733	762	897	1,043
Sussex	1,149	1,185	1,393	1,328	1,454	1,507
Thames Valley	1,825	1,827	1,799	1,786	1,891	2,061
Warwickshire	376	398	406	394	412	459
West Mercia	942	975	975	1,043	1,095	1,116
West Midlands	2,739	2,817	2,652	2,695	2,819	3,007
West Yorkshire	2,234	2,304	2,216	2,199	2,228	2,364
Wiltshire	475	519	555	563	622	649
Total	53,011	52,975	52,465	52,588	53,575	58,022

Source:
Home Office Statistical Bulletins—Police Service Strength 1997–2002

Police Numbers

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of police officers in *(a)* England and Wales, *(b)* Avon and Somerset and *(c)* East Somerset district in each year from 1980–81 to 2003–04; and if he will make a statement. [92084]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 22 January 2003]:* Information on the number of officers in England and Wales and Avon and Somerset Constabulary for 1980–81 to 2001–02 (the latest available statistics) is set out in the table. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has set a target for there to be 130,000 officers in March 2003 and 132,500 officers in 2004, but he has not set targets for individual forces.

The deployment of resources between the eight territorial divisions and other specialist operational and support units of the force is an operational matter for the Chief Constable.

I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on 2 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 589W, setting out police strength for each Basic Command Unit for each force in England and Wales as at 31 March 2002.

Police numbers; England and Wales and for Avon and Somerset 1980–81 to 2001–02

Year (as at 31 March)	*Police numbers England and Wales*	*Police numbers Avon and Somerset*
1981	118,102	2,953
1982	119,973	3,011
1983	121,003	2,970
1984	121,053	2,997
1985	120,116	2,982
1986	120,848	2,958
1987	122,236	3,009
1988	124,080	3,013
1989	125,631	3,014
1990	126,777	3,094
1991	127,495	3,092
1992	127,627	3,081
1993	128,290	3,068
1994	127,897	3,033
1995	127,222	3,000
1996	126,901	2,981
1997	127,158	2,989
1998	126,814	2,976
1999	126,096	2,999
2000	124,418	2,934
2001	125,519	2,960
2002	129,603	3,096

Police Pay and Pensions

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assumptions the Home Office made about the change in police pay and pension costs between 2002–03 and 2003–04 in determining the police grant distribution. [90217]

Mr. Denham: The average increase in Police Grant and Revenue Support Grant and National Non-Domestic Rates income in 2003–04 will be 4.3 per cent. Each police authority will receive an increase of at least 3 per cent.

Within the total sum available, distribution of Police Grant is based, by formula, on predicted relative demands on policing services for each police authority. Formula changes for 2003–04 do not relate to pay or pension costs. The proportion of the formula attributable to projected pensions costs remains at 14.5 per cent.

Grant is not specifically earmarked for pay and pension costs. Authorities will take grant into account when setting budgets to meet these costs from their total available resources.

Police Precept

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the level of the police precept in each English police authority, based on *(a)* Band D council tax and *(b)* other measures for which comparative information is available, in each year from 1990–91 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92082]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 22 January 2003]:* Precept levels are determined by police authorities.

Police precepts (Band D level) for English Police Authorities since 1995–96 are set out in the table. Before April 1995 policing in shire areas was provided by county councils. Figures for the police component of county precepts are unavailable.

Council tax—police element (Band D)

£

Police authority	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*2002–03*
Avon and Somerset	45.32	45.73	52.04	55.09	60.62	67.59	72.66	83.4
Bedfordshire	45.40	46.46	52.51	55.84	61.36	66.98	70.26	78.69
Cambridgeshire	44.64	45.00	51.03	48.24	52.11	62.46	68.04	94.59
Cheshire	44.71	45.10	51.16	53.86	56.28	61.06	64.66	73.54
Cleveland	45.23	46.02	54.87	48.43	62.55	65.58	69.51	96.13
Cumbria	49.54	51.14	58.20	72.35	78.27	84.23	90.60	100.48
Derbyshire	45.04	45.18	51.31	57.30	65.85	71.12	75.38	91.96
Devon and Cornwall	45.60	45.66	49.79	48,30	53.52	58.87	61.81	73.8
Dorset	56.13	57.49	63.59	70.60	77.12	84.42	92.25	103.5
Durham	45.00	45.45	52.20	48.60	50.40	52.65	56.43	64.44
Essex	47.25	48.42	54.09	62.28	65.07	67.95	71.01	77.67
Gloucestershire	44.92	44.96	51.17	57.74	68.90	77.98	82.05	94.01
Greater Manchester	45.53	45.86	54.10	56.28	60.22	62.72	64.66	68.86
Hampshire	45.00	45.81	51.75	50.13	53.91	55.08	59.04	75.15
Hertfordshire	44.89	46.02	51.51	58.83	63.54	67.99	72.39	81.01
Humberside	45.09	45.78	52.47	52.47	54.81	60.30	85.77	95.4
Kent	45.09	45.81	51.57	48.45	52.48	55.73	60.26	73.64
Lancashire	45.18	45.71	53.25	53.48	57.69	62.60	67.89	73.86
Leicestershire	45.27	45.32	52.26	61.21	63.79	67.80	75.52	95.21
Lincolnshire	62.21	66.96	69.03	78.93	81.99	86.49	90.36	94.86
Merseyside	53.42	57.87	66.87	71.78	77.44	81.31	85.37	94.76
Metropolitan	47.83	49.84	57.00	70.73	77.44	90.95	118.85	130.59
Norfolk	45.27	45.18	50.58	53.64	64.35	72.09	83.61	100.35
Northamptonshire	63.29	64.26	70.56	69.29	76.08	79.65	83.00	105.25
Northumbria	44.92	45.95	52.73	47.67	49.82	52.06	55.65	58.15
North Yorkshire	45.47	45.40	49.72	48.46	52.20	57.04	62.59	88.59
Nottinghamshire	45.51	45.94	49.78	54.32	61.55	65.17	70.17	85.17
South Yorkshire	44.95	45.80	53.29	54.28	56.72	59.26	62.79	74.09
Staffordshire	47.87	48.15	54.74	72.42	78.86	83.43	94.37	100.93
Suffolk	44.64	45.09	51.39	52.38	56.16	61.11	67.14	82.08
Surrey	41.94	42.93	44.64	66.06	75.24	79.41	83.08	96.44
Sussex	45.18	45.99	51.66	50.94	53.19	55.53	59.13	69.84
Thames Valley	46.86	46.96	52.79	50.76	56.53	60.34	64.49	73.49
Warwickshire	44.60	46.70	52.24	62.09	71.18	77.57	85.17	101.78
West Mercia	44.94	45.34	50.87	53.64	59.00	74.06	78.50	104.5
West Midlands	44.48	45.65	53.20	48.99	51.19	54.77	57.21	61.88
West Yorkshire	45.28	45.28	53.17	52.41	54.76	58.73	60.82	75.92
Wiltshire	48.45	49.44	55.48	62.77	68.98	75.84	83.26	91.54

Police Response Times

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the target time is for the police to respond to 999 calls in *(a)* Essex Constabulary, *(b)* Tendring division, *(c)* Colchester division and *(d)* England; and if he will list the most recent performance in each case. [91463]

Mr. Denham: The Government do not set target times for emergency response.

The emergency response targets set by Essex Police Authority within Essex Police are the same for all divisions:

Rural—20 minutes,

Urban—10 minutes.

There is not a national target—forces set their own, although the majority are rural 20 minutes and urban 10 minutes; the others are very similar.

The latest Essex performance figures are as follows:

Essex Police—Target 86 per cent. Performance (rolling 12 months to end December 2002) 83.5 per cent.

Tendring Division—Target 88 per cent. Performance (rolling 12 months to end December 2002) 88.3 per cent.

Colchester Division—Target 88 per cent. Performance (rolling 12 months to end December 2002) 83.9 per cent.

The most recent figures available for England and Wales are those given in the Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary annual report 2001–02 published on 9 December 2002. These show that the average response times for attending incidents within target times were 78.7 per cent. in urban areas and 86.9 per cent. in rural areas.

Police Standards Unit

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many police forces have been subject to intervention by the Police Standards Unit since its creation; [92688]

(2) how many separate interventions the Police Standards Unit has made since its creation. [92687]

Mr. Denham: There have been no formal interventions by the Police Standards Unit under the powers provided by sections 4 and 5 of the Police Reform Act 2002.

The Police Standards Unit is, however, working with police forces in England and Wales—and in conjunction with Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary—to share good practice, to provide support where performance issues have been identified and to aid specific initiatives such as the work with 10 forces to tackle street crime.

Policing (London)

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will make a statement on the current level of policing in *(a)* the London Borough of Havering and *(b)* other London boroughs; [91333]

(2) how many police officers there are in each London borough; [91332]

(3) what recent discussions he has had with police borough commanders on police numbers in the London boroughs; [91339]

(4) what plans he has to increase police numbers and resources in the London Borough of Havering. [91334]

Mr. Denham: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, has regular meetings with the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis (Sir John Stevens QPM) at which a range of policing issues are discussed.

I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on 2 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 589W. This sets out police strength for each Basic Command Unit for each force in England and Wales, including the London boroughs.

Under the provisional grant settlement for 2003–04 announced on 5 December 2002 the MPS will receive £2,021.7 million in Government grant.

Decisions about the allocation of resources, including police officers, to the London boroughs are matters for the Commissioner and the Metropolitan Police Authority.

Radiological Terrorism

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what liaison has taken place between the Civil Contingencies Unit and the Office of Civil Nuclear Security in respect of preparation of counter measures against radiological terrorism. [91961]

Mr. Wilson: I have been asked to reply.

None. The Office for Civil Nuclear Security (OCNS), the security regulator, provides advice on protective security of nuclear materials and nuclear facilities in the civil nuclear industry. OCNS does not provide advice on the consequences of terrorism.

Stray Dogs

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his policy is on the provision by local police forces of temporary kennels for stray dogs collected by local authority dog wardens. [92590]

Mr. Denham: The provision of temporary kennels for stray dogs by the police is a local matter determined individually by each police force. The Policing Bureaucracy Taskforce recommended that this function may transfer to local authorities. The proposals are being discussed in consultation with the relevant stakeholders.

Sussex Police

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers have left Sussex constabulary in the last 12 months because of *(a)* retirement, *(b)* early retirement, *(c)* injury and *(d)* other employment. [92577]

Mr. Denham: The precise information requested is not collected centrally. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary has provided the figures set out in the table for the 12 months ending 31 March 2002.

Sussex police wastage: 2001–02

	Number
Dismissed or required to resign	2
Voluntary resignations	63
Medical retirements	16
Ordinary retirements	82
Transfers	34
Died in service	2
Total wastage	199

Terrorism Act

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 14 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 597W, on arrests made under the Terrorism Act 2000 since 1 December 2002, if he will list *(a)* the locations where the 50 arrests were made, *(b)* the numbers arrested and charged or released at each location and *(c)* the date of each of these incidents. [92037]

Mr. Blunkett: Since 1 December 2002 and to date, a total of 75 arrests have been made under the Terrorism Act 2000. The table details dates, locations and outcomes.

Date	*Number of arrests*	*Location*	*Outcome*
1 December 2002	1	Manchester	Released without charge
3 December 2002	2	Manchester	Released without charge
5 December 2002	10	London	Released from TACT (6 re-arrested for criminal offences)
11 December 2002	6	London	5 charged (s11 and s18 TACT) 1 released without charge
11 December 2002	1	Cheshire	Charged (s11 TACT)
18 December 2002	4	London	Charged (s57 of TACT)
18 December 2002	3	Edinburgh	Charged (s57 of TACT)
19 December 2002	1	London	Released without charge
22 December 2002	1	London	Released without charge
24 December 2002	1	Edinburgh	Charged (s57 and s58 TACT)
29 December 2002	2	Cumbria	Charged (s15 TACT)
30 December 2002	3	London	Released from TACT (re-arrested for criminal offences)
5 January 2003	8	London	2 released without charge; 3 charged (s57 TACT and s2 Chemical Weapons Act); 1 charged (s57 and 58 TACT and s2 Chemical Weapons Act) 2 released from TACT (re-arrested for criminal and immigration offences)
7 January 2003	1	London	Charged under s57 TACT and s2 Chemical Weapons Act
8 January 2003	1	London	Released without charge
12 January 2003	6	Bournemouth	Released from TACT (re-arrested for criminal and immigration offences)
13 January 2003	1	London	Released without charge
14 January 2003	3	Manchester	1 charged with murder 1 detained under ATCS Act 1 charged (s57 and s58 TACT)
14 January 2003	2	Tottenham	1 detained under ATCS Act 1 released without charge
14 January 2003	1	Birmingham	Released without charge
15 January 2003	1	Birmingham	Released without charge
15 January 2003	1	Manchester	Released from TACT into Immigration Service custody
17 January 2003	3	Gatwick	Released from TACT into Immigration Service custody
17 January 2003	2	London	Released from TACT (bailed re criminal offences)
18 January 2003	3	Gloucestershire	Released without charge
20 January 2003	7	London	All remain in custody

Traffic Police

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police in England have been allocated to traffic duties in each year since 1990; and what training in road accident investigation is given to police officers. [91852]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The table gives the readily available information on the number of traffic officers in each police force in England. This covers the three years since 1999, in which year the definition of traffic officer used by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary changed. The definition is now "staff who are predominantly employed on motor-cycles or in patrol vehicles for the policing of traffic and motorway related duties". This definition excludes those engaged in accident investigation, vehicle examination or radar duties.

The adoption of an intelligence-led approach to traffic policing, the integration of such policing with other core activities, the increased use of cameras and other technology, and the more effective use of police resources can lead to a reduction in dedicated traffic officers without a reduction in performance in meeting traffic-related targets or enforcement levels.

The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) has created a protocol to safeguard expertise and credibility by providing a common standard within the police service for the conduct of collision investigation and reconstruction. Under this, police forces should aim, at the primary level, to train collision investigation officers to the level of the appropriate City and Guilds qualification or an approved equivalent. The recommendation is that the qualification should be achieved within two years of the officer first undertaking this type of work. In addition, specialist officers are required to undergo continuing professional development, which provides a means of maintaining and enhancing their expertise and ensuring the maintenance of standards.

Number of traffic officers by police force

	1999–2000	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Avon and Somerset	200.3	210.5	214.0
Bedfordshire	73.0	69.0	68.5
Cambridgeshire	93.0	86.0	78.0
Cheshire	195.6	187.0	194.0
City of London	22.0	24.0	25.0
Cleveland	67.9	62.9	67.0
Cumbria	118.8	111.0	108.0
Derbyshire	138.6	135.6	140.3
Devon and Cornwall	215.3	202.3	186.7
Dorset	83.0	86.0	81.0
Durham	116.0	112.8	112.6
Essex	245.1	249.1	253.7
Gloucestershire	67.6	68.6	63.6
Greater Manchester	432.8	422.8	420.8
Hampshire	251.0	240.0	239.8
Hertfordshire	155.0	168.0	149.0
Humberside	154.6	145.0	136.0
Kent	102.6	103.6	103.6
Lancashire	220.4	216.8	219.6
Leicestershire	87.0	95.0	85.7
Lincolnshire	93.0	88.0	97.8
Merseyside	185.0	130.0	126.0
Metropolitan police	823.8	685.7	602.0
Norfolk	108.6	112.6	114.0
Northamptonshire	51.8	51.8	61.4
Northumbria	158.0	158.0	178.0
North Yorkshire	96.0	129.0	140.0
Nottinghamshire	166.5	175.0	111.0
South Yorkshire	196.4	206.4	208.4
Staffordshire	188.0	35.0	34.0
Suffolk	70.0	62.6	67.6
Surrey	173.0	197.0	109.5
Sussex	191.3	190.0	174.2
Thames Valley	251.4	250.5	246.8
Warwickshire	102.0	95.8	95.0
West Mercia	278.0	322.0	325.0
West Midlands	394.0	380.0	385.0
West Yorkshire	322.8	326.2	336.2
Wiltshire	92.7	91.0	88.0
Totals	6,791.9	6,718.6	6,446.8

Zimbabwe

Mr. Flook: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* Zimbabwean nationals and *(b)* British passport holders previously resident in Zimbabwe without the right of residence have applied for residence in the UK in each of the last 24 months. [91947]

Beverley Hughes: The available information relates to the number of Zimbabwe nationals granted settlement. Monthly statistics for 2000 and 2001, the latest available, are given in the table. Data for 2002 are due to be published later this year. Information on the number of applications made for settlement is not available.

In 2001, 515 British overseas citizens (British passport holders without the right of residence) were granted settlement. The corresponding figure for 2000 was 630. It is not possible to identify how many of these citizens were previously resident in Zimbabwe.

Nationals of Zimbabwe granted settlement, by month, 2000 and 2001

Number of persons

	2000	*2001*
January	85	65
February	65	75
March	55	105
April	95	50
May	85	90
June	110	90
July	90	100
August	90	125
September	75	90
October	75	100
November	70	55
December	60	30
Total	955	980

Note:

Data rounded to the nearest 5.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 28 January 2003

CABINET OFFICE

E-Government

24. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress has been made with the development of e-government. [93526]

Mr. Alexander: The Government are committed to a radical reform of public services and e-government is a powerful catalyst for bringing about the transformation necessary to deliver the Government's vision. In recognition of this commitment, we are investing £6 billion over the next three years in e-government.

Disabled People (Civil Service)

25. **Miss Begg:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress has been made in improving the recruitment of disabled people into the civil service. [93527]

Mr. Alexander: The Government are committed to employing disabled people. As at April 2002 disabled staff accounted for 3.6 per cent. of the civil service, up from 2.8 per cent. in 1995. A service wide target has been set at 3.0 per cent. disabled people in the senior civil service by 2004–05. In April 2002 the percentage of disabled staff in the senior civil service was 1.7 per cent., up from 1.5 per cent. in 1998.

Regulatory Reform

26. **Mr. Prisk:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress his Department is making in implementing the Regulatory Reform Action Plan. [93528]

Mr. Alexander: The Regulatory Reform Action Plan (RRAP) contains 268 reform proposals that the Government have committed itself to delivering over the next three years. So far, 27 per cent. of the items it contains have been completed.

Civil Contingency Bill

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when he plans to bring forward a Civil Contingency Bill. [93555]

Mr. Alexander: Work is progressing well on preparing new civil contingencies legislation. Proposals will be published this Parliamentary Session. New legislation will be introduced as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Computer Misuse

Mr. Webb: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many cases of computer misuse there were in his Department in each of the last five years, broken down by each category of misuse; and how many of those cases resulted in disciplinary action. [93049]

Mr. Alexander: There were a total of 35 cases of computer misuse in the Cabinet Office during the five years 1998–2002, broken down as follows. The numbers of those resulting in disciplinary action are shown in parentheses.

	Inappropriate use of internet	*Using another's password*	*Totals*
1998	2(2)	2 (2)	4 (4)
1999	3 (3)	0	3 (3)
2000	19 (12)	0	19 (12)
2001	8 (7)	0	8 (7)
2002	1 (1)	0	1 (1)
Total	33 (25)	2 (2)	35 (27)

Congestion Charge

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office whether individual passengers of the Government Car and Despatch Agency will reimburse the agency for congestion charges it incurs. [92996]

Mr. Alexander: The responsibility for the provision of ministerial cars and drivers has been delegated under the terms of the Framework Document to the Government Car Despatch Agency. I have asked its Chief Executive Mr. Nick Matheson to write to the hon. Member. Copies of his letter will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Industrial Action/Illness

Andrew George: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many working days have been lost in the Cabinet Office owing to *(a)* industrial action and *(b)* illness in each year since 1997. [93465]

Mr. Alexander: Working days lost through industrial action are recorded as unauthorised absence for which pay is stopped. The Cabinet Office (including agencies) keeps records of unpaid absence generally but they also include authorised absence. Separating the records could be achieved only at disproportionate costs.

Sick absence figures for Government Departments are published annually in the report "Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service". The most recent report for calendar year 2001 was announced by Ministerial Statement 19 December 2002. Copies are available in the Libraries of the House. Figures for 2002 will be announced later this year.

Cabinet Office figures (including its agencies and non-departmental public bodies) are:

	Days per staff year
1997	6.6
1998	7.3
1999	6.8
2000	4.6
2001	5.7

Public Appointments

Mr. Tynan: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress is being made in providing training for people considering making an application for public appointments. [93522]

Mr. Alexander: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman) earlier today, *Official Report,* column 716.

TRANSPORT

Aviation Inquiry

11. **John Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on submissions to his inquiry into aviation. [93539]

Mr. Darling: The Department has so far received over 70,000 responses to the airport consultation from a wide range of interest groups and individuals.

I will shortly publish a revised south-east consultation paper which will include runway options for Gatwick airport.

The consultation will remain open for four months from the date of publication.

17. **John Barrett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many responses his Department has received to the "Future of Air Transport" consultation document. [93545]

Mr. Spellar: The Department has so far received over 70,000 responses to the airport consultation from a wide range of interest groups and individuals. We will shortly publish a revised south-east consultation paper, which will include runway options for Gatwick airport. The consultation will remain open for four months from this date.

M6

12. **Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, if he will make a statement on the proposed widening of the M6 motorway. [93540]

Mr. Spellar: I wrote to the North West Regional Assembly on the 10 December 2002 giving the Secretary of State's response to the 'West Midlands to North West Multi Modal Study' (MIDMAN). The study has clearly demonstrated that some road widening is a necessary component of a strategy aimed at tackling congestion on the M6 motorway. Government therefore support the study recommendation to widen the motorway from dual 3 to dual 4 lanes between Junctions lla and 19. The Highways Agency has been instructed to progress this work.

Rail Services (Scotland)

13. **Mr. Luke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, if he will make a statement on investment in the east coast main line rail services north of Edinburgh. [93541]

Mr. Spellar: Last year the Strategic Rail Authority announced £100 million of investment for the east coast main line under a deal to extend the GNER franchise by two years. The Authority is considering how to deliver improvements to the east coast main line in order to secure greater capacity and increased line speeds.

Transport Infrastructure

14. **Jon Trickett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what priority he gives to economic regeneration when planning new transport infrastructure. [93542]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department's method for appraising transport schemes looks at a wide range of costs and benefits including the reduction of travel times, safety, accessibility and impacts on the environment, as well as a scheme's contribution to regeneration. We take decisions on particular schemes in the light of all of these factors.

Cycling

15. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on departmental funding for local cycling projects. [93543]

Mr. Jamieson: The Minister for Transport announced on 9 January 2003 the second round of our Cycling Projects Fund. This provides a further £1 million of funding for local, practical projects aiming to deliver an increase in cycling. The fund builds on the more than £2 million that was made available in 2002 to support 138 cycling projects.

Road Traffic

16. **Norman Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what his policy is on road traffic reduction. [93544]

Mr. Jamieson: The Government's position has consistently been that we seek to reduce the adverse impacts of road traffic, rather than the level of traffic per se.

Central Railway

18. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects to make a decision on Central Railway's application for a hybrid Bill. [93546]

Mr. Spellar: We are considering carefully Central Railway's proposals and will respond to Central Railway in due course.

Wales Railway Franchise

19. **Ian Lucas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the specifications set out in the Wales railway franchise. [93547]

Mr. Jamieson: The franchise will include all local and regional passenger services within Wales, and some cross-border services. Its terms will reflect the outcome of negotiations with bidders, among other things.

Strategic Rail Authority

20. **Vernon Coaker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what recent discussions he has had with the Strategic Rail Authority about improving local rail services. [93548]

Mr. Spellar: I, and other departmental Ministers, meet the Chair and Chief Executive of the Strategic Rail Authority on a regular basis; and discuss a range of issues.

Air Travel Trust Fund

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he will introduce legislation to increase the air travel trust fund. [93661]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to my answer of 20 January 2003 *Official Report*, column 38W.

Bus Services (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many *(a)* new, *(b)* improved and *(c)* withdrawn bus services there were in (i) Shrewsbury and Atcham and (ii) Shropshire in each year since 1997. [93086]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department does not collect this information. However, I am informed by Shropshire County Council that since 1998 the total number of commercial bus journeys in the county withdrawn by operators is 1,936. In the same period the county council has provided subsidy for 2,500 new additional bus journeys some of which replaced those commercial ones that have been withdrawn.

The council does not have available separate information about services in Shrewsbury and Atcham.

Concessionary Travel (Pensioners)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will take steps to introduce free off-peak travel for pensioners on public transport. [93698]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on 30 October 2002, *Official Report*, column 863W.

Cross-Solent Fares

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what representations he has received since 1977, other than from hon. Members, that the Government should subsidise cross-solent fares. [93863]

Mr. Jamieson: Since 1997, 15 representations from members of the public have been received on this matter.

Cycling (Protective Equipment)

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to introduce legislation to compel cyclists to wear personal protective equipment; and if he will make a statement. [93734]

Mr. Jamieson: We have no current plans to make the wearing of personal protective equipment by cyclists compulsory. The Highway Code advises cyclists to wear clothing which will make them visible and which is appropriate for cycling. It also advises them to wear helmets. We have engaged TRL to monitor wearing rates. The latest study shows that in 1999 the overall wearing rate was 22 per cent. on major built up roads. That is not a high enough level of public acceptance to introduce compulsory wearing. There would be enforcement difficulties and it could have adverse effects on the levels of cycling. However, we will continue to monitor wearing rates and will review the option of compulsory wearing from time to time.

External Consultants

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the benefit to *(a)* his Department, *(b)* taxpayers and *(c)* road users of the value of each external consultant used by his Department since its inception. [93957]

Mr. Jamieson: Guidance on the use of consultants by my Department requires that each consultancy project should have a sound business case which sets out the deliverables and benefits expected to accrue . Details of individual consultancies and supporting business cases are not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Freight (Shipping)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much freight was carried by water in and around the UK in *(a)* May 1992, *(b)* May 1997 and *(c)* September 2002 by (i) all flagged ships and (ii) UK flagged ships; and if he will make a statement. [93662]

Mr. Jamieson: The available information relates to UK coastal shipping. The statistics are compiled on an annual basis only. Coastal freight traffic carried (i) in all flagged ships and (ii) in UK flagged ships for years 1991, 1996 and 2001 (the latest available year), in terms of goods lifted (tonnage) and goods moved (tonne-kilometres), were as follows:

	Goods lifted (million tonnes)		*Goods moved (billion tonne-kilometres)*	
Year	*All flagged ships*	*UK flagged ships*	*All flagged ships*	*UK flagged ships*
1991	63.10	22.44	40.69	9.84
1996	70.87	17.30	45.14	7.27
2001	58.53	7.74	34.12	2.96

Minimum Wage

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will estimate the impact of increasing the minimum wage *(a)* in line with average earnings, *(b)* to £4.17 per hour, *(c)* to £4.87 per hour, *(d)* to £5.00 per hour and *(e)* to £5.30 per hour, on the cost of salaries of departmental employees (i) in total and (ii) for each nation of the United Kingdom in the next financial year. [90597]

Mr. Jamieson: Increasing the minimum wage in the manner described would have no impact on the cost of salaries for employees in my Department.

Ports (Security Breaches)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many official breaches of security have taken place at UK ports in each year since 1997, broken down by *(a)* region, *(b)* port and *(c)* type of breach. [93244]

Mr. Jamieson: Since 1997 my Department has recorded a total of 20 breaches of port security, ie instances where individuals have gained unauthorised access to Restricted Zones at ports. It is not appropriate to give a detailed breakdown of either the specific port or region where these breaches took place for obvious reasons.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what *(a)* court actions and other prosecutions have taken place and *(b)* fines or other actions have been imposed, against (i) UK ports and (ii) other marine organisations and activities in response to breaches of security which have taken place at UK ports in each year since 1997; and what the nature of the breaches were in each case. [93245]

Mr. Jamieson: No court actions and/or other prosecutions have taken place. From 1 January 1997 until 31 December 2002 a total of seven Enforcement Notices (ENs) have been served on UK harbour authorities and harbour operators. The ENs were served under the provisions of the Aviation and Maritime Security Act 1990 and related to failings to meet the requirements of that Act. Details are as follows:

Year	*Number of ENs*	*Failings*
1997	1	Restricted Zone(RZ) access control
1998	0	
1999	0	
2000	1	RZ access control
2001	4	Pass display (2); lack of suitably trained search staff; RZ access control
2002	1	RZ access control

Public Transport (Safety)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what representations he has received about new measures to protect the safety of people using public transport, with particular reference to women. [93482]

Mr. Jamieson: We receive representations from a number of different organisations, including some regarding personal safety on public transport. For example, last year we received a representation by the Rail Safety Task Force of Soroptomist International of south east England regarding improving safety in rail travel.

Redhill Aerodrome

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the occasions on which Ministers in his Department have met representatives of Redhill Aerodrome Ventures Ltd. since 7 June 2001. [93787]

Mr. Jamieson: Since 7 June 2001, no meetings have been held between Ministers in my Department and representatives of Redhill Aerodrome Ventures Ltd.

Road Accidents

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment has been made by his Department of the number of *(a)* accidents associated with heavy commercial vehicles in each year since 1997 and *(b)* the associated fatalities. [93808]

Mr. Jamieson: The number of accidents involving at least one HGV in each year since 1997, and the associated fatalities from those accidents are shown in the table:

Accidents involving at least one HGV: GB 1997–2001

Accidents/fatalities

	HGV accidents	*Fatalities*[1]
1997	13,132	535
1998	13,278	576
1999	13,951	620
2000	13,894	560
2001	13,631	575

[1] Total number of fatalities in accidents involving at least on HGV.

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many *(a)* pedestrians and *(b)* cyclists were (i) killed, (ii) seriously injured and (iii) slightly injured in road accidents in each year since 1997; and how many were under the age of 18 years in each category. [93826]

Mr. Jamieson: The number of pedestrians and cyclists of all ages, and those aged under 18 that were killed or injured in each year since 1997, are shown in the following tables:

Pedestrian and pedal cycle casualty data: GB 1997–2001

Casualties

Road user type/severity	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
All ages					
Pedestrians					
Killed	973	906	870	857	826
Serious	10,053	9,575	8,955	8,641	8,238
Slight	34,575	34,405	33,063	32,535	31,513
All	45,601	44,886	42,888	42,033	40,577
Pedal cycle					
Killed	183	158	172	127	138
Serious	3,409	3,154	3,004	2,643	2,540
Slight	21,044	19,611	19,664	17,842	16,436
All	24,636	22,923	22,840	20,612	19,114
Casualties under 18					
Pedestrians					
Killed	165	120	128	120	130
Serious	4,228	3,988	3,682	3,465	3,393
Slight	16,004	15,729	14,846	14,375	14,097
All	20,397	19,837	18,656	17,960	17,620
Pedal cycle					
Killed	41	35	44	34	31
Serious	1,199	1,072	1,069	850	773
Slight	8,241	7,247	7,446	6,425	5,692
All	9,481	8,534	8,559	7,309	6,496

Tolls

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what his estimate is of the annual cost to his Department of reimbursing VAT to private operators of tolls on the basis being consulted upon at present. [93350]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* Current estimates are that the annual reimbursement will range from about £250,000 to £350,000.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what arrangements will be in place on 1 February to ensure that privately operated tolls do not increase by reason of the incidence of a VAT liability. [93351]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* My Department is currently consulting with owners of privately operated statutory tolled undertakings on a reimbursement scheme, which will allow qualifying operators to recover VAT included in tolls. The scheme will be in place before any payment under it will need to be made.

The concession agreement at the Severn crossings has been renegotiated to eliminate the need to increase tolls because of the introduction of VAT.

Traffic Accidents (Driver Liability)

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to introduce legislation on driver liability in road traffic accidents; and if he will make a statement. [93733]

Mr. Jamieson: Road traffic law in both Great Britain and Northern Ireland provides for penalties for bad driving behaviour whether or not the driver is involved in an accident.

The culpability of a motorist charged with a road traffic offence, such as dangerous or careless driving, is a matter for a court to decide.

Traffic Safety Cameras

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will publish the terms of reference for the "Cost Recovery System for Traffic Safety Cameras" study; on what dates *(a)* the study and *(b)* its associated pilots were completed; and if he will publish the information gathered by the study. [94092]

Mr. Jamieson: A trial was set up to test the new funding mechanism for safety cameras. The key tests were to reduce speeding and casualties, to encourage general public acceptance of the road safety benefits, and to ensure satisfactory working of the funding and partnership arrangements. The trial ran from 1 April 2000 until 31 March 2002 in eight pilot areas. These have been monitored and an independently produced research report of the findings is expected to be published shortly.

Wales-England Rugby Match (Rail Services)

Kevin Brennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he has requested a copy of the independent safety report commissioned by Wales and the West Trains on the provision of rail services after the Wales *v.* England Six Nations rugby match at the Millennium Stadium, Cardiff; and if he will place a copy in the Library. [93255]

Mr. Jamieson: The SRA has undertaken detailed discussions with the train operator about transport arrangements for this match. However, the safety report owned by Wales and Borders Trains is an internal document. Neither my Department nor the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) has seen it.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Amnesic Shellfish Poisoning

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps she is taking to manage amnesic shellfish poisoning in scallops; and what recent discussions she has had and what representations she has received on management of amnesic shellfish poisoning in scallops. [89689]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* I have been asked to reply.

European Union legislation lays down the health conditions for harvesting and placing on the market of live bivalve molluscs and requires monitoring for biotoxins, including amnesic shellfish poisoning (ASP). If statutory monitoring reveals that the maximum permissible ASP toxin level in the whole animal has been exceeded, the production or relaying area concerned must be closed until the situation has returned to normal. The Food Standards Agency, the United Kingdom competent authority responsible for shellfish issues, has received a number of representations on the management of ASP in scallops. They are currently considering the adoption of an optional derogation in EU law that would provide for a tiered approach to the testing of ASP toxins.

Animal Welfare

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) how many live sheep were exported from Dover to continental Europe on 10 January 2003 on the Alda K; when and where health certification was carried out in respect of the sheep; how many of the sheep were rejected as unfit for the intended journey *(a)* during inspection for health certification purposes and *(b)* at Dover docks, and to where those sheep were taken; and what the address was of the final destination given on the route plan for each of the consignments; [92977]

(2) how many live sheep were exported from Dover to continental Europe on *(a)* 10 January and *(b)* 14 January on the Omega Livestock; when and where health certification was carried out in respect of the sheep; how many of the sheep were rejected as unfit for the intended journey (i) during inspection for health certification purposes and (ii) at Dover docks, and to where those sheep were taken; and what the address was of the final destination given on the route plan for each of the consignments. [92978]

Mr. Morley: The information requested is as follows:

Sailing date	*Total animals certified*	*Where consignments were certified*	*Animals rejected at certification*	*Animals rejected at Dover docks*	*Destination*
10 January (Alda K)	849	England	0	0	Germany
10 January (Omega Express)	2,174	England	15	0	France
14 January (Omega Express)	2,766	England and Wales	13	0	France

The sheep for the consignments listed were certified within 48 hours prior to export. These consignments were fattening animals transported to holdings, except for the Alda K sailing on 10 January 2003 where they were slaughter animals which went to an approved slaughterhouse. The animals which were rejected at certification remained in Great Britain.

These figures relate to the numbers of sheep certified for export and are subject to revision and change.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she intends to reply to the letter to her Department dated 29 November from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Ms Jean Kellock. [92281]

Alun Michael: My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Lord Whitty, responded on 27 January.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she expects to reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Totnes concerning Mr. E. Baker of Kingsbridge, South Devon dated 7 December 2002, concerning his IACS claim. [93882]

Alun Michael: I replied on 26 January.

Departmental Budget

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her total departmental budget was for each year of its existence; what the projected budget is for 2002–03; and how much within each year has been allocated to *(a)* Rural Affairs, *(b)* Agriculture, *(c)* Environmental Protection and *(d)* International Environmental Matters. [89096]

Alun Michael: The budget figures for each year are as follows:

£ million

	2001–02	*2002–03*
Total Defra	2,959	2,459
Rural affairs	509	516
Agriculture	1,424	828
Environmental Protection	756	841
International Environmental Matters	30	29

The amounts in the table are budgets scored within departmental expenditure limits. The figures for Rural Affairs, Agriculture, Environmental Protection and International Environmental Matters are an estimated split of direct resources, excluding overheads for central services.

Equine Passports

Mr. Cameron: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs which organisations she has licensed to issue equine passports; and if she will make a statement. [93362]

Alun Michael: There are presently 56 equine organisations and associations that have been authorised to issue horse passports in Great Britain.

These passport issuing organisations are either:

Equine studbook societies who deal with a particular breed. These have been recognised under Commission Decision 92/353/EC. This legislation lays down the criteria for the approval or recognition of organisations and associations which maintain or establish studbooks for registered equidae.

International equine organisations that manage horses for competition or racing who have been registered under article 4 of the Horse Passports Order 1997.

List of Organisations and Associations that have been authorised in GB to issue Horse Passports (ie equine studbook societies that have been recognised under commission decision 92/353 EC and international organisations that manage horses for competition or racing:

American Quarter Horse Association UK
Anglo-European Studbook Ltd.
Appaloosa Horse Club (ApHc) UK Ltd.
Arab Horse Society
British Hanoverian Horse Society
British Horse Foundation/British Horse Database
British Miniature Horse Society
British Palomino Society
British Percheron Horse Society
British Skewbald & Piebald Association
British Spotted Pony Society
British Warm-Blood Society and British Sports Horse Registry
The Caspian Horse Society
The Caspian Horse Breed Society (UK)
Cleveland Bay Horse
Coloured Horse and Pony Society (UK)
Dales Pony Society
Dartmoor Pony Society
Donkey Breed Society
English Connemara Pony Society
Eriskay Pony Society
Eriskay Pony (Mother Society)—Comann Each nan Eilean Ltd.
Exmoor Pony Society
Fell Pony Society
Fjord Horse National Study-book Association of Great Britain

Fjord Horse Registry of Scotland and Fjord Horse UK
Friesian Horse Association of Great Britain and Ireland Ltd.
Hackney Horse Society
Highland Pony Society
Icelandic Horse Society of Great Britain
International Miniature Horse and Pony Society
The Irish Draught Horse Society (GB)
The Lusitano Breed Society (Great Britain)
Lippizaner National Studbook Association of Great Britain
National Pony Society
New Forest Pony Breeding & Cattle Society
Scottish Icelandic Horse Association
Shetland Policy Stud-Book Society
Shire Horse Society
The Scottish Sports Horse
Sport Horse Breeding of Great Britain
The Sports Pony Studbook Society
The Spotted Horse and Pony Society
The Standard and Trotting Horse Association of Great Britain and Ireland
Suffolk Horse Society
Trakehner Breeders Fraternity
Weatherbys
Welsh Pony & Cob Society

International organisations that manage horses for competition or racing:

The British Driving Society
British Harness Racing Club
British Equestrian Federation
Hurlingham Polo Association
The Spotted Pony Breed Society (Great Britain)
British Appaloosa Society
British Horse Society

Mr. Cameron: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what animal passports other than equine ones are issued that provide information about drugs administered to the animal concerned. [93365]

Alun Michael: Horses are the only animals that currently require a record to be made of medicines administered as required by Commission Decision 2000/68/EC, which requires all horses to be accompanied by a passport.

Farm Census

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to amend the law to allow the Environment Agency access to farm census information and IACs returns. [87182]

Margaret Beckett: Information can already be released to the Environment Agency in accordance with the provisions of the Agricultural Statistics Act 1979 and the Data Protection Act 1998 but subject to the safeguards provided for in that legislation. Officials are in discussion with the Environment Agency about information requirements and how they may be met.

Flood Defences

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what new funding mechanisms have been introduced for flood defences; and how much she estimates they will raise in *(a)* 2004–05 and *(b)* 2005–06. [92011]

Mr. Morley: No new funding mechanisms have yet been introduced. The Government are currently considering the options. The Spending Review figures announced last year for 2005–06 include an estimate of what might be raised from a new mechanism, such as a charge on development on the floodplain. This was set at £20 million out of an increase in provision for flood and coastal defence of £150 million for that year. No such amount was assumed for 2004–05.

Flooding

Mr. Goodman: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when the Environment Agency's report into flooding in the Marlow and Medmenham area will be completed; and whether it will be published in full. [93208]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* I understand that the Environment Agency have already started to compile and analyse data and information relating to the flooding that occurred throughout the Thames catchment during January 2003. As with previous floods there will be an analysis of what happened and the agency will make available to the public the lessons learnt from this information.

Mr. Goodman: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans the Environment Agency has to meet residents in the Marlow and Medmenham area during its inquiry into recent flooding in the area. [93209]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* The Environment Agency held a "open surgery" on 20 January from 9.00 am to 9.00 pm at Shepperton. It invited all those residents from Chertsey who had been flooded and advertised the event in local newspapers and over 500 people attended. Staff spoke to individuals about the cause of the flooding and the agency's plans for managing flood risk.

A further surgery was held on 23 January at Egham, to which residents flooded from the River Thames downstream of Windsor were invited, and a surgery has been arranged for 30 January for residents living between Hurley and Maidenhead.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what guidance she has issued to the Environment Agency concerning priorities for capital projects to tackle flooding. [93601]

Mr. Morley: In order to be eligible for DEFRA grant aid a capital flood defence project must satisfy fundamental economic, technical and environmental criteria and achieve an appropriate priority score based (from April 2003) on a combination of three elements—(i) benefits as compared to cost, (ii) the number of people protected as measured by the number of households at risk, their vulnerability and the extent to which adequate advance warning of flooding can be given, and (iii) environmental protection and enhancement.

In addition to guidance on the above priority scoring system, DEFRA publishes detailed guidance on aspects of project appraisal (strategic planning, economic, environmental, approaches to risk). The documents are intended to assist knowledgeable practitioners; they are not comprehensive manuals or textbooks and they do not define Government policy. However, compliance with this guidance is likely to produce projects that are acceptable for central Government support.

The above are published on the DEFRA website and the Department also provides the Environment Agency with a Memorandum setting out the conditions for grant and which has further information on the Government's priorities for flood defence projects.

Funding Commitments

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) how many funding commitments were launched by her Department and its predecessors in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999, *(d)* 2000, *(e)* 2001, *(f)* 2002 and *(g)* 2003; which (i) require bidding and (ii) are linked to a set funding formula; and what the total amount available was for each commitment; [89687]

(2) how many funding commitments were ended by her Department and its predecessors in each year since 1997. [89688]

Alun Michael: This information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Illegal Meat Imports

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the cost has been of her Department's television advertising campaign to discourage illegal meat imports; how many advertisements have been or will be broadcast, and at what times of the day; and if she will make a statement. [90979]

Margaret Beckett: The television campaign uses two public service fillers rather than paid advertisements. These fillers have been sent to broadcasters to be used in donated airtime. The cost of making and marketing the two fillers was £156,176. To 31 December, the Central Office of Information had been notified of 119 transmissions—71 at night (00:00–05:59), 24 in the afternoon (12:00–17:19) and 24 at breakfast time (06:00–09:25). However, many stations issue transmission logs quarterly, so the first full transmissions report is not due until February.

Internal Drainage Boards

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs which Government Ministers are members of internal drainage boards. [91581]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* Internal drainage boards are independent bodies. This information is not held centrally. We are not aware of any Government Minister who is a member of an IDB.

Meat Hygiene

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her policy is on the European Commission's proposal to require the full recovery of meat hygiene inspection charges from abattoirs and to make all abattoirs enforce new measures for the disposal of blood. [89615]

Margaret Beckett: The Commission has not yet made proposals on charges to abattoirs for health inspections but we have made plain our preference for the existing structure and levels of meat hygiene charges. With respect to disposal of blood, officials are working with industry representatives to achieve satisfactory outcomes both in terms of regulatory requirements and the ability of industry to change existing practices at minimum cost and disruption.

Municipal Waste

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what estimate she has made of the amount of municipal waste generated in the United Kingdom, using the definition of municipal waste in Article 2*(b)* of the Landfill Directive (99/31/EC). [89625]

Margaret Beckett: It is estimated that around 34 million tonnes of municipal waste were generated in the United Kingdom in 2000–01 (using the definition in Article 2*(b)* of the Landfill Directive).

Organophosphates

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will convene a meeting of scientists, manufacturers, her advisers and the All Party Organophosphate Parliamentary Group to assess progress in identifying past problems with organophosphate products and appropriate policies for their future use. [93692]

Mr. Morley: Following the request at the recent meeting of the Parliamentary All Party Group on OPs, I have asked my officials to draw up proposals for a meeting of stakeholders with an interest in the authorisation and use of OPs in the UK. I will consider these proposals when they are available.

River Management

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the lines of accountability are with regard to the implementation of the European Water Framework Directive in the event of a river basin management plan crossing borders between river basins. [93269]

Mr. Morley: It is proposed that the Environment Agency will be under a duty to prepare a draft river basin management plan for each river basin district in consultation with relevant bodies and that Secretary of State should have an explicit role in approving plans, including powers to require modifications, or to reject them.

Maps of the proposed river basin districts are included at appendix 5 of the Government's Second Consultation Paper. Four basins will cross internal borders, two in England-Wales (the Severn and the Dee) and two in England-Scotland[1] (the Solway/Esk and the Tweed). The Directive allows individual river basins to be combined to form a district and it is proposed that England-Wales forms two districts, and it is likely that England-Scotland will combine basins to form one district.

It is for further consideration how DEFRA and the Wales Assembly Government, and how DEFRA and the Scottish Executive will manage cross-border districts. Cross-border issues England-Scotland are treated separately from cross-border issues England-Wales to take account of the different legislation in place.

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[1] A small number of tributaries of the North Tyne rise in Scotland before flowing into England. Since only a small area of the basin lies in Scotland, it is proposed that it be combined with a neighbouring basin lying wholly in England, such as the Tees, into a single river basin district.

Water Poverty

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the number of people affected by water poverty in *(a)* England, *(b)* the West Midlands and *(c)* North Staffordshire. [89676]

Mr. Morley: The Government do not have a quantitative definition for the term 'water poverty', and so no assessment has been made.

Table A, which has been placed in the Library, is drawn from the DSS Family Resources Survey. This is the most recent available compiled information showing the relationship between water and sewerage bills and household incomes in England, and covers the years 1994–95 to 1998–99. The survey does not break the results down by region.

The housing statistics division of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister have used these data to compile figures on 'water affordability' as one of the Government's Sustainable Development Indicators. For illustrative purposes, this exercise used 3 per cent. as the affordability threshold for proportion of income spent on water charges. A chart of these figures covers the years 1994–95 to 1997–98.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Job Sharing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Solicitor-General if she will make a statement on the extent of job sharing in her Department. [90875]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* Personnel records for the Crown Prosecution Service show that across the Service on 31 December 2002 there were a total of 1439 staff (approximately 20 per cent. of the workforce) working on a part-time basis. The Crown Prosecution Service does not record job share details separately. However, a number of those working part-time are working on a job-share basis.

The Serious Fraud Office offers its staff a range of flexible working practices to assist them in achieving a satisfactory work/life balance. However it does not, at present, have any staff that have opted to work under a job share arrangement nor has it received any job applications from individuals who wish to work in this way.

Five job sharing arrangements were in place in the Treasury Solicitor's Department on 31 December 2002. All jobs in the Treasury Solicitor's Department are advertised on the basis that they are open to applicants who wish to work flexibly, unless this is expressly excluded due to the nature of the work.

My own Department, the Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers, and HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate currently have no job sharers.

Legal Action

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Solicitor General what action she has taken to bring criminal charges against persons whose names have been communicated to her following the quashing of a conviction. [88512]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 8 January]:* On the basis of the information provided to me by the hon. Member, I am unable to identify the matter to which he refers.

Police Officers (Bribery)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Solicitor General what criteria she uses to decide whether to proceed with a prosecution of a police officer for bribery in cases involving release of information to the press. [93034]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 27 January]:* cases involving allegations against police officers are reviewed in accordance with the Code for Crown Prosecutors as are all cases. It is important for the maintenance of public and police confidence that the same standard is applied to all accused, whoever they may be. The Code recognises that a public interest factor in favour of a prosecution includes where the defendant

> "was in a position of authority or trust"

(paragraph 6.4.d). Prosecutors will therefore have regard to the fact that police officers occupy positions of authority and trust in society.

Under the Public Bodies Corrupt Practices Act 1889 both the offer or the acceptance of a bribe amounts to an offence. Corruption strikes at the heart of public confidence in administrative and judicial affairs. In all such cases where there is sufficient evidence to provide a realistic prospect of a conviction, a prosecution will normally take place unless the public interest factors against proceeding with a case clearly outweigh those in favour.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Arts Expenditure (Somerset)

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money has been spent on the arts in Somerset in each financial year since 1999–2000. [93130]

Dr. Howells: The following figures supplied by the Arts Council of England relate to the local authority and administrative area of Somerset county and therefore do not include north Somerset, Bath and north-east Somerset.

Grant-in-aid expenditure in Somerset 1999–2002

£

Year	*Expenditure*
1999–2000	324,757
2000–01	214,263
2001–02	246,322

Lottery Expenditure in Somerset 1999–2002

£

Year	*Expenditure*
1999–2000	875,740
2000–01	784,095
2001–02	590,162

Civil Servants

Mr. La[illegible]o ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media a[illegible]port how many civil servants have been employed by *(a)* her Department and *(b)* each of its agencies and non-departmental bodies in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if she will make a statement. [92394]

Dr. Howells: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office on 22 January 2003, *Official Report,* columns 333–34W.

Free Television Licences

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will take steps to provide free television licences for all pensioners. [93700]

Dr. Howells: No. The Government have introduced free television licences for people aged 75 or over, because older pensioners are more likely to be reliant on television as their window on the world. Older pensioners are also more likely to be on low incomes. We have no plans to extend free television licences to pensioners below the age of 75.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Businesses (Regional Variations)

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment she has made of the regional variations in the number of *(a)* new businesses registering, *(b)* businesses trading on-line and *(c)* businesses with internet access in the United Kingdom. [98210]

Nigel Griffiths [*holding answer 27 January 2003*]: The information requested is set out in the tables

Enterprises registering for VAT and registration rates by country and region, 2001

	Thousands	*Number per 10,000 resident adults*
United Kingdom	175.5	37
North East	4.1	20
North West	17.6	32
Yorkshire and the Humber	11.7	29
East Midlands	11.6	34
West Midlands	14.2	33
East of England	17.4	40
London	34.9	59
South East	28.4	44
South West	14.5	36
England	154.3	39
Wales	6.0	26
Scotland	11.5	28
Northern Ireland	3.6	28

Source:
Small Business Service

UK Businesses trading online, by Region—per cent.
(All businesses weighted by number of employees)

Greater London	36
East of England	32
Scotland	29
North West	26
West Midlands	26
Wales	22
Northern Ireland	21
South East	20
Yorkshire and Humberside	20
East Midlands	19
South West	18
North East	15

Source:
DTI International Benchmarking Study 2002

UK Businesses with access to the Internet—per cent.
(All businesses weighted by number of employees)

Greater London	96
Scotland	94
Wales	93
Yorkshire and Humberside	92
South East	92
East of England	91
North East	90
East Midlands	90
South West	90
North West	88
Northern Ireland	85
West Midlands	84

Source:
DTI International Benchmarking Study 2002

We have a number of programmes to improve the record in all regions.

Citizens Advice Scotland

Ann McKechin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on the representations her Department made regarding the refusal of the application by Citizens Advice Scotland to the Treasury's Capital Modernisation Fund in 2001 for funding of an electronic case recording system. [91457]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Department recognises the importance of ensuring that the integrity of a UK-wide Citizens Advice Service is maintained and that the Service in Scotland is on a par with the Service in England and Wales. We have therefore allocated additional one-off project funding of £1 million from within DTI's existing budgets to enable CAS to undertake this work.

Computer Misuse

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many cases of computer misuse there were in her Department in each of the last five years, broken down by each category of misuse; and how many of those cases resulted in disciplinary action. [93039]

Ms Hewitt: My Department has recorded the following statistics for the misuse categories as listed (figures in brackets represent where disciplinary action was taken):

	2002	*2001*	*2000*	*1999*	*1998*
Accessing/handling inappropriate material	3 (3)	8 (4)	32 (0)	3 (0)	2 (0)
Unauthorised access to or misuse of data	13 (0)	15 (0)	4 (0)	10 (0)	4 (0)

The figures do not include incidents occurring within the Department's Executive Agencies.

Debt Taskforce

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) how many times the Task Force on Tackling Over-Indebtedness has met since its establishment; [92714]

(2) how many DTI employees are engaged in work for the Task Force on Tackling Over-Indebtedness; [92730]

(3) what discussions the Task Force on Tackling Over-Indebtedness are involved in. [92715]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 22 January 2003]*: The Task Force on Tackling Over-indebtedness has met 10 times.

The Task Force has sent me its second report which I am considering. I will be issuing a response shortly.

No DTI staff are currently engaged in work for the Task Force.

Departmental Expenditiure (Newsprint)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the total expenditure of her Department was on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in 2002. [90525]

Ms Hewitt: My Department's expenditure on newspapers, magazines and periodicals for 2001–02 was £705,729.

This includes expenditure on national daily and Sunday newspapers, regional newspapers, mass circulation magazines and journals, and academic periodicals. It also includes expenditure on annual publications, in particular reference works that would not normally be considered as periodicals. It is not possible to exclude such annual publications from the above figures, except at disproportionate cost.

Development Agencies

Mr. Greg Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what purpose Government money will be used to fund offices and staff for the Welsh Development Agency, the Scottish Development Agency, the East of England Development Agency, the North of England Development Agency and the South West of England Development Agency in California. [88586]

Alan Johnson: The Department is responsible for providing funding for overseas representation in California by One North East, South West of England Regional Development Agency and the East of England Development Agency to carry out inward investment activities. The Welsh Development Agency and Scottish Development International activities in California are funded separately by the Devolved Administrations.

Mr. Greg Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will take powers to ensure that development agencies do not use public money to open offices and employ staff overseas without parliamentary or ministerial approval. [88587]

Alan Johnson *[holding answer 14 January 2003]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given on 15 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 649W.

Equitable Life

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what reports she received on the transfer out of Equitable Life by the PIA's pension scheme in 1998 at the time the transfer took place. [91187]

Ms Hewitt: None.

Export Control Act

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when she will announce the start date for the consultation period on secondary legislation for the Export Control Act 2002. [93468]

Nigel Griffiths: We expect to publish a consultation document on the secondary legislation to be made under the Export Control Act 2002 shortly.

Future Integrated Soldier Technology

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when she expects to be consulted about the industrial implication of the contractor selection for the Future Integrated Soldier Technology (FIST) programme; and whether she will take the value of export opportunities for British companies into account in her assessment of the relative merits of the competing contractors for the FIST programme. [93430]

Alan Johnson: I would expect to be formally consulted by the Ministry of Defence ahead of the preferred contractor decision and announcement. DTI officials have been taking a close interest in the Future Integrated Soldier Technology (FIST) programme and continue to be actively engaged with both the Defence Procurement Agency (DPA) and the companies over the industrial implications of the respective bids.

An understanding of the export potential will form a part of the procurement assessment. As is usual for defence programmes, the Defence Export Services Organisation (DESO) takes the lead on these matters.

North Korea

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what reports she has received on the use by North Korea of the United Kingdom Magnox Reactor design to build its plutonium production reactors. [91968]

Nigel Griffiths: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has received no reports on the design of the DPRK's reactors.

Pensions (Keyboard Withdrawals)

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what arrangements she is making to assist elderly pensioners suffering from macular degeneration to withdraw their pensions in cash using a keyboard and PIN once the new procedures are implemented. [92776]

Mr. Timms: This is a matter which falls within the day to day responsibility of Post Office Ltd. I have therefore asked the Chief Executive to reply direct to the hon. Member.

PV Solar Panels

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry pursuant to his answer of 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 11–12W, on PV Solar Panels, why grants for PV solar panels were awarded only to public buildings in 2002. [93996]

Mr Wilson: The Large Scale Field Trial was open only to public buildings because European Union State Aid Rules prevented us from giving substantial grants to private sector entities for this type of research and development project.

Small Business

Ms Munn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what *(a)* advice and *(b)* financial support her Department gives to small businesses which are transferred to new owners. [92986]

Nigel Griffiths: Personal Business Advisers based in the national network of Business Link Operators can provide advice and support for small businesses transferring to new owners, including help with management buy-outs. Small businesses should call 0845 600 9006 to be put in touch with their local operator, or visit www.businesslink.org to find out more.

The SBS website at: http://www.sbs.gov.uk/content/dti/bsuccession/index.htm sets out the main regulations that apply when a business changes hands, and how to comply with them.

In addition, the Business Debtline, a 3-year pilot, provides support and advice to primarily, but not exclusively, sole traders and micro businesses in financial difficulties. The free phone number 0800 197 6026 and a self-help pack containing comprehensive advice is also available.

TREASURY

Accounting Standards

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what plans he has to give the Financial Services Authority responsibility for investigating the accounts of companies suspected of breaching accounting standards and laws; [92815]

(2) what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of measures in place to deter breaches of accounting standards and laws by British businesses. [92827]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

This is one of the areas currently being looked at by the Co-ordinating Group on Audit and Accounting Issues. They will be presenting their report to my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Chancellor of the Exchequer by the end of the month and I expect my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will make a statement.

Child Trust Fund

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out what the timetable is for the introduction of the Child Trust Fund. [93654]

Ruth Kelly: The Government will announce further decisions regarding the implementation of the Child Trust Fund as part of the Budget cycle, in line with normal practice relating to annually managed expenditure.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which types of financial service providers will be permitted to sell the Child Trust Fund; and whether *(a)* fund managers and *(b)* life insurance companies will be permitted to do so. [93655]

Ruth Kelly: As announced in the pre-Budget report, the Child Trust Fund will be offered through open market provision. Providers—including fund managers and life insurance companies—will be able to enter the market if they satisfy a set of conditions.

Construction Industry Scheme

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what impact the extension in application of the Construction Industry Scheme to the fitting out of commercial properties has had on *(a)* landlords, *(b)* tenants and *(c)* other non-construction sector enterprises; whether a regulatory impact assessment has been made following the recent changes; and if he will make a statement. [93367]

Dawn Primarolo: There have been no recent changes to the scope of the Construction Industry Scheme. Whether the scheme applies to the fitting out of commercial premises depends on the commercial arrangements between the parties concerned. This has always been the case.

Dormant Accounts

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what assessment he has made of the total amount of assets residing in dormant accounts and intestate estates held by *(a)* banks, *(b)* building societies, *(c)* credit unions and *(d)* the post office; [92347]

(2) what assessment he has made of *(a)* the British Bankers Association scheme and *(b)* the Building Societies Association scheme to assist customers in tracing dormant accounts and intestate estates. [92349]

Ruth Kelly: We welcome both these schemes. As stated in the discussion document "Next Steps on Volunteering and Giving in the UK", a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House, we believe that a more comprehensive unclaimed assets scheme for the voluntary and community sector has considerable attractions. We intend to work constructively with the banks, financial institutions and the voluntary and community sector to reach a shared understanding of the assets involved, of how things can be improved and how a comprehensive database might be achieved that would lead to a considerable increase in charities' income.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what plans he has to introduce legislation to place a statutory duty on banks, building societies, credit unions and the Post Office to trace owners of dormant accounts; [92348]

(2) what plans he has to introduce legislation to enable the transfer of assets held in dormant accounts and intestate estates held by banks, building societies, credit unions and the Post Office into an independently managed dormant accounts fund, if the rightful owner or heir is not traced. [92350]

Ruth Kelly: None.

HMS Nottingham

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to the answer of 13 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 403W, on HMS Nottingham, which Department of State is paying for the cost of transportation of HMS Nottingham on a heavy lift ship. [93028]

Mr. Ingram: I have been asked to reply.

The cost of transporting HMS Nottingham back to the United Kingdom on a heavy lift ship will be met by the Ministry of Defence from within existing funds, and by flexing of priorities if necessary.

Inland Revenue

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the level of real spending in the Inland Revenue in each year from 1985–86 to 2002–03, using 2000–01 prices; and if he will make a statement. [91721]

Dawn Primarolo: The real expenditure on the Inland Revenue Department's administration, quoted at 2000–01 prices is as follows:

£ million

	Expenditure
1985–86	[1]—
1986–87	1,647.3
1987–88	1,718.1
1988–89	1,668.6
1989–90	1,748.0
1990–91	1,833.8
1991–92	1,919.7
1992–93	1,914.6
1993–94	2,007.7
1994–95	1,845.9
1995–96	1,871.7
1996–97	1,810.3
1997–98	1,771.7
1998–99	1,810.3
1999–2000	1,929.0
2000–01	2,096.0
2001–02	1,991.0
2002–03	[2]—

[1] Information unobtainable within the timescale.

[2] Full-year expenditure details not yet available.

Notes:

1. 1999–2000—The Inland Revenue took on the Contributions Agency and Family Credit Unit.
2. 1999–2000—The reported expenditure from this year forward has been reported under the resource accounting, that is accruals, basis. Prior to this the figures were reported under a cash basis.

Landfill Tax Credit

David Burnside: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to revise the operation of the landfill tax credit in Northern Ireland. [93270]

John Healey: As announced in the pre-Budget report, the Government will continue a reformed tax credit scheme which will make available approximately a third of the funding that is currently going through the landfill tax credit scheme, around £47 million per year, for spending on local community environment projects. The figure of £47 million will be kept broadly constant in real terms, which will ensure that the current level of support for these types of projects is maintained. The Government are considering how this successor tax credit scheme, which will apply throughout the UK, may be changed to take account of the most serious criticisms of the current scheme made by bodies including the Public Accounts Committee. The Government will set out its plans for reform of the scheme on a Budget timetable.

The remainder of the funding which would otherwise be going through the landfill tax credit scheme, around £100 million in 2003–04, will be allocated to public spending to encourage sustainable waste management.

This spending will be a devolved matter, and it will be for the Northern Ireland Assembly or, during a period when the Assembly is suspended, Northern Ireland Office Ministers to determine how to allocate these funds to sustainable waste management activities in Northern Ireland.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Afghanistan

Mr. Wood: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much was spent on aid to Afghanistan in 2002; and what will be spent in 2003. [93143]

Clare Short: The international community provided approximately $1.8 billion to Afghanistan in 2002. DFID's contribution is over £55 million in the 2002–03 financial year so far.

Donor's contributions for 2003 have yet to be finalised, although there are indications that it will be broadly similar to last year.

Computer Misuse

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many cases of computer misuse there were in her Department in each of the last five years, broken down by each category of misuse; and how many of those cases resulted in disciplinary action. [93045]

Clare Short: I am pleased to advise that we have had no recorded cases of computer misuse in the last five years in my Department.

Ethiopia

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions she has had with the Defence Secretary regarding safeguards on military aid to Ethiopia. [92862]

Clare Short: Our Country Assistance Plan for Ethiopia includes a commitment to consideration of how we might help Ethiopia reform its security sector. The first step towards this will be a joint DFID/FCO/MOD scoping mission in early April 2003.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of the impact of Ethiopia's debt burden on poverty levels in Ethiopia. [92863]

Clare Short: Ethiopia qualified for interim debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) Initiative at decision point in November 2001. In the current Ethiopian financial year, this will reduce external debt service payments by 54 per cent. and allow an increase in poverty-targeted expenditure of around 1.3 per cent. of GDP. Ethiopia has now completed its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, called "Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Programme".

This sets out the policy action framework not only for spending the savings from debt relief, but also for allocating all other aid and Government revenue, so that they have the greatest impact on poverty reduction.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of human rights violations by *(a)* the Ethiopian Government and *(b)* the Ethiopian military. [92864]

Clare Short: We take allegations of human rights abuses in Ethiopia seriously, regularly raising concerns both bilaterally and through the EU. The Ethiopian Government set out plans in its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper to make progress in these areas. Our response is set out in our newly agreed Country Assistance Plan for Ethiopia.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of *(a)* the freedom of the press and *(b)* the independence of the judiciary in Ethiopia. [92865]

Clare Short: The Ethiopian Government set out plans in its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper to make progress in these areas. Our response is set out in our newly agreed Country Assistance Plan for Ethiopia.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of levels of political and ethnic violence in Ethiopia. [92866]

Clare Short: We have covered these issues in our newly agreed Country Assistance Plan for Ethiopia, which will be available on the DFID website in February 2003.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of Ethiopia's total debt burden will be relieved if Ethiopia completes the HIPC Initiative; and when she expects Ethiopia to complete the HIPC Initiative. [92867]

Clare Short: We expect Ethiopia to reach completion point under the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) Initiative in 2004, at which stage, it will receive an irrevocable reduction in its debt stock. Total debt relief is expected to be US$1.9 billion in nominal terms, which is equivalent to 47 per cent. of the net present value of debt service. The British Government are concerned that no country should exit the HIPC process with an unsustainable level of debt. Where necessary, we therefore support the provision of additional debt relief at completion point—so called 'topping up'—for countries such as Ethiopia which, since decision point, have suffered shocks which reduce their export earnings and ability to service their debts.

Iraq

Mr. Wood: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what contingency plans her Department has made for humanitarian assistance to Iraq in the event of military action; and what funds the Government will make available for such measures. [93149]

Clare Short: My Department is undertaking contingency planning for a range of eventualities in Iraq. The potential costs of additional humanitarian assistance under various scenarios, and how they would be financed, are under active review.

World Trade Rules

Mr. John Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures the Government are taking to make the eradication of poverty the primary aim of world trade rules. [93732]

Clare Short: World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules need to apply to all members. But they must also be achievable by developing countries, with realistic implementation schedules and targets.

New rules require the right balance between standardisation and flexibility. For rules to be strong and binding, they need to have enough flexibility to meet the varying needs of the WTO membership and to recognise that WTO members are at different stages of development.

Without flexibility, new WTO agreements will be stuck at the lowest common denominator. This will lead to richer members making agreements amongst themselves outside the WTO and without consideration for the impacts on developing countries.

The term special and differential treatment is used to describe special provisions for developing countries in existing WTO agreements[1]. Many developing countries complain that in the Uruguay Round the application of special and differential treatment and the treatment of different country circumstances were haphazard and that longer implementation deadlines for developing countries were decided arbitrarily.

There needs to be a better application of flexibility in designing future WTO rules. Appropriate flexibility should be integrated systematically into WTO agreements, rather than added on as an afterthought.

Special and differential treatment reforms will eventually link into the poverty reduction strategies. Thus the integration of trade policy reform is essential if poor people are to benefit from trade liberalisation. In addition to special and differential treatment, the UK has been supporting the Integrated Framework. The Integrated Framework has two aims: to identify trade capacity building and technical assistance needs in least developed countries to which the multilateral agencies and donors can then make a co-ordinated response; and to mainstream trade into least developed countries poverty reduction strategies, so that pro-poor trade policies are included in a consistent manner in a country's overall development strategy. The Integrated Framework is based on the principle of country ownership and partnership. It is now being implemented in 14 least developed countries and eventually will be extended to Low Income countries. Ultimately the Integrated Framework should cease to be necessary as trade becomes successfully integrated into poverty reduction strategies.

[1] These are in the form of (1) provisions aimed at increasing trade opportunities, (2) provisions that call upon WTO members to safeguard the interest of developing countries, (3) flexibility of commitments, (4) transitional time periods, and (5) technical assistance.

Mr. John Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what estimate the United Nations has published in US dollar value of the international sales disadvantage effectively imposed on poor countries by world trade rules. [93731]

Clare Short: The world's poorest countries face tariffs that are on average more than twice as high as those facing developed countries. Recent research estimates that developing countries could gain approximately $150 billion a year in real income from a 50 per cent. reduction in tariff barriers and other forms of protection by both developed and developing countries. Similarly, it has also been estimated that a 40 per cent. reduction in agricultural tariffs and export subsidies could boost global real incomes by around $60 billion a year.

Zimbabwe

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures she is taking to put pressure on Zimbabwe to allow private imports of food to Zimbabwe. [93860]

Clare Short: The UN, with our strong support, have been pressurising Zimbabwe to import sufficient food for the non-destitute for many months. Zimbabwe has a state monopoly on cereal imports, and price controls that prevent effective private-sector participation in the food market. All donors have appealed to Zimbabwe to amend the current restrictions. The UN Special Envoy for the Southern Africa Humanitarian crisis, Mr. James Morris, has raised this issue with Mr. Mugabe six times, most recently obtaining agreement that a scheme first proposed in mid-2002 to facilitate private sector involvement, should be reconsidered for wheat imports for urban needs.

Private sector participation would help make food available for those who do have the money to purchase it. But while the private sector as a whole remains excluded, many organisations have been able to obtain import licences for specific programmes of humanitarian assistance.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Criminal Records Bureau

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many teachers are awaiting clearance from the Criminal Records Bureau, broken down by local education authority. [89312]

Hilary Benn: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Neil Gerrard) on 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 194W.

Average Sentences

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average sentence for *(a)* burglary and *(b)* robbery was in each year since 1972. [90151]

Hilary Benn: The information requested, relating to average custodial sentence length for persons sentenced for burglary and robbery in England and Wales 1984 to 2001, is contained in the table. Data for earlier years are not available.

Statistics for 2002 will be published in the autumn.

Average custodial sentence length imposed at all courts for persons convicted of offences of burglary and robbery and the number sentenced to life imprisonment England and Wales, 1984 to 2001 [1]

	Burglary		*Robbery*	
	Average custodial sentence length (months) [2]	*Persons sentenced to life imprisonment* [3]	*Average custodial sentence length (months)* [2]	*Persons sentenced to life imprisonment* [3]
1984	9.4	—	29.4	—
1985	10.0	2	30.9	1
1986	10.7	—	35.6	3
1987	11.7	2	38.5	1
1988	12.2	1	37.5	1
1989	12.4	—	37.0	1
1990	12.0	—	37.3	2
1991	11.5	—	38.8	4
1992	11.5	—	39.0	1
1993	11.1	—	38.8	6
1994	11.4	—	39.8	—
1995	12.0	1	38.2	2
1996	13.8	—	38.1	8
1997	15.8	—	39.1	4
1998	15.5	1	35.3	16
1999	15.7	—	35.7	37
2000	15.9	—	36.1	31
2001	16.6	3	35.4	23

[1] These data are on the principal offence basis.

[2] Excludes those sentenced to a life sentence.

[3] From 1984 to 1997 the numbers sentenced to life imprisonment exclude those who were sentenced under Sec 53(2) Children and Young Persons Act 1933.

Community Sentences

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what was the average number of hours of community service required by community sentences given by magistrates in England and Wales to *(a)* under 17-year-olds, *(b)* 17 to 21-year-olds and *(c)* over 21-year-olds in each year since 1995; [92149]

(2) how many community sentences were given by magistrates in England and Wales to *(a)* under 17-years-olds, *(b)* 17 to 21-year-olds and *(c)* over 21-year-olds in each year since 1995. [92148]

Hilary Benn: The information requested is contained in the table.

Number of persons sentenced at magistrates courts to a community sentence, community punishment order or community punishment and rehabilitation order, and the average number of hours ordered to be served, England and Wales 1995 to 2001[1]

Year/age group	*Number sentenced to a community sentence*	*Number sentenced to a CPO or CPRO*[2]	*Average hours*[3]
1995			
10 to 16 years	15,096	1,350	90
17 to 21 years	31,055	15,552	98
22 and over	61,389	32,553	129
All ages	107,540	49,455	118
1996			
10 to 16 years	15,857	1,561	87
17 to 21 years	32,382	16,076	96
22 and over	64,566	33,550	107
All ages	112,805	51,187	103
1997			
10 to 16 years	16,502	1,724	86
17 to 21 years	32,725	16,338	96
22 and over	68,588	35,186	106
All ages	117,815	53,248	102
1998			
10 to 16 years	18,569	1,847	86
17 to 21 years	35,132	17,966	95
22 and over	73,333	36,909	105
All ages	127,034	56,722	101
1999			
10 to 16 years	19,649	2,133	84
17 to 21 years	37,589	19,379	95
22 and over	73,739	39.908	104
All ages	130,977	58,420	100
2000			
10 to 16 years	24,338	2,214	85
17 to 21 years	38,633	19,581	94
22 and over	72,961	35,975	104
All ages	135,932	57,770	100
2001			
10 to 16 years	30,027	2,009	87
17 to 21 years	40,227	18,557	95
22 and over	75,215	34,384	104
All ages	145,469	54,950	100

[1] These data are on the principal offence basis.

[2] CPO = community punishment order. CPRO = community punishment and rehabilitation order.

[3] Average hours of community punishment order and community punishment order within community punishment and rehabilitation order to be served.

Crime

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will define total crime for the purposes of the allocation of drug and crime reduction funding for 2003–04 to police basic command units. [93353]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* The national recorded crime statistics for burglary, robbery and theft of and from vehicles, were used for determining the 30 Basic Command Units (BCUs) with the highest levels of acquisitive crime. Although recorded crime statistics do not differentiate between drug and non-drug related crime, these types of crimes are the ones mostly closely associated with drug use.

Crime Reduction

Ross Cranston: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his written answer of 16 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 624W, when he plans to place the findings of the exercise on crime and disorder reduction partnerships and their implications for nuisance and noise associated with fireworks in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [91856]

Mr. Denham: As I indicated to my hon. Friend on 16 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 624W, the monitoring exercise he refers to was set up to monitor incidents relating to the improper use of fireworks between 23 October and 15 January. We are currently gathering and analysing the responses received. Once this process has been completed a copy of our findings will be placed in the Library.

Criminal Cases Review Commission

John Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many convictions have been overturned by the Court of Appeal following a referral by the Criminal Cases Review Commission since March 1997. [92309]

Hilary Benn: The Court of Appeal has quashed 60 convictions obtained in England and Wales following references by the Criminal Cases Review Commission.

John Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases, where the conviction has been overturned by the Court of Appeal following a referral by the Criminal Cases Review Commission, had previously been investigated by his Department prior to March 1997. [92310]

Hilary Benn: Departmental records indicate that 36 cases, where the Court of Appeal has quashed a conviction obtained in England and Wales following references by the Criminal Cases Review Commission, had previously been the subject of applications to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for a referral. I am unable to say how many of these 36 cases were investigated prior to their transfer to the Commission, as this information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

John Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases the Criminal Cases Review Commission has referred to the Court of Appeal since March 1997. [92311]

Hilary Benn: The Criminal Cases Review Commission has referred 173 cases to the Court of Appeal. (This figure includes referrals of convictions or sentences or both, but excludes referrals to the Court of Appeal in Northern Ireland or to Crown Courts.)

John Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases have been referred to the Criminal Cases Review Commission since March 1997. [92312]

Hilary Benn: There have been 5,520 applications from England, Wales and Northern Ireland to the Criminal Cases Review Commission. This figure includes requests for case reviews of both summary and indictable convictions and of sentence only. At least three quarters of the applications received prove to be ineligible for a case review (usually because of a failure to exhaust the normal appeals process).

Drink-driving

Mark Tami: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many custodial sentences were given for drink-driving offences in the last three years, broken down by police authority; [91567]

(2) how many drink-driving convictions in England and Wales there have been in the last three years, broken down by police authority. [91569]

Hilary Benn: Information taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database on convictions and custodial sentences for drink-driving offences by police force area 1998 to 2000 is shown in the table. Data for 2001 will be available in February.

Findings of guilt and immediate custodial sentences at all courts for offences of driving etc after consuming alcohol or taking drugs by police force area, 1998—2000

	1998		*1999*		*2000*	
Police Force area	*Findings of guilt*	*Immediate custody*[1]	*Findings of guilt*	*Immediate custody*[1]	*Findings of guilt*	*Immediate custody*[1]
Avon and Somerset	2,566	157	2,728	165	2,462	152
Bedfordshire	1,060	96	869	87	797	89
Cambridgeshire	1,060	62	941	43	793	41
Cheshire	1,903	119	1,827	133	1,652	122
Cleveland	870	63	811	57	777	56
Cumbria	856	51	871	37	806	50
Derbyshire	1,547	202	1,463	181	1,417	126
Devon and Cornwall	2,265	127	2,277	112	2,199	104
Dorset	1,186	88	1,120	96	1,115	84
Durham	1,035	53	1,137	81	1,124	76
Essex	2,438	233	2,528	261	2,462	237
Gloucestershire	985	36	889	51	804	37
Gt Manchester	4,715	453	4,850	464	4,801	428
Hampshire	3,597	231	3,725	213	3,472	244
Hertfordshire	1,672	91	1,679	90	1,552	98
Humberside	1,358	87	1,323	97	1,371	128
Kent	2,627	155	2,633	133	2,592	134
Lancashire	2,945	178	3,010	184	2,584	163
Leicestershire	1,485	140	1,624	188	1,531	152
Lincolnshire	979	36	941	44	816	48
London, City of	301	9	236	5	162	4
Merseyside	2,451	326	2,137	296	2,128	286
Met Police	13,889	1,050	12,414	838	11,801	891
Norfolk	1,118	43	1,010	64	935	45
Northamptonshire	1,062	73	1,058	91	782	90
Northumbria	2,457	194	2,463	229	2,621	215
North Yorkshire	1,205	77	1,124	60	1,073	67
Nottinghamshire	1,804	247	1,802	262	1,722	210
South Yorkshire	2,002	178	1,927	149	2,122	170
Staffordshire[2]	1,955	140	1,711	143	[3]—	[3]—
Suffolk	1,042	60	1,089	71	902	74
Surrey	1,328	58	1,417	47	1,539	61
Sussex	2,113	113	2,224	120	2,112	136
Thames Valley	3,896	195	3,725	216	3,496	212
Warwickshire	784	53	856	38	786	42
West Mercia	1,794	97	1,747	114	1,631	101
West Midlands	5,582	532	4,775	532	4,559	451
West Yorkshire	3,669	329	3,597	358	3,375	287
Wiltshire	1,108	39	1,009	45	930	28
Total England	86,709	6,471	83,567	6,395	80,671	6,076
Dyfed Powys	995	38	944	48	858	45
Gwent	1,203	84	1,079	78	1,211	99
North Wales	1,306	95	1,248	94	1,332	92
South Wales	2,903	239	2,526	282	2,757	255
Total Wales	6,407	456	5,797	502	6,158	491
Total England and Wales	93,116	6,927	89,364	6,897	86,829	6,567

[1] Immediate custody includes sentences of Secure Training Order, Detention and Training Order Young Offenders Institution, and Unsuspended sentence of imprisonment.

[2] Staffordshire police force were only able to submit sample data for persons proceeded against and convicted in the magistrates' courts for the year 2000. Although sufficient to estimate higher orders of data, these data are not robust enough at a detailed level and have been excluded from the table.

[3] Not available.

Drug Dependency (Prisoners)

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he proposes to improve the quality and coverage of prison-based drug treatment programmes. [92114]

Hilary Benn: A framework is already in place to address the wide-ranging needs of drug-misusing prisoners and includes:

detoxification in all local and remand prisons;

Counselling, Assessment, Referral, Advice and Throughcare (CARATs) in all prisons;

60 intensive treatment programmes;

voluntary drug testing available in all prisons.

Delivery is supported by a range of quality standards:

minimum standards for clinical services for substance misusers and for CARATs;

independent accreditation of treatment programmes by the Correctional Services Accreditation Panel (formerly the Joint Accreditation Panel)—with the aim of having all programmes accredited by March 2004;

separate auditing is also conducted by the Standards Audit Unit, in accordance with PSO 0200—Performance Standards Manual.

Additionally, the Service is working closely with the National Treatment Agency to ensure its models of care, treatment standards and standards for drug workers are, where appropriate, being applied to prison-based work.

The Government's 2002 Spending Review made provision for significant, additional funding for action on drugs misuse. In particular, investment in aftercare and throughcare will help ensure the gains made whilst prisoners are in custody are not lost on their release. Provision has also been made to boost treatment in prisons.

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of prisoners in the United Kingdom who would benefit from a programme of treatment for drugs dependency. [92118]

Hilary Benn: Records of the number of prisoners who would benefit from a programme of treatment are not kept centrally. Data from the Office for National Statistics show that around 80 per cent. of prisoners had used drugs at some point before coming into prison, with 54 per cent. reporting drug dependency in the year prior to custody.

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Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the routes by which drugs enter prisons; and what proportion enter through external visits. [92121]

Hilary Benn: By definition drug smuggling is a covert activity which is extremely difficult to quantify and will vary between prisons. The main identified routes by which attempts are made to smuggle drugs into prisons include:

social visits;

mail;

perimeter breach; and

reception

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many places on drug treatment programmes are available to prisoners in *(a)* England and *(b)* Kent. [92101]

Hilary Benn: The Prison Service has in place a comprehensive framework to address the needs of drug-misusing prisoners.

Delivery targets are given in the table.

Intervention	*All prisons' targets (by March 2004)*	*Kent targets (2002–03)*
CARATs[1]	25,000	1,000
Detoxification	27,000	210
Rehabilitation programmes and TCs[2]	5,700	406
VDT compacts[3]	28,000	2,234

[1] Counselling assessment referral advice through care.

[2] Therapeutic communities.

[3] Voluntary drug testing.

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he intends to take to ensure that arrestees who test positive for drugs are directed into treatment programmes. [92112]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: In the areas in England and Wales where the provisions for drug testing persons in police detention are currently being implemented, it is part of the drug testing procedure that those who test positive for a specified Class A drug are given specific opportunity to see an arrest referral worker, with a view to assessment of their drug misuse and referral to appropriate treatment.

Measures being introduced as part of the Government's new comprehensive programme of criminal justice interventions to get drug misusers into treatment include the enhancement of existing arrest referral schemes and the expansion and extension of the drug testing arrangements under which the police can test persons, after charge, for specified Class A drugs. We are also taking forward in the Criminal Justice Bill the proposal to pilot a presumption against bail for those who refuse to be assessed as to their dependency on, or propensity to misuse, specified Class A drugs, or who then refuse to undergo relevant follow-up action recommended.

The programme will be backed up by improvements in treatment capacity and local delivery.

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of prisoners in Kent tested positive for drugs in each of the past five years. [92113]

Hilary Benn: The proportion of prisoners who tested positive under random mandatory drug testing (MDT) in Kent prisons is given in the table.

	Percentage positive
1997–98	13.6
1998–99	11.9
1999–2000	9.8
2000–01	8.8
2001–02	9.4

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he proposes to address the availability of drugs in prisons. [92120]

Hilary Benn: A range of measures is in place to reduce the availability of drugs in prisons. Elements include:

passive and active drug dogs;

a range of fixed and low-level furniture in visits areas;

closed circuit television in visits areas;

measures to deal with visitors who smuggle drugs into prisons;

mandatory drug testing; and

agreed searching policies.

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners in the past year underwent treatment for drugs dependency in *(a)* England and *(b)* Kent. [92119]

Hilary Benn: The numbers of prisoners engaging in some form of drugs treatment during 2001–02 are given in the table.

Intervention	*All prisons (England and Wales)*	*Kent prisons*
CARATs[1]	39,279 initial assessments	1,697
Detoxification	40,865 entrants	616
Rehabilitation programmes and therapeutic communities	4,691 entrants	539
Voluntary drug testing compacts	27,041 compacts signed	2,432

[1] Counselling, Assessment, Referral, Advice and Throughcare services.

Gun Crime

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many people were convicted of offences involving airguns during 2001–02; what proportion of those convictions were for criminal damage; how many of those convicted of criminal damage were aged under 17 years; and what the ages were of all those convicted of offences more serious than criminal damage involving airguns; [90654]

(2) what proportion of those convicted of firearms offences during 2001–02 *(a)* had no previous criminal convictions, *(b)* had served sentences in custody and *(c)* were in each age decile from age 10 upwards. [90655]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The information requested is not collected centrally. However, 240 persons aged 10 and under 17 years were found guilty of offences in England and Wales during 2001 under the various Firearms Acts 1968 to 1997 (11 per cent. of all persons found guilty of firearms offences). The equivalent figures for those persons aged 17 and under 21 was 455 (21 per cent.); and 1,467 persons aged 21 and over (68 per cent.).

Information for 2002 is due for publication in the late autumn of 2003.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many incidents of illegal gun possession crime were recorded in *(a)* Lancashire, *(b)* the north-west of England, *(c)* England, *(d)* Wales and *(e)* the UK in (i) 2002 and (ii) each of the preceding five years. [90749]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Numbers of illegal firearm possession offences are not collected separately. Offences of illegal possession of firearms are included in the recorded crime classifications of 'Possession of Weapons' and 'Firearms Acts Offences' (Home Office offence classifications 8B and 81 respectively), but other offences are also included under these classifications, for example, possession of knives and illegal trading in firearms. These offence classifications were used from 1 April 1998, and the figures for England and Wales since that date are given in the table. A breakdown of the offences included under these classifications is included on the Home Office website at: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/countrules.html

Financial year	*Possession of weapons*	*Firearms acts offences*
1998–99	23,635	3,325
1999–2000	23,792	3,143
2000–01	24,552	3,531
2001–02	28,740	3,205

Some police forces adopted the principles of the National Crime Recording Standard in advance of its national implementation on 1 April 2002, which will have the effect of increasing the number of crimes counted.

Information relating to Scotland and Northern Ireland are matters for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

HMP Garth and HMP Wymott

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to introduce 24-hour health care at HMP Wymott; [92027]

(2) what plans he has to build a prison hospital on the site of *(a)* HMP Garth and *(b)* HMP Wymott. [92023]

Hilary Benn: There are no plans to introduce full 24-hour health care at Wymott prison as there is already a 13-place in-patient facility with 24-hour nursing cover in the health care centre at Garth prison, which serves as a resource for other Prison Service establishments in the area, including Wymott prison.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the decision was taken to place two prisoners in single cells at HMP Wymott. [92020]

Hilary Benn: The decision to ask training establishments to locate two prisoners in selected single cells was taken centrally, as a result of the overwhelming population pressures faced by the prisons estate. The practice commenced at Wymott on 26 June 2002. Each single cell utilised in this way has been risk assessed for the purpose, and all prisoners are also individually risk assessed to determine their suitability for location with another prisoner.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to build *(a)* extensions to and *(b)* a new prison at (i) HMP Garth and (ii) HMP Wymott. [92022]

Hilary Benn: On 27 March 2002, the Prison Service was granted an extension in time of a further five years to the planning clearances already granted for additional single houseblocks for 120 prisoners at both Garth and Wymott prisons.

Planning clearance has been applied for to increase the size of the proposed houseblock at Wymott to 180 places. The outcome of the application is expected on 21 January 2003. On 24 July 2002, planning clearance was granted for an 80 place modular temporary unit (MTU) at Wymott, which will be additional to the 180-place houseblock. Work is under way to construct the 80 place MTU and, subject to a successful planning application, work on the 180-place houseblock will begin in the near future.

There are no immediate plans to build the houseblock at Garth although the position will be regularly reviewed and there are currently no plans to build a complete new prison at either site.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the number of bed watches taking place at HMP Wymott; and what the average number was in other prisons at the most recent available date. [92024]

Hilary Benn: Since July 2002, there have been 1,000 bedwatches for 60 prisoners at Wymott, averaging around 40 per week. No figures are centrally collected on the frequency of bedwatches and information on the average number in other prisons is therefore not available.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners were taken to hospital from HMP Wymott on average in each of the last five years. [92025]

Hilary Benn: During the last five years, an average of 470 prisoners have been taken to hospital each year from Wymott prison.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners died in HMP Wymott in each of the last five years. [92026]

Hilary Benn: A total of 14 prisoners have died at HMP Wymott in the last five years: two in 1998, three in 1999, five in 2000, one in 2001 and three in 2002.

Juvenile Offenders

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to ensure that the courts deal effectively with persistent juvenile offenders. [92019]

Hilary Benn: We have delivered the Youth Justice Pledge by halving the time taken from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders, funded Youth Justice Board Intensive Supervision and Surveillance programmes for the most prolific offenders and introduced the detention and training order for persistent and more serious young offenders.

We have also strengthened the secure remand powers and introduced bail tagging for 12 to 16-year-olds nationally, and 17-year-olds in the 10 street crime priority areas, who repeatedly offend.

We have already reduced young offender reconvictions by 14.6 per cent., as measured by those dealt with in July 2000 just after national implementation of the main youth justice reforms.

Police Authority Funding

Mr. Challen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the standard police grant sought by each police authority in England and Wales was in each year since 1996–97; and what the final settlement was for each authority. [91104]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* Police grant is allocated by the police funding formula and not by police authority bids. The funding formula is largely based on an analysis of policing activity. Distribution between Police Authorities takes into account socio-demographic factors such as population.

I have placed in the Library details of general policing grants since 1996–97. Figures for 2003–04 are provisional. I expect to announce details of the final settlement for next year on 5 February.

Prison Staff Changes

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how quickly a risk assessment has to be carried out in prisons when changes in staffing levels take place. [92021]

Hilary Benn: Prison Governors are required to carry out risk assessments where a change in staffing level brings an increased level of risk to staff, prisoners and others.

The risk assessment should be carried out on those jobs, which are affected by a change in working practice, and should be completed before the change in staffing levels is implemented, except where the operational demands of the Service prevent this.

Replica Guns

Stephen Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his policy on possession of a replica gun in a public place. [93211]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: An imitation firearm can create the same fear as a real one. It is not acceptable that people going about their business should be put in fear in this way. We therefore propose to introduce a new offence of having an imitation firearm in a public place without reasonable excuse.

This will mean that anyone seen in public with an imitation firearm can be challenged and if they do not have a reasonable explanation for having the gun, they can be arrested before any further offences can be committed.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH

BG Group

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library copies of the reports which were compiled by the secondee from BG Group to the British Embassy in Indonesia in 2001 on the strengthening of official organisations in that country. [89461]

Mr. Rammell: I have today asked for this report to be placed in the Library of the House.

Brazil

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will seek an early meeting with the Government of President Lula of Brazil to discuss debt and environmental issues. [93116]

Mr. Rammell: During my visit to Brazil from 14–18 December I discussed various issues, including the economy and environment, with Ministers-designate of President Lula's future Government. We hope to build on these discussions through a series of senior bilateral exchanges early this year. We have invited President Lula to make an early visit to the UK.

Cuba

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions the Government has had with the Government of the USA on its policies on trade between UK companies and Cuba. [91680]

Mr. Rammell: Our Embassy in Washington and Ministers and officials in the FCO and the Department of Trade and Industry frequently discuss a range of trade issues with their US counterparts. These include from time to time, trade with Cuba in the context of the US Helms-Burton legislation. The UK and the EU oppose this legislation because of its extraterritorial effect.

Diplomatic Staff

Mr. Alan Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the complement was of diplomatic staff in each of the Arabic-speaking capitals in the Middle East in each year since 1990; and if he will make a statement. [92934]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The table shows the number of UK-based staff in our Middle East posts from 1990. The figures include all those staff whose salaries are paid by the FCO and other Government Departments.

Country	*Post*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
Syria	Damascus	8	14	17	17	17	19	18	17	17	17	17	14	14
Lebanon	Beirut	6	6	7	6	7	7	7	7	8	8	8	9	8
Jordan	Amman	33	34	34	33	33	34	33	32	31	31	31	26	23
Iraq	Baghdad	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Saudi Arabia	Riyadh	38	38	38	37	36	36	36	35	34	33	33	29	25
Yemen	Sana'a	8	8	8	8	9	8	7	8	9	9	9	8	8
Oman	Muscat	20	19	18	19	19	16	16	16	17	17	17	16	15
UAE	Abu Dhabi	19	19	18	18	17	18	18	18	18	18	18	15	13
UAE	Dubai	26	26	25	25	22	21	22	23	23	23	23	19	15
Qatar	Doha	10	10	9	9	9	9	10	10	10	10	10	11	11
Kuwait	Kuwait	23	23	22	22	20	19	19	19	19	19	19	17	16
Bahrain	Bahrain	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	12	13
Egypt	Cairo	39	37	37	37	36	34	32	34	34	35	32	37	32

Energy Supplies (Security)

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he intends to take to bolster the security of energy supplies. [92176]

Mr. Rammell: Energy security is a key element of energy policy, security of energy supplies is one of the issues being looked at in the forthcoming Energy White Paper.

Government Payments

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what payments have been made to *(a)* Turkey, *(b)* Syria and *(c)* Jordan by the Government in each of the last three years; for what purpose; and if he will make a statement. [87412]

Mr. Straw: Government funding for projects in the above countries for the last three years totals:

	£
(a) Turkey	6,972,416
(b) Syria	429,800
(c) Jordan	21,078,129

We have made no direct financial payments to these Governments, rather we have provided services in the form of training, expertise and equipment. These figures are approximate and may not be exhaustive. A breakdown of expenditure is set out as follows:

Breakdown of Expenditure

(a) Turkey

Funds: Purpose—to help Turkey meet the Copenhagen Political Criteria and to help Turkey address issues of importance to the UK. These include:

EU Action Plan: past projects include funding the Ministry of the Interior's and Ministry of Education's participation in the British Council Seminar in the UK on 'Communicating Human Rights'.

Human Rights Project Fund (HRPF): past projects include human rights training for

the Jandarma in custody, detention and public order policing.

Global Conflict Prevention Fund (GCPF): past projects include an anti-smuggling/customs course.

Defence Assistance Fund (DAF): past projects include English language training for Turkish officers at the BMEC English Language School in Beaconsfield. The DAF may be used to defray the cost, in full or in part, of bilateral activities such as training activities which provide a direct defence benefit. The use of the fund is determined by the country priorities set out in the Defence Assistance Plan.

Drugs and Crime Fund (DCF): past projects include customs training.

(Other small funds include the Environmental programme budget and project fund)

Turkey

	£
EU Action Plan	
2000–01	n/a
2001–02	149,454
2002–03	[1]150,000
HRPF	
2000–01	306,333
2001–02	311,409
2002–03	167,708
DAF Allocation	
2000–01	571,000
2001–02	608,000
2002–03	356,000
GCPF	
2000–01	n/a
2001–02	[2]156,640
2002–03	[1]169,700
DCF	
2000–01	108,515
2001–02	672,690
2002–03	[3]261,967

[1] Allocated

[2] Spent

[3] This does not include a UNDCP amount of £550,000 which may be allocated to Turkey projects.

There is no Department for International Development (DfID) programme in Turkey however DfID did provide £1.5 million in humanitarian assistance in 1999–2000 following a major earthquake and £283,000 in 2000–01.

(b) Syria

Our Embassy in Damascus runs a DfID-funded Small Grants Scheme. The FCO runs small projects in Syria under the Global Conflict Prevention Fund. We also fund Chevening Scholarship and sponsored visits programmes.

Syria

	£
DfID	
1999–2000	119,000
2000–01	75,000
2001–02	80,000
GCPF (formerly ASSIST)	
1999–2000	18,880
2000–01	50,000
2001–02	27,000

Bilateral defence relations with Syria have improved. Over the past two years, the MOD has established a programme of assistance with the Syrians worth about £30,000 annually. This money is spent on funding Syrian candidates on courses such as English Language Training.

(c) Jordan

DfID's support to Jordan is set out in the table. This consists of debt relief, aid trade provision and technical assistance. The FCO funds small projects under the Global Conflict Prevention Fund. We also fund Chevening Scholarship, sponsored visits programmes and human rights projects.

The MOD has an extensive bilateral programme of assistance with Jordan costing in the region of £400,000 annually. These funds are spent on providing course places to the Jordanian Armed Forces and in-country training. Their largest project to date with the Jordanians was the gifting of Challenger I Tanks, a project that began in August 1999 and is ongoing. This was a gift from the UK Government to the Jordanian Government, not a direct payment.

Jordan

	£
DfID	
1999–2000	6,310,000
2000–01	6,298,000
200–02	6,433,000

Jordan

	£
GCPF (formerly ASSIST)	
1999–2000	190,031
2000–01	220,000
200–02	427,098

I will write the right hon. Member with more details and place a copy in the Library.

Heritage Assets

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what sales of heritage assets and antique assets have been made by his Department since May 1997; if he will list such assets; and if he will estimate the total sales proceeds. [92375]

Mr. Rammell: The FCO holds very few heritage assets. We do however own many antiques and other valuable items that are used as working, operational, assets. The only such items that we have sold since 1997 have been: one antique carpet, one tea table, three armchairs, one sofa, one lectern, one bookcase, one dining table. The total sales proceeds after commission was £21,424.

Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms Convention

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to ratify protocol 13 of the European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms; and if he will make a statement. [93151]

Mr. Rammell: The UK Government plan to ratify protocol 13 of the European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms by June this year. The Lord Chancellor's Department handles the ratification process. The Protocol will come into force when 10 states have ratified it, at present there are only 5 ratifications.

Iraq

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the Government's policy is in respect of the 10 point agreement on cooperation on inspections agreed between Dr Blix on behalf of UNMOVIC and the Iraqi Government on 20 January. [94049]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The 10 points in the joint statement made during Dr. Blix's visit to Baghdad last week do not constitute an agreement. They are simply a statement of practical arrangements. They do not add to or alter Iraq's obligations under UN Security Council Resolution 1441.

The Government have repeatedly stated that it is essential that Iraq co-operate fully and unconditionally with the inspectors as they are required to do under UNSCR 1441.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his estimate is of the total expenditure by his Department on ministerial travel *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* abroad, in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92438]

Mr. Rammell: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given him by my hon. Friend the Minister of State at the Cabinet Office (Mr. Alexander) on 22 January 2003, *Official Report,* column 334W.

Pakistan

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the role of Pakistan in the proliferation of nuclear weapons. [93429]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Pakistan's continued development and testing of nuclear weapons and the means for their delivery is a matter of concern to the entire international community.

Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme is a breach of the requirements of UN Security Council Resolution 1172. We regularly call upon Pakistan to abide by all the requirements of the Resolution, including cessation of the development of nuclear weapons, and accession—as a non-nuclear weapons state—to both the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

We are aware of, and concerned by, reports that Pakistan has nuclear related dealings with other countries.

Performance Report

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department's autumn performance report for 2002 will be published. [93152]

Mr. Rammell: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr Flight) on 21 January *Official Report* column 299W

Radioactive Contamination

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports his Department has received on radioactive contamination of floodwaters in Kyrgystan and Uzbekistan and the risks of such contamination within Afghanistan. [93095]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We received reports about flooding and landslides in the Maili Su area of Kyrgyzstan in May 2002. There was some concern at the time that Soviet era uranium dumps and deposits could be disturbed, leading to contamination of Kyrgyz rivers. Though this did not happen, there remains some risk that radioactive waste could be disturbed by future landslides and earthquakes. If waste was to enter the Maili Su river, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, through which the river also flows, would be affected. We are not aware of reports suggesting that Afghanistan would be affected, but will continue to monitor the situation.

UN Resolution 1441

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions the Government have had with the US Administration on US compliance with Paragraph 10 of UN Resolution 1441. [93322]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We regularly discuss with the US Administration all aspects of Iraq policy, including support for UNMOVIC/IAEA operations. Both the UK and the US are fully committed to supporting UN weapons inspections in Iraq.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

Mr. Tam Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish the parameters by which the Government defines whether a weapon falls into the category of weapons of mass destruction. [93321]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There is no universally accepted definition of the phrase "weapons of mass destruction", but it is generally held to refer to nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to secure international agreement for *(a)* a sporting boycott, *(b)* power sanctions and *(c)* wider economic sanctions against Zimbabwe; and what the value of imports from Zimbabwe to the United Kingdom was in the last 12 months. [91269]

Mr. Rammell: The EU has put in place targeted sanctions including an arms embargo, a travel ban and assets freeze, specifically targeted at 79 members of the Mugabe regime. We have also made clear our views that the British cricket team should not play in Zimbabwe at present. However we do not believe that a general sporting boycott, power sanctions, or wider economic sanctions would be right. Such measures would only serve to harm the Zimbabwean people, who are already suffering enough under Mugabe's leadership. The latest yearly figure for imports from Zimbabwe to the UK is for 2001, when imports amounted to £91 million.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Donaghadee Treatment Works

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made on the development of the North Down Waste Water Treatment Works at Donaghadee; and whether the Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Basildon (Angela Smith), has met the Donaghadee Planning Action Group in relation to this matter. [92302]

Angela Smith: The decision to locate the North Down Wastewater Treatment Works on the site adjacent to the Donaghadee Carpet Factory was taken in February 2002 by Peter Robinson MP MLA, the then Minister for Regional Development, following a detailed site search and appraisal process, and consideration and evaluation of all relevant factors.

An application for Crown Development for the Works was made by Water Service on 14 May 2002. The application was accompanied by an Environmental Statement. Planning Service has consulted specialist advisers within Government and in the public sector on the application and the Environmental Statement. A number of responses are awaited. When these are received, Planning Service will assess the responses from consultees to ensure that they are satisfied with the content of the Environmental Statement. If further information is required, an addendum to the Environmental Statement will be necessary.

The application and the Environmental Statement were advertised for public comment in accordance with the normal procedures. A substantial number of objections have been received, including the Donaghadee Planning Action Group. On completion of the consultation process associated with the planning application and the Environmental Statement, Planning Service will have to consider the further processing of the application, including the need for a public inquiry.

In dealing with planning cases I have decided not to get involved in procedural and operational matters, and so have turned down meeting requests where applications are at these stages. However, I have met with members of the Donaghadee Sewerage Action Group to discuss issues relating to the selection process.

In parallel with the planning issues, the Valuation and Lands Agency has been asked to commence initial land acquisition procedures for the site. The cost of the entire scheme has recently been assessed and is now estimated to be £42 million. The Works has been identified as one of seven major wastewater treatment projects that may be suitable for inclusion in a Public Private Partnership (PPP) programme of work. This programme is currently the subject of a detailed appraisal study that will take several months to complete.

Larne to Whitehead Railway Line

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what funding the railway line between Larne and Whitehead will receive from the Regional Transport Strategy 2002–12; and what funding will be available for upgrading this stretch of line in the future. [82682]

Angela Smith: The Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) for Northern Ireland 2002–2012 identifies a range of strategic transportation investment priorities including funding of just over £500 million in railways over the next 10 years. It does not specify amounts to be invested in individual railway lines. Commitments to proceed with any major capital scheme will be subject to the normal Budgetary process, economic appraisal and the consideration of any statutory procedures. Furthermore, decisions on the retention of rail services north of Whitehead; and north and north-west of Ballymena, will also be subject to successful results from the introduction of new trains and improved infrastructure on the rest of the network early in the implementation of the Strategy.

Motorcycle Road Races

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in providing further funds for circuit safety work at the North West 200 circuit and the Ulster Grand Prix Motorcycle circuits; and what discussions have taken place to identify *(a)* a schedule and *(b)* the cost of safety works at North West 200 and Ulster Grand Prix circuits. [92939]

Angela Smith: There has been ongoing discussions regarding the need for safety works at the North West 200 and Ulster Grand Prix circuits. Schedules detailing the extent and the cost of the work required were submitted to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure on the 15 January and these are presently under consideration.

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made with the proposal to permit motorcycle road racing clubs responsible for the North West 200 and the Ulster Grand Prix to access the Health and Safety funds created for sporting stadia in order to finance essential safety work at their respective circuits. [92940]

Angela Smith: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland will be drawing up proposals for a new programme which will take account of health and safety needs at sporting venues in the province. The new scheme will be subject to consultation prior to its introduction in 2003–04. The total cost is circa £90,000.

Museum of Sea and Sky

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps are required to take forward the MAGNI proposal for a museum of sea and sky at Titanic Quarter. [92935]

Angela Smith: MAGNI has set out clear stages for taking forward its proposed heritage development at Titanic Quarter. In order, these are: the establishment of a project team; the appointment of consultants; the development of an outline lottery bid; the raising of support among other bodies; and the development of a full lottery bid. MAGNI are about to embark on the last two of these stages, and these will be taken forward simultaneously.

Obviously the future progression of the project will be dependent on the necessary financial resources being available.

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made by MAGNI in providing a museum of sea and sky at Titanic Quarter. [92945]

Angela Smith: MAGNI has prepared a plan setting out how the organisation proposes to take forward a heritage development at Titanic Quarter. It will major on the themes of sea and sky, but it will also cover the wider social history of the city of Belfast and the people of Northern Ireland.

To date MAGNI has appointed consultants to assist in the preparation of an outline bid for lottery funding. This outline bid is due to be submitted shortly, and it should be followed up by a more substantial document in due course. My officials will continue to work closely with MAGNI in taking this project forward.

Soccer Strategy

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in implementing the soccer strategy, with particular reference to obtaining agreement between the IFA and IFL on the section relating to governance. [92885]

Angela Smith: Encouraging progress has been towards the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Advisory Panel report "Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland". It is understood that the Irish Football Association (IFA) agreed, at a meeting on 20 January, to merge with the Irish Football League to form a unified governing body for the sport as recommended by the Advisory Panel.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is currently examining the Irish Football Association's development plan which sets out its proposals for the future governance of soccer in Northern Ireland, and for other aspects of the game.

Lady Hermon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if the sum of £8 million set aside by the Northern Ireland Executive in its budget proposals to finance the soccer strategy proposals is available to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure for this purpose. [92886]

Angela Smith: Yes, but the allocation of funding to soccer is dependent upon the preparation of a development plan from the Irish Football Association that is acceptable to DCAL.

Ulster Hospital

Mrs. Iris Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* surgical and *(b)* medical procedures were postponed at the Ulster Hospital in the last 12 months. [92672]

Mr. Browne: Information on numbers of *(a)* surgical and *(b)* medical procedures postponed or cancelled at the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust, during the calendar year 2002 is detailed in the table:

	Cancellations/postponements
(a) Surgical	
General Surgery	1,237
Paediatric Surgery	30
T&O	40
Maxillo-facial	73
Plastic Surgery	347
Gynaecology	504
ENT	153
Total	2,384
(b) Medical	
Care of the Elderly	7
Pain Management	160
Paediatric Medicine	12
General Medicine	298
Total	477

PRIVY COUNCIL

Third Reading Debates

Mr. Gale: To ask the President of the Council if he will list, for each Bill passed by the House since June 1997, how many minutes were spent on third reading debate. [93953]

Mr. Robin Cook: The information requested is as follows:

1997–98

	Hours/ minutes at third reading
Finance (No. 2) Bill	3.30
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill	3.30
Road Traffic Reduction (National Targets) Bill	3.27
Education (Schools) Bill	2.31
Employment Rights (Dispute Resolution) Bill [Lords]	2.25
Community Care (Residential Accommodation) Bill	2.22
Scotland Bill	2.05
Lloyds TSB Bill [Lords]	2.03
Northern Ireland Bill	1.30
Firearms (Amendment) Bill	1.27
Public Interest Disclosure Bill [includes consideratio	1.25
Public Processions (Northern Ireland) Bill [Lords]	1.19
Finance Bill	1.08
Crime and Disorder Bill [Lords]	0.51
Human Rights Bill [Lords]	0.51
Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Bill	0.44
Police (Northern Ireland) Bill	0.43
Special Immigration Appeals Commission Bill [Lords]	0.38
Late Payment of Commercial Debts (Interest) Bill [Lords]	0.37
Local Government (Contracts) Bill	0.36
Education (Student Loans) Bill	0.35
National Lottery Bill [Lords]	0.33
Bank of England Bill	0.29
Tax Credits (Initial Expenditure) Bill	0.23
Data Protection Bill [Lords]	0.19
Nuclear Explosions (Prohibitions and Inspections) Bill [Lords]	0.18
Landmines Bill	0.15
Animal Health (Amendment) Bill	0.14
Competition Bill [Lords]	0.14
Registration of Political Parties	0.14
Magistrates' Courts (Procedure) Bill [Lords]	0.13
Supreme Court (Offices) Bill [Lords]	0.12
National Health Service (Private Finance) Bill [Lords]	0.07
Waste Minimisation Bill [includes consideration]	0.03

1998–99

	Hours/ minutes at third reading
House of Lords Bill	4.25
Criminal Cases Review (Insanity) Bill [Lords]	2.28
Tax Credits Bill	1.58
Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill	1.41
Finance Bill	1.20
Disability Rights Commission Bill	1.18
Road Traffic (NHS Charges) Bill	0.52
Northern Ireland (Location of Victims' Remains) Bill	0.51
Company and Business Names (Chamber of Commerce, etc.) Bill	0.48
Access to Justice Bill [Lords]	0.47
Pollution Prevention and Control Bill [Lords]	0.45
Road Traffic (Vehicle Testing) Bill	0.45
Northern Ireland Bill	0.41
Scottish Enterprise Bill	0.37
Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill [Lords]	0.34
Rating (Valuation) Bill	0.29
Protection of Children Bill	0.24
Employment Relations Bill	0.23
Mental Health (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill	0.23
Breeding and Sale of Dogs (Welfare) Bill	0.20
Social Security Contributions (Transfer of Functions, etc.) Bill	0.19
Contracts (Rights of Third Parties) Bill [Lords]	0.09
Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Bill	0.06
Football (Offences and Disorder) Bill	0.06
Water Industry Bill	0.01

1999–2000

	Hours/ minutes at third reading
Licensing (Young Persons) Bill	3.02
Disqualifications Bill	2.03
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill	1.20
Government Resources and Accounts Bill	1.17
Census (Amendment) Bill [Lords]	1.17
Financial Services and Markets Bill	1.15
Football (Disorder) Bill	1.14
Northern Ireland Bill	1.08
Countryside and Rights of Way Bill	1.05
Police (Northern Ireland) Bill	1.03
Finance Bill	1.01
Sea Fishing (Grants) Charges Bill	1.00
Postal Services Bill	0.58
Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill	0.52
Carers and Disabled Children Bill	0.47
Armed Forces Discipline Bill [Lords]	0.46
London Local Authorities Bill [Lords]	0.41
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill [Lords]	0.40
Transport Bill	0.38
Local Government Bill [Lords]	0.37
Terrorism Bill	0.36
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill	0.33
Trustee Bill [Lords]	0.33
Limited Liability Partnerships Bill [Lords]	0.31
Representation of the People Bill	0.30
Children (Leaving Care) Bill [Lords]	0.29
Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Bill	0.27
Utilities Bill	0.19
Freedom of Information Bill	0.18
Protection of Animals (Amendment) Bill	0.16
Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill	0.15
Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill	0.15
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill	0.14
Political Parties, Elections and Referendums	0.14
Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill	0.13
Nuclear Safeguards Bill	0.12
Electronic Communications Bill	0.11
Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Bill	0.10
Learning and Skills Bill [Lords]	0.10
Care Standards Bill [Lords]	0.07

2000–01

	Hours/ minutes at third reading
Capital Allowances Bill	2.30
House of Commons (Removal of Clergy Disqualifications) Bill	2.10
Hunting Bill	1.32
Kent County Council Bill [including consideration]; Medway Council Bill [including consideration]	1.30
Criminal Justice and Police Bill	1.29
Vehicles (Crime) Bill	1.16
Homes Bill	0.58
International Development Bill	0.57
Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill [Lords]	0.57
Regulatory Reform Bill [Lords]	0.55
Social Security Contributions (Share Options) Bill	0.48
Children's Commissioner for Wales Bill	0.45
Private Security Industry Bill [Lords]	0.36
Health and Social Care Bill	0.31

2000–01

	Hours/ minutes at third reading
Rating (Former Agricultural Premises and Rural Shops) Bill	0.21
Social Security Fraud Bill	0.12
Election Publications Bill [Lords]	0.11
Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Deceased Fathers) Bill	0.06

2001–02

	Hours/ minutes at third reading
European Communities (Amendment) Bill	6.46
Marine Wildlife Conservation Bill	3.47
Employee Share Schemes Bill	2.57
Industrial and Provident Societies Bill	2.21
Finance Bill	2.02
Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Bill [Lords]	1.50
Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning (Amendment) Bill	1.47
Adoption and Children Bill	1.46
Proceeds of Crime Bill	1.30
European Communities (Finance) Bill	1.30
International Development Bill [Lords]	1.21
Animal Health Bill	1.13
Enterprise Bill	1.08
Office of Communications Bill [Lords]	1.08
Copyright (Visually Impaired Persons) Bill	1.02
Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill	1.01
State Pensions Credit Bill [Lords]	1.00
Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Bill	0.52
Employment Bill	0.58
Immigration, Nationality and Asylum Bill	0.58
Homelessness Bill	0.50
Police Reform Bill	0.50
Tax Credits Bill	0.48
Commonwealth Bill	0.47
Football (Disorder) (Amendment) Bill	0.42
British Overseas Territories Bill [Lords]	0.42
Copyright, Etc. and Trade Marks (Offences and Enforcement) Bill	0.41
Export Control Bill	0.36
Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill [Lords]	0.34
Education Bill	0.33
Divorce (Religious Marriages) Bill	0.30
Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Bill	0.27
Land Registration Bill	0.27
Public Trustee (Liability and Fees) Bill [Lords]	0.27
Travel Concessions (Eligibility) Bill [Lords]	0.24
City of London (Ward Elections) Bill	0.23
Civil Defence (Grant) Bill	0.18
Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Bill	0.15
National Health Service Reform and Health Care Professions Bill	0.15
National Heritage Bill	0.12
Private Hire Vehicles (Carriage of Guide Dogs etc.) Bill	0.06

2002–03

	Hours/ minutes at third reading
Community Care (Delayed Discharges etc.) Bill	0.57
Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill	0.36
Health (Wales) Bill	0.23

PRIME MINISTER

Computer Misuse

Mr. Webb: To ask the Prime Minister how many cases of computer misuse there were in his office in each of the last five years, broken down by each category of misuse; and how many of those cases resulted in disciplinary action. [93038]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office for today at column 722W.

Iraq

Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what advice he has taken on the legal basis for an invasion of Iraq. [93902]

The Prime Minister: It has been the longstanding policy of successive Governments not to disclose internal policy advice, including legal advice, under Part 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. As I have repeatedly made clear, no decision has been made to take military action and military action is not inevitable.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the line of command for the use of UK nuclear weapons. [93110]

The Prime Minister: The use of the United Kingdom's nuclear weapons may be ordered only by the Prime Minister.

Spanish Visit

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Prime Minister whether the cost of his visit to Spain on 5 September 2002 for the wedding of the daughter of the Prime Minister of Spain was met by the taxpayer. [94104]

The Prime Minister: Yes, as has already been made clear I was invited in my position as a Head of Government.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Housing Allowance

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) how he intends to consult stakeholders in housing allowance in pathfinder project areas; and if he will make a statement; [93315]

(2) if he will publish the results of consultations carried out with stakeholders in housing allowance pathfinder project areas; [93316]

(3) at what points during the housing allowance pathfinder projects stakeholders will be consulted. [93317]

Malcolm Wicks: We will be working closely with pathfinder authorities to introduce the standard local housing allowance scheme and will ensure that local stakeholders including landlords, letting agents, and statutory and voluntary sector advisers, are consulted and made fully aware of the changes.

It will be an important part of our evaluation strategy to consider the views of all local stakeholders as well as those of tenants affected by the scheme. Details of how this will be done have not yet been decided but we recognise the importance of consulting the full range of stakeholders at regular stages during the pilot. As usual, the results of the evaluation will be published.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when the Government will respond to the Better Regulation Task Force on the recommendations in their report entitled 'Housing Benefit: a case study of lone parents' published in September 2001. [91972]

Malcolm Wicks: On 12 December 2001, we responded positively and in detail to the Better Regulation Task Force report "Housing Benefit: A Case Study of Lone Parents". A copy of our response is in the Library.

On 17 October 2002, we announced a wide-ranging package of reforms for housing benefit (HB). The overall strategy for reforming HB is to improve administration, promote choice and responsibility, enhance work incentives and reduce levels of fraud and error in the system.

Married Women's Half-Test

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what steps were taken to publicise the abolition of the married women's half-test under the Social Security Act 1975. [91305]

Mr. McCartney *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* Affected women were identified by a trawl of the NIRS database and invited to claim. In addition, there was a publicity campaign aimed at finding those women who did not receive an invitation to claim for whatever reason.

Pension Credit

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions whether pensioners' earnings will be eligible for the pension credit; and if he will make a statement. [93737]

Mr. McCartney: Currently around half a million pensioners aged 65 or over work. The earnings of pensioners aged 65 or over will be rewardable in the savings credit. The existing earnings disregards of £5, £10 and £20 that apply in the Minimum Income Guarantee will also apply in Pension Credit. The remunerative work rule that excludes from Minimum Income Guarantee pensioners who work 16 hours a week or more (24 hours for couples) will be abolished for Pension Credit.

For example, a pensioner receiving retirement pension of £77.45 and earning £35 per week would get nothing under the present MIG scheme. However, under Pension Credit, he would be £12.65 better off a week, or almost £658 per year.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Career Development Loans

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many career development loans have been allocated since 1998; how many applications have been refused since 1998; what the total sum issued since 1998 has been; how much remains outstanding; how much has been recovered via debt agencies and court orders; how much has been defaulted; and if he will make a statement. [88837]

Margaret Hodge: Career Development Loans (CDLs) are deferred repayment commercial bank loans designed to help individuals, who may not otherwise be able to afford or have access to funds to pay for vocational education and learning. The DfES operates the programme in partnership with three high street banks and pays the interest on the loan for the period of training covered by the CDL. For the period 1 January 1998 to 31 December 2002, 79,641 loans have been taken out with a value of £316 million. As at 31 December 2002, £94 million remained outstanding for payment of interest by the Department and this value will continue to reduce over time. The amount that has been defaulted is £24 million and £2.6 million has been recovered so far. This reflects a net default rate of 7 per cent. compared to the 15 per cent. maximum operating limit agreed with the banks to cover the higher level of risk they take in making these particular loans. The exact number of applications refused by the banks is not known. The refusal rate varies between the banks, but the overall rate is around 25 per cent. of applications received.

Child Care

Vera Baird: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills whether premiums will be available on education maintenance allowances to help single parents to access child care. [91840]

Margaret Hodge: The national Education Maintenance Allowance will be designed to cover the day-to-day expenses associated with participating in further education, such as the cost of books and equipment, and to help towards the cost of transport to and from a learning centre. Additional funding, via the Learner Support Fund, will be available for students facing particular needs or costs that threaten their access to, or completion of, further education courses. This will include help with the costs of child care.

Under the Learner Support Fund, up to £4,000 per annum is available according to the costs of the child care and the young parent's financial circumstances. The maximum amount available will increase to £5,000 per annum from September 2003 to provide for the higher costs prevailing in some areas.

Computer Misuse

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many cases of computer misuse there were in his Department in each of the last five years, broken down by each category of misuse; and how many of those cases resulted in disciplinary action. [93044]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The numbers of computer misuse incidents within the Department for Education and Skills is as follows.

Year	*Number of cases*	*Type of Misuse*	*Action*
1998	10	Serious inappropriate internet access	Disciplinary Action
	2	Serious Email abuse	Disciplinary Action
1999	45	Serious inappropriate internet action	Disciplinary Action
	6	Inappropriate internet access	Informal Warning
2000	42	Serious inappropriate access	Disciplinary Action
	14	Inappropriate internet access	Informal Action
2001	14	Serious inappropriate internet access	Disciplinary Action
	84	Serious inappropriate internet action	Informal Warning
2002	8	Serious inappropriate internet access	Disciplinary Action
	38	Inappropriate internet access	Informal Warning

The Department for Education and Skills allows personal use of the Internet and email outside normal hours. Staff are warned that internet accesses may be monitored and misuse may lead to disciplinary action. Staff are reminded of the policy each time they log on to the Department network and must accept the policy before log in can be completed.

Excellence in Cities

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many schools have been de-designated from the excellence in cities programme since its inception; and how many schools remain in the programme. [93198]

Mr. Miliband: There is no de-designation process, although the number of schools varies as new schools are established and others are closed or amalgamated. Our latest figures show that there are 2,370 schools in excellence in cities of which 1,000 are secondary schools.

Higher Education (Family Incomes)

Paul Farrelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) how many UK students have qualified for *(a)* full exemption, *(b)* part exemption and *(c)* no exemption from tuition fees in (i) England, (ii) Wales and (iii) Northern Ireland in each academic year from 1998 onwards; [91636]

(2) what reports he has received about the number of students who have qualified for *(a)* full exemption, *(b)* part exemption and *(c)* no exemption from tuition fees in Scotland in each academic year from 1998 until 2001. [91640]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* In England and Wales students on undergraduate courses and their families are expected to make a contribution towards the cost of their tuition only if they can afford to do so.

The number of students in academic years 1998–99, 1999–2000 and 2000–01 (latest year for which data are available) who have been assessed to make a full, partial or nil contribution towards the cost of their tuition are:

All students[1]

Thousand

Academic year	*Number of students*	
	England	*Wales*
1998/99[2]		
Full student/parent/spouse/partner contribution[5, 6]	79.8	4.5
Partial student/parent/spouse/partner contribution	45.5	3.4
Nil student/parent/spouse /partner contribution[7]	101.3	6.9
1999–2000[2]		
Full student/parent/spouse/partner contribution[5, 6]	155.9	10.8
Partial student/parent/spouse/partner contribution	87.9	8.2
Nil student/parent/spouse /partner contribution[7]	201.7	14.4
2000–01[2,3]		
Full student/parent/spouse/partner contribution[5, 6]	253.4	[4]n/a
Partial student/parent/spouse/partner contribution	121.3	[4]n/a
Nil student/parent/spouse /partner contribution[7]	267.5	[4]n/a

The devolved Administrations for Scotland and Northern Ireland are responsible for the administration of tuition fees in their countries.

Learning and Skills Council

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what evidence he has collated of software problems in the Learning and Skills Council's funding arrangements for colleges; and what action the Department and the council are taking to eliminate such problems. [91183]

Margaret Hodge: I am aware of the difficulties encountered by some colleges in accessing the Learning and Skills Council's learner information suite which have resulted in some colleges being unable to forecast accurately their expected income. I have expressed my concerns to John Harwood, the council's chief executive. The LSC are committed to providing a high quality service to colleges and we expect the council's systems to be corrected and fully functional at the end of this month.

Learning Difficulties (School Sport)

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) what assessment he has made of primary movement exercise programmes; [93587]

(2) what the Government's policy is on the use of primary movement exercise programmes to alleviate learning difficulties. [93592]

Mr. Miliband: Physical Education (PE) remains a compulsory subject within the National Curriculum at all Key Stages. At Key Stages 1 and 2 its emphasis is on learning and developing basic movement skills and actions. The Ofsted Primary Subject Report on Physical Education—published in July 2002—indicated that at primary level

> "pupils' achievement is at least satisfactory in all but one school in 20 in both Key Stages 1 and 2".

A joint Department for Education and Skills and Department for Culture, Media and Sport public service agreement target, announced on 15 July 2002, seeks to enhance the take up of sporting opportunities by 5 to 16-year-olds by increasing the percentage of schoolchildren who spend a minimum of two hours each week on high quality PE and school sport within and beyond the curriculum to 75 per cent. by 2006. Spearheading action will be the significant expansion of the specialist sports college and school sport co-ordinator partnership programmes.

The strategy has an inclusive ethos and is designed to be flexible enough to allow children with learning difficulties—whether in a mainstream school or other—to be taught throu[illegible] variety of methods which could include a primary movement exercise programme if a school decided that was the most suitable option.

London Institute

Mr. Beard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much public money has been given to the London Institute; and how the use of this money has been accounted for in each year since the foundation of the Institute. [92299]

Margaret Hodge: The following table shows the total income and the amount received from funding council grants for the London Institute each year since 1994–95.

£million

London Institute	*Total income*	*Funding Council grant income*[1]
1994–95	57,728	38,020
1995–96	60,619	38,159
1996–97	64,954	37,439
1997–98	69,446	38,389
1998–99	71,968	42,041
1999–2000	78,075	44,073
2000–01	83,474	45,593

[1] The funding council grant includes funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England, and from the funding bodies for further education in England.

Source:

Table 1, HESA annual publication "Resources of Higher Education Institutions".

There is a financial memorandum between each institution and each of the funding councils from which they receive public funding. This sets out the responsibilities of each party including financial management and the arrangements for audit and monitoring.

Post-16 Education

Vera Baird: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills by what percentage the pilot schemes suggest education maintenance allowances will improve progression rates into post sixteen education in deprived areas. [91837]

Margaret Hodge: The EMA pilot scheme has been subject to a rigorous and thorough evaluation study. The latest report was published on 3 July 2002.

The evaluation of the pilot scheme includes 10 of the original EMA pilot LEAs which are among the most deprived in England. Evidence from the evaluation indicates that within the group of young people eligible for EMA, participation in education in Y12 has increased by 5.9 percentage points. For the cohort of young people in these LEAs as a whole, this is equivalent to a participation gain of 3.7 percentage points.

In Year 13, due to an EMA induced improvement in retention, the gain in participation increases further to just over 7 percentage points among eligible young people which is equivalent to just over 4 percentage points for the cohort as a whole.

Vera Baird: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the Government's policy is on diversity of supply in post-16 education. [91853]

Margaret Hodge: We are committed to ensuring that high quality post-16 education and training is available to meet the full range of learner, employer and community needs. In some areas this will require greater diversity in the supply of provision.

Following the publication of our strategy for reforming further education and training—'Success for All' in November 2002, we have asked each provider to set out their unique educational mission focusing on what they do best. Our strategy also identifies the need, where appropriate, for more discrete provision to meet the distinctive needs of 16 to 19-year-olds.

Alongside this, we have asked the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to undertake strategic area reviews to ensure the best mix of provision is supplied in each part of the country. These reviews will be undertaken locally in partnership with further education colleges and local education authorities and in consultation with a wide range of employer, learner, community and provider interests in each area.

The combination of unique provider missions and strategic area reviews will lead to greater diversity in post-16 education and training, to ensure improved choice, opportunity and success for all.

Schools (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many teachers were employed in schools in *(a)* Shropshire and *(b)* Shrewsbury and Atcham in each year since 1997. [93019]

Mr. Miliband: The tables provide the full-time equivalent (FTE) number of teachers as at January of each year. Shropshire was affected by local government re-organisation in April 1998.

(a) Teachers in Shropshire

	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
All regular teachers FTE[1]						
Former Shropshire	3,330	3,350	N/a	N/A	N/A	N/A
Shropshire post April 1998	N/a	N/a	1,940	2,050	2,110	2,140
Telford and Wrekin	N/a	N/a	1,360	1,340	1,410	1,420

[1] The information for Shropshire is taken from the Annual Survey of Teachers in Service, an LEA level survey. The figures cover all regular teachers employed in the maintained schools sector (nursery, primary, secondary, special and PRUs) by the local authority, including centrally employed teachers. Teachers on paid absence are included, together with any replacements on contracts of one month or more. Includes teachers with and without qualified teacher status.

Note:

N/a = not applicable

All figures are rounded to the nearest 10.

(b) Teachers in Shrewsbury and Atcham

	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
Teachers in schools FTE[1]						
Shrewsbury and Atcham	630	630	630	640	650	660

[1] The information for Shrewsbury and Atcham constituency is from the Annual Schools' Census and includes the normal

complement of teachers in maintained nursery, primary, secondary, special schools and PRUs. Includes teachers with and without qualified teacher status and foreign language assistants.

Note:

All figures are rounded to the nearest 10.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will list building improvement projects and their value in each school in Shrewsbury and Atcham in each year since 2001. [93082]

Mr. Miliband: We do not hold information in the form requested. Most capital funding available for building improvements in schools is allocated to local education authorities and schools by needs-related formulae. It is for local education authorities and schools to decide how their capital allocations are invested and prioritised between projects, in line with locally agreed asset management plans.

Special Educational Needs

Dr. Ladyman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what training Ofsted inspectors have received in respect of duties imposed on schools by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001. [92995]

Mr. Miliband: The training undertaken by school inspectors is a matter for Ofsted. HM Chief Inspector David Bell will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of his letter will be placed in the House of Commons Library.

Specialist Status Schools

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills of the schools that have lost specialist status since 1996, how many were *(a)* arts, *(b)* business and enterprise, *(c)* engineering, *(d)* languages, *(e)* maths and computing, *(f)* science, *(g)* sports and *(h)* technology. [93197]

Mr. Miliband: There have been 33 specialist schools which have lost their specialist status since 1996. Of these schools, 32 were technology colleges and one was a language college.

Student Funding

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills whether bankruptcy discharges liability to repay student loans; and if he will make a statement. [91182]

Margaret Hodge: Bankruptcy discharges liability to repay student loans where the loan was taken out before the commencement of bankruptcy.

Paul Farrelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) how many UK students have qualified for the income-dependent element of student loans in *(a)* England, *(b)* Wales and *(c)* Northern Ireland in each academic year since 1998; [91637]

(2) what reports he has received on the number of students in Scotland who have qualified for *(a)* the full amount, *(b)* a proportion and *(c)* no part of the income-dependent element of student loans in each academic year since 1998. [91823]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* For the first year of the new student support arrangements, academic year 1998–99, eligible new entrants domiciled in England and Wales received support for living costs through both grants and loans. Grants, which were assessed against family income, on average formed about a quarter of the support available. All students were entitled to a non income-assessed loan which comprised the remaining three quarters of support available.

New entrants to higher education from 1999–2000, together with those who started in 1998–99, receive support for living costs through loans which are partly income assessed.

The number of students in academic years 1999–2000 and 2000–01 (latest year for which data is available) who are eligible for the full income-assessed element of the loan and those who receive some of the income-assessed element of the loan are:

All students[1,2,3]

Thousand

Academic year	*Students eligible for the full income-assessed element of the loan*	*Students eligible for part of the income-assessed element of the loan*
1999–2000		
England	295.1	48.9
Wales	21.4	3.9
2000–01[4,5]		
England	348.3	80.0
Wales[4]	[4]—	[4]—

[1] The amount of student loan available is assessed by local education authorities in England and Wales for students who are normally domiciled in their area and studying in the UK.

[2] Includes students in receipt of loans for extra weeks of study.

[3] Excludes students in receipt of the reduced rate of loan as these are not subject to income-assessment.

[4] In academic year 2000–01 data are not available separately for Wales due to a low response rate to the survey. Data are provisional.

[5] The apparent rise in student numbers over the two years is accounted for by the introduction of income-assessed student loans in 1999–2000 for those starting their courses that year or academic year 1998–99—so two cohorts were included in the first year but three in 2000–01.

Source:

F503G student support survey of LEAs in England and Wales

The devolved Administrations for Scotland and Northern Ireland are responsible for their own administration of student loans.

Paul Farrelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what reports he has received about the number of students in Scotland who have qualified for *(a)* the full amount, *(b)* a proportion and *(c)* no part of the young students' bursary in each academic year since its introduction. [91639]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* My right hon. Friend does not hold information on Scottish issues. This is a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Paul Farrelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many UK students in *(a)* England, *(b)* Wales, *(c)* Northern Ireland and *(d)* Scotland qualified for (i) the full amount, (ii) a proportion and (iii) no part of student maintenance grants in each academic year from 1990 to 1998. [91753]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 20 January 2003]*: The support arrangements under the mandatory awards scheme for eligible undergraduate students domiciled in England and Wales on courses which began before 1 September 1998 consisted of payment, usually in full, of their tuition fees, a grant towards their maintenance, depending on income, and a non-income assessed loan. New students in academic year 1998–99, were expected to contribute up to £1,000 a year towards the cost of their tuition depending on family income. In 1998–99, income-assessed grants on average only formed about a quarter of the support available and all students were entitled to a non income-assessed loan which comprised the remaining three quarters of support available and which will be repayable on an income contingent basis.

In addition to the basic maintenance grant disabled students, students with dependants and lone parent students could also apply for various supplementary grants and allowances, the majority of which were income-assessed.

The number of students in academic years 1990–91 to 1998–99 who have been assessed for a full, partial or nil contribution to their maintenance are shown in the table.

The devolved Administrations for Northern Ireland and Scotland are responsible for the administration of their own student support.

Maintenance awards

Status of student: academic years 1990–91 to 1998–99 —England and Wales[1]

Thousand

	Mandatory scheme students[2]							
	1990–91	*1991–92*[3]	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
England								
Students with:								
Full maintenance grants	165.8	—	257.8	301.2	324.0	328.8	321.9	317.3
Partial maintenance grants	169.9	—	205.7	224.2	225.0	218.6	205.8	203.4
Nil maintenance grants[4]	117.1	—	147.3	154.8	168.4	179.2	194.0	205.6
All students[5]	452.8	—	610.8	680.2	717.4	726.6	721.7	726.3
Wales								
Students with:								
Full maintenance grants	11.9	—	17.3	19.4	20.3	20.8	21.0	20.2
Partial maintenance grants	12.9	—	15.1	15.8	16.3	15.2	14.1	14.0
Nil maintenance grants[4]	5.2	—	6.4	6.2	7.1	8.2	8.2	9.2
All students[5]	30.0	—	38.8	41.4	43.7	44.2	43.3	43.4

	1998–99[4]		
	Mandatory scheme students[2]	*Student support scheme students*[2,4]	*All students*
England			
Students with:			
Full maintenance grants	198.2	118.9	317.1
Partial maintenance grants	139.0	43.0	182.1
Nil maintenance grants[4]	150.0	64.7	214.7
All students[5]	487.2	226.7	713.9
Wales			
Students with:			
Full maintenance grants	12.7	8.7	21.4
Partial maintenance grants	9.3	2.5	11.8
Nil maintenance grants[4]	6.8	3.6	10.4
All students[5]	28.8	14.8	43.6

[1] The table shows awards made by local education authorities in England and Wales to students normally domiciled in their area. The table excludes placement year sandwich students who do not normally receive maintenance support in their placement year.

[2] Up to and including academic year 1998–99 eligible students in England and Wales received support through income-assessed grants and a non income-assessed student loan. For new students in 1998–99, the proportion of grant and loan was approximately 25 per cent. and 75 per cent.

[3] Separate data for academic year 1991–92 are not available; combined England and Wales totals show 212.1 thousand students with full maintenance grants, 199.1 thousand students with partial maintenance grants and, 135.2 thousand students with a nil maintenance grant. These figures do not include data in respect of the London Residuary Body estimated to be 8,600 mandatory awards; an accurate breakdown of this figure is not available.

[4] Data in 1998–99 include an estimated 15,000 students support scheme students in England and Wales who, because they did not expect to receive a contribution to their support from public funds, did not make an application to their local authority.

[5] Totals may not add through due to roundings.

Source:

F503G survey of local education authorities on student support

Technical Craft Skills

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will make it his policy to ensure that technical craft skills for trades are available to young people in south-east Essex. [92781]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The Government and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) are wholly committed to Modern Apprenticeships (MA) as a quality work-based learning route to craft, supervisory and technician skills for young people in England. We have adopted a challenging Public Service Agreement (PSA) target for MA entrants by 2004—28 per cent. of young people to begin an MA by the age of 22. MA is one of the wide range of specialist pathways that will be available to young people under a transformed 14–19 phase of learning.

The Chancellor, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills and the Chairman of the Learning and Skills Council have announced a new Modern Apprenticeship

Task Force which will take a key role in promoting MA to employers and thereby contributing to increased take-up—in south-east Essex and elsewhere.

All parties involved in the initiative are working together to increase the take-up of MA. The LSC in England works through its 47 local offices (one of which covers Essex) and with key partners to identify and meet local skills needs by promoting and funding the delivery of work-based learning programmes, including MA and college-based provision. Connexions Partnerships are delivering improved advice and guidance to young people on the opportunities available in their communities. New and developing Sector Skills Councils also play a key role by supporting promotion to employers in their sectors.

In addition, the Government will be publishing a national skills strategy in June, setting out how we will further boost numbers of young people acquiring technical and craft skills across the economy.

Training

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much the Learning and Skills Council spent on training allowances for young people in 2001–02. [90917]

Margaret Hodge: This is a matter for the Learning and Skills Council. John Harwood, the council's chief executive will write to the hon. Member with the information requested and a copy of his reply will be placed in the Libraries.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Housing (Coventry)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many homes were owned by the council in Coventry in each of the last five years. [93140]

Mr. McNulty: Local authorities report their number of council homes as at 1 April on their annual Housing Investment Programme (HIP) returns. Based on Coventry City Council's recent returns the reported numbers of council homes were:

As at 1 April	*Number*
1998	20,359
1999	20,175
2000	19,886

The Council ceased to have any council housing in September 2000, following the transfer of the council stock under the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's Large Scale Voluntary Transfer Programme (LSVT) to new Registered Social Landlords—Whitefriars North and Whitefriars South, within the Whitefriars Housing Group.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the level of housing need has been in Coventry in each of the last five years. [93141]

Mr. McNulty: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given on 7 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 115W. Local authorities in England report the numbers of households on their housing register (excluding tenants awaiting transfers) as at 1 April in their annual Housing Investment Programme (HIP) returns. Based on Coventry City Council's recent returns the reported numbers in the last five years are:

As at 1 April	*Number*
1998	7,767
1999	8,915
2000	8,458
2001	6,295
2002	7,104

Council Housing

Bob Russell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many council dwellings were sold in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available. [91142]

Mr. McNulty: Information on total numbers of sales and transfers of local authority and New Town dwellings in England since 1992–93 is in the table.

	All owner/occupier sales (including right to buy)	*Transfers to registered social landlords/other*
1992–93	42,289	27,289
1993–94	50,510	33,643
1994–95	46,236	41,120
1995–96	33,165	45,900
1996–97	35,206	22,534
1997–98	42,078	35,701
1998–99	41,087	76,543
1999–2000	54,957	96,755
2000–01	53,005	132,462
2001–02[1]	52,459	35,687

[1] Provisional

Source:

DOE/DETR/DTLR/ODPM Housing Activity return P1B/New Town returns

Bob Russell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many council dwellings were built in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available. [91145]

Mr. McNulty: The numbers of local authority dwellings built in England in each of the last 10 years is in the following table. The numbers have declined as social housing has increasingly been delivered by Registered Social Landlords.

Year	*Number of local authority dwellings built*
1992–93	2,579
1993–94	1,451
1994–95	853
1995–96	757
1996–97	451
1997–98	323
1998–99	194
1999–2000	102
2000–01	389
2001–02	105

Crossrail

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he will announce his decision on the revision of Crossrail safeguarding directions to prevent inappropriate development; and if he will make a statement. [93142]

Mr. Jamieson: I have been asked to reply.

Cross London Rail Links Limited have been asked to put to Ministers in February advice on route options and a worked-up business case for Crossrail. Current safeguarding directions will be reviewed as and when a route may be determined.

East Riding of Yorkshire Council

David Davis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he will announce the level of funding to the East Riding of Yorkshire Council for nursery school places for the next financial year. [93847]

Mr. Raynsford: Funding for nursery school places will be within local government formula grant from 2003–04. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will announce our final proposals for the 2003–04 local government finance settlement on Monday 3 February; the House will have the chance to debate these on Wednesday 5 February. It will, of course, be for the authority to decide what allocation to make to specific services.

Green Belt Land

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will introduce measures to prevent the speculative purchase of agricultural land in designated green belt, its sub-division into building plots and sale on the basis of an anticipated relaxation of planning controls. [92832]

Mr. McNulty: The Government reaffirmed their commitment to the protection and enhancement of the Green Belt in my righ. hon. Friend, the Deputy Prime Minister's statement on Sustainable Communities, Housing and Planning in the House of Commons on 18 July 2002, *Official Report,* column 438 Since 1997 over 30,000 hectares have been added to the Green Belt, or earmarked for addition.

However, it is not generally the role of the planning system to place control on land ownership.

Housing (Rural Areas)

Andrew George: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the average turnaround time was for unused housing stock in *(a)* England and *(b)* local authorities, defined as rural, by region, in each year since 1978. [90833]

Mr. McNulty: Local authorities in England have been asked to provide estimates of the average time taken to re-let their housing stock on their annual Housing Investment Programme (HIP) returns since 1994. Because of variations in the way local authorities maintain lettings records and compile these estimates, the figures quoted, and any comparisons between authorities, should be treated with caution. Comparable information in respect of re-lettings by registered social landlords is only available from 1996–97.

Average re-let times for local authority dwellings (days)

	2001–02	*2000–01*	*1999–2000*	*1998–99*	*1997–98*	*1996–97*	*1995–96*	*1994–95*	*1993–94*
North East									
All LAs	60	50	54	40	32	30	26	29	33
Rural LAs	67	62	41	35	40	33	32	31	33
North West									
All LAs	54	49	46	40	41	39	38	35	34
Rural LAs	48	51	45	40	40	39	36	33	29
Yorkshire and Humberside									
All LAs	65	58	51	43	38	39	36	35	37
Rural LAs	54	52	53	47	39	28	20	19	31
East Midlands									
All LAs	45	41	40	38	38	34	36	35	38
Rural LAs	34	31	36	37	38	33	29	27	27
West Midlands									
All LAs	49	55	51	49	43	35	37	35	36
Rural LAs	33	12	39	32	33	23	26	23	25
East of England									
All LAs	36	38	40	36	37	38	37	33	36
Rural LAs	38	28	34	25	29	31	27	27	25
London									
All LAs	44	47	51	55	55	71	70	68	72
Rural LAs	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
South East									
All LAs	39	36	37	34	36	38	36	32	32
Rural LAs	37	37	32	33	37	35	35	33	31

Average re-let times for local authority dwellings (days)

	2001–02	*2000–01*	*1999–2000*	*1998–99*	*1997–98*	*1996–97*	*1995–96*	*1994–95*	*1993–94*
South West									
All LAs	36	29	28	20	23	28	26	25	30
Rural LAs	25	22	22	19	24	24	22	22	21
England									
All LAs	50	47	45	41	40	41	40	39	41
Rural LAs	44	39	40	33	35	31	29	28	27

n/a = not applicable, figures to the nearest day.
Source:
DOE/DETR/DTLR/ODPM annual Housing Investment Programme (HIP) returns.

Average re-let times for registered social landlord dwellings (days)

	2001–02	*2000–01*	*1999–2000*	*1998–99*	*1997–98*	*1996–97*
North East						
All LAs	33	41	41	40	40	33
Rural LAs	33	41	45	39	35	29
North West						
All LAs	52	53	41	36	34	30
Rural LAs	44	41	38	29	27	22
Yorkshire and Humberside						
All LAs	34	37	37	38	35	26
Rural LAs	22	22	22	27	19	14
East Midlands						
All LAs	39	43	39	36	33	29
Rural LAs	38	40	33	29	24	20
West Midlands						
All LAs	30	37	31	31	31	27
Rural LAs	30	32	25	26	25	20
East of England						
All LAs	26	28	29	26	28	24
Rural LAs	21	24	23	21	21	21
London						
All LAs	36	37	40	40	40	41
Rural LAs	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
South East						
All LAs	27	29	29	29	31	28
Rural LAs	24	27	27	27	28	26
South West						
All LAs	29	32	32	27	24	21
Rural LAs	23	24	27	24	21	16
England						
All LAs	36	38	35	33	33	29
Rural LAs	29	30	29	26	24	21

n/a = not applicable, figures to the nearest day.
Source:
Housing Corporation's continuous CORE survey data.

Housing Waiting Lists

Martin Linton: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many people were on housing waiting lists in each London borough at the latest date for which figures are available. [92132]

Mr. McNulty: Local authorities in England report the numbers of households on their housing register (excluding tenants awaiting a transfer) as at 1 April in their annual Housing Investment Programme returns. The latest reported information, for 2002, is as follows:

Households on the housing register of London boroughs as at 1 April 2002

London Borough	*Number*
Barking and Dagenham	2,668
Barnet	7,030
Bexley	3,487
Brent	14,746
Bromley	3,592
Camden	8,147
City of London	623
Croydon	6,890
Ealing	8,289
Enfield	7,264

Households on the housing register of London boroughs as at 1 April 2002

London Borough	*Number*
Greenwich	6,876
Hackney	8,930
Hammersmith and Fulham	6,044
Haringey	12,585
Harrow	3,992
Havering	1,888
Hillingdon	6,041
Hounslow	6,369
Islington	8,161
Kensington and Chelsea	8,294
Kingston upon Thames	3,971
Lambeth	14,228
Lewisham	15,368
Merton	4,361
Newham	13,942
Redbridge	5,671
Richmond upon Thames	3,763
Southwark	6,164
Sutton	1,653
Tower Hamlets	7,837
Waltham Forest	10,283
Wandsworth	3,923
Westminster	3,709

Note:

Local authorities have different practices for compiling and managing housing register/waiting lists, which means that direct comparisons between authorities can be misleading.

Source:

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister Housing Investment Programme (HIP) annual returns.

Local Government Finance

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister, what the average percentage rise in the government grant to police authorities is for the forthcoming financial year; and what the percentage increase was for the Essex police force. [91397]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* I have been asked to reply.

The average percentage increase in general policing grants to police authorities in England and Wales for 2003–04 is 4.3 per cent.

Essex police authority will receive a 3 per cent. increase in general grants. The authority will also receive £0.5 million from the Rural Policing Fund and £5.79 million from the Crime Fighting Fund, taking the overall increase to 3.5 per cent. Essex will also receive £2.33 million for the Airwave communication system.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make allowance for inaccuracies in the 2001 census count when considering the grant allocation for 2004–05; and if he will make a statement. [92495]

Mr. Raynsford: It is the policy of the Deputy Prime Minister to use consistent data for all authorities in the calculation of formula grant. For population estimates, this means the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will be using the Registrar General's mid-year population estimates, as derived from the 2001 census and published by the Office for National Statistics. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) are confident that the approach taken for the 2001 census provides the most accurate estimates of the population both nationally and for each of the 376 local authorities in England and Wales. ONS are not anticipating making changes to their figures, but if this should occur the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will consider what impact these may have on the Local Government Finance Settlement. The floors provided for under the Local Government Settlement ensure that no authority receives an increase in grant less than inflation in 2003–04 irrespective of reductions in the estimated resident population of that authority in the 2001 census.

Local Government Finance (Westminster)

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make it his policy to use alternative data sources to the 2001 census to calculate Westminster City Council's *(a)* grant settlement for 2003–04 and *(b)* future grant settlements; and if he will make a statement. [92494]

Mr. Raynsford: It is the policy of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to use consistent data for all authorities in the calculation of formula grant; consequently the same data source will be used for Westminster as for all authorities. For population estimates, this means the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will be using the Registrar General's mid-year population estimates (as published by the Office for National Statistics). For the 2003–04 Local Government Finance Settlement these will be the 2001 estimates that are based on the 2001 census. For future years the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister intends to use the latest available mid-year estimates.

Occupational Stress

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the *(a)* prevalence and *(b)* causes of occupational stress among local government officers. [93691]

Mr. Leslie: Decisions on specific health issues like occupational stress are a matter for individual local authority employers and detailed information about causes and prevalence is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, as part of the Review of Ill-Health Retirement in the Public Sector, there continues to be close collaboration with the Employers' Organisation for Local Government and the Association of Local Authority Medical Advisers in the preparation of a Management of Ill-Health Retirement handbook published in September 2002. This includes a chapter on the causes of stress, recognising the symptoms and the implications for local authority managers and those working in the occupational health sector.

Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister which development documents a unitary authority will have to complete as a result of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill. [93602]

Mr. McNulty: Under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill, a unitary authority will have to prepare those local development documents that are specified in its local development scheme. These must include the authority's statement of community involvement and documents prescribed under clause 16*(1)(a)* of the Bill. It is intended that these prescribed documents should be a core strategy containing the core spatial planning policies for the authority's area and site specific policies, including a proposals map.

Property Prices

Mr. Chope: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will place in the Library a list of lower quartile prices of properties sold in each local authority area in each quarter of 2002. [94045]

Mr. McNulty: A table showing lower quartile property prices in each local authority area will be available in the Library from Wednesday 29 January. Figures will be provided for all four quarters of 2001 and for the first three quarters of 2002.

The figures are derived from the Land Registry dataset covering all residential property transactions—but excluding properties sold for less than £1,000 or more than £20 million.

Note that the figures for Q3 2002 are provisional only. Revised and final figures for Q3 2002 will be made available by end-February, which is when provisional figures for Q4 2002 will also be available.

Regional Planning

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what guidance the Government will issue for regional housebuilding targets during the process of establishing Regional Strategic Procedure. [93603]

Mr. McNulty: This Government do not set regional housebuilding targets. Annual rates of housing provision are kept under regular review and are established through regional planning guidance and the spatial strategy it should set out. Guidance on this is set out in Planning Policy Guidance Note 11 on 'Regional Planning' and Planning Policy Guidance Note 3 on 'Housing'. These arrangements will continue when regional spatial strategies replace regional planning guidance as provided for in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill.

Right to Buy (Christchurch)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many additional social housing units he estimates will be available to let in each of the next five years in Christchurch if the right to buy maximum discounts scheme is introduced. [94044]

Mr. McNulty: The effect of lower maximum Right to Buy discounts on the supply of affordable housing in any area will depend upon a number of factors. It is likely to be limited initially, but to grow over time, reducing the upward pressure of Right to Buy sales and subsequent resales on local rents and housing prices.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister (1) whether the Right to Buy scheme reduction in maximum discounts will apply to social housing within Christchurch borough owned by New Forest district council; [94047]

(2) whether the Right to Buy scheme reduction in maximum discounts applies to local housing in Christchurch in respect of which housing authorities outside Christchurch have the nomination right. [94046]

Mr. McNulty: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is minded to reduce the maximum Right to Buy discount available to tenants to £16,000 in Christchurch and 41 other areas which are under the greatest housing market pressure, as evidenced by a high local incidence of homelessness and high house prices. The reduction will apply to all social housing available under the Right to Buy scheme in those areas. We have written to the local housing authorities giving them the opportunity to provide reasons why the change should not be made in their area. We will consider carefully all representations received.

Right to Buy (Reduced Discount Scheme)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister why the number of lets to new council tenants and nominations by landlords to registered social landlords less the number of homes let to homeless households is reduced by 20 per cent. for the purpose of calculating available lets under the reduced discount scheme for right to buy. [94040]

Mr. McNulty: In the initial assessment of 'available lets', a reduction of 20 per cent. was made to allow for dwellings unsuitable for the homeless (such as sheltered housing) and for other inescapable demand (such as urgent medical priority cases). This adjustment was made consistently in respect of all local authorities, so it did not affect their final ranking on the basis of the objective indicator of demand pressure.

Social Housing

Bob Russell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many dwellings were constructed by registered social housing landlords, excluding local authorities, in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available; and how many are planned to be built in the next financial year. [91143]

Mr. McNulty: The numbers of new dwellings constructed by Registered Social Landlords in each of the last 10 years are shown in the following table. Information from local authority housing strategies shows, for 2003–04, a projected 31,000 total of new dwellings constructed and existing stock acquired by Registered Social Landlords.

Year	*Number of new dwellings constructed by Registered Social Landlords*
1992–93	23,969
1993–94	30,213
1994–95	31,375
1995–96	30,226
1996–97	24,630
1998–99	21,397
1999–2000	18,920
2000–01	17,363
2001–02	16,610
2002–03	14,367

Mr. Laws: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what his estimate is of the number of social houses *(a)* completed and *(b)* started in each reporting period in each year from 1982–83 to 2002–03, broken down by (i) English region and (ii) English local authority; and if he will make a statement. [93134]

Mr. McNulty: The total numbers of houses started and completed by registered social landlords and local authorities in each region are shown in the table. The years shown are those which are readily available. I will write further to provide information for each local authority.

Numbers of dwellings

	Starts	*Completions*
North East		
1991–92	1,588	1,263
1992–93	1,444	1,532
1993–94	1,525	1,548
1994–95	1,017	1,370
1995–96	1,063	1,115
1996–97	1,043	1,074
1997–98	662	909
1998–99	650	674
1999–2000	571	807
2000–01	669	636
2001–02	167	493
North West		
1991–92	3,928	3,113
1992–93	4,327	4,002
1993–94	5,017	4,802
1994–95	4,209	4,513
1995–96	3,975	4,838
1996–97	2,656	3,596
1997–98	2,308	2,661
1998–99	2,402	2,284
1999–2000	1,993	2,884
2000–01	1,439	1,926
2001–02	1,353	1,673
Yorkshire and the Humber		
1991–92	2,478	2,283
1992–93	3,108	2,466
1993–94	3,134	3,269
1994–95	3,084	2,884
1995–96	2,638	3,273
1996–97	1,789	2,732
1997–98	1,482	1,556
1998–99	1,233	1,587
1999–2000	1,040	1,198
2000–01	765	928
2001–02	635	885
East Midlands		
1991–92	1,192	1,698
1992–93	2,008	1,454
1993–94	2,468	2,076
1994–95	2,551	2,733
1995–96	1,769	2,395
1996–97	1,293	1,346
1997–98	1,368	1,464
1998–99	1,093	1,374
1999–2000	1,034	1,179
2000–01	454	906
2001–02	442	649
West Midlands		
1991/92	2,446	2,511
1992/93	2,901	3,101
1993/94	3,380	2,668
1994/95	3,151	3,874
1995/96	2,071	2,563
1996/97	2,311	2,217
1997/98	1,973	1,873
1998/99	1,999	2,152
1999/2000	2,091	2,216
2000/01	1,325	1,954
2001/02	1,143	1,198
East		
1991–92	2,106	2,116
1992–93	3,335	2,733
1993–94	3,833	3,726
1994–95	3,649	3,319
1995–96	3,064	3,404
1996–97	2,581	2,991
1997–98	2,415	2,472
1998–99	1,946	2,486
1999–2000	1,401	1,718
2000–01	1,577	1,678
2001–02	1,296	1,512
London		
1991–92	3,641	3,720
1992–93	5,872	4,606
1993–94	6,788	5,743
1994–95	5,907	5,660
1995–96	3,632	5,052
1996–97	4,270	4,934
1997–98	4,133	4,381
1998–99	3,536	3,233
1999–2000	2,799	2,934
2000–01	3,038	4,320
2001–02	2,606	3,846
South East		
1991–92	3,217	4,183
1992–93	6,437	4,579
1993–94	5,375	5,276
1994–95	4,650	4,931
1995–96	4,183	5,272
1996–97	4,796	3,656
1997–98	3,335	4,099
1998–99	2,525	3,672
1999–2000	3,106	2,914
2000–01	2,228	2,828
2001–02	2,315	2,850
South West		
1991–92	1,801	2,200
1992–93	2,551	2,075
1993–94	2,624	2,556
1994–95	3,525	2,944
1995–96	2,440	3,071
1996–97	2,556	2,535
1997–98	2,212	2,305
1998–99	2,380	1,652
1999–2000	2,184	1,615
2000–01	1,528	1,823
2001–02	1,416	1,444

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Computer Misuse

Mr. Webb: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many cases of computer misuse there were in her Department in each of the last five years, broken down by each category of misuse; and how many of those cases resulted in disciplinary action. [93043]

Ms Rosie Winterton: There have been 43 cases of computer misuse in the Department over the last five years. These cases are broken down as follows.

	1998	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
Category	1	0	0	1	*0*
Personal use	0	1	1	2	8
Unofficial Business Use[1]	1	2	0	0	2
Other	3	4	4	8	5
Total	5	7	5	11	15

[1] This covers receipt of unsolicited business e-mails, either directly from the business site, or forwarded from internal users

In each case disciplinary action has been taken where appropriate in line with Departmental disciplinary procedures, which accord with the central framework set out in paragraph 4.5 of the Civil Service Management Code.

Legal Services Commission

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what checks are undertaken by the Legal Services Commission on the competence of solicitors who claim to specialise in *(a)* divorce, *(b)* probate, *(c)* asylum, *(d)* family law, *(e)* property and *(f)* medical negligence. [93090]

Ms Rosie Winterton: Generally probate cases will not be publicly funded but cases in the other categories may well be.

Since 1 April 2001, all publicly funded legal service suppliers, whether solicitor firms or not for profit agencies, have had to hold a quality mark before being awarded a Legal Services Commission (LSC) contract. All solicitor suppliers for specialist legal services must hold the Specialist Quality Mark (SQM). The SQM focuses, in respect of individual competence, on supervision, training, and file review processes, and requires supervisor solicitors to be accredited to category specific qualifying panels as evidence of competence. The LSC conducts regular quality mark audits to ensure suppliers meet the required standard. The LSC also conducts cost compliance audits to check that public funds claimed by a supplier are being used appropriately.

These audits enable the LSC to take appropriate measures to deal with poor quality work, including cost reductions and, in extreme cases, removal of the contract.

Public Record Office (Documents Release)

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if her Department will arrange for an early release of documents held by the Public Record Office, originated by the then Department of the Environment and the Department of Trade and Industry, relating to the Lowermoor Water Poisoning Incident of July 1988. [90032]

Mr. Morley: I have been asked to reply.

A report of the incident was produced in August 1988 and put into the public domain and two reports into the health of the people in the area were published in 1989 and 1991. Copies of these last two reports are in the Library of the House. Other health studies into the incident have been published in scientific literature. The report of the sub group of the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment, which is considering the continuing health concerns expressed by those affected by the incident, will be published by the Department of Health later this year. We are looking at our files to see if they contain any further environmental information on the incident that can be released and put on the Department's website.

Statutory Instruments

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, how many statutory instruments have been issued by her Department in each calendar year since 1979. [89845]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The figures in the following table show the number of Statutory Instruments, Orders in Council and Northern Ireland Statutory Rules issued by the Lord Chancellor's Department from 1998 to 2002.

Figures for previous years are unavailable.

	1998	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
Statutory Instrument	57	106	110	137	64
Order in Council	2	4	2	10	14
Northern Ireland Statutory Rule	26	16	21	15	26
Total	35	126	133	162	104

HEALTH

Acute Hospital Services

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has conducted into the reasons for different categories of acute hospital staff choosing to leave their professions. [91476]

Mr. Hutton: The Department has commissioned over many years and continues to fund a series of cohort studies of doctors' careers by the United Kingdom medical careers research group at the University of Oxford.

This research covers all doctors, not just those employed in acute hospitals. The objectives are:

to determine the career choices of UK doctors at regular intervals after qualification and to study the factors that influence them;

to study career progression at regular intervals, to compare it with earlier career choices and to determine factors that have influenced any change;

to study and estimate the movement of doctors to work outside the national health service, to work in medicine outside the UK, or to leave medicine, and to identify factors associated with them;

to ascertain the views of doctors about their work, training, career, working environment, and morale, and to compare these between specialties, grades, etc.;

to use study findings to model and forecast future workforce supply;

to consider the findings, to make recommendations about their interpretation and policy relevance, and to inform medical workforce planners and decision-makers about factors that have an important influence on medical careers and medical work.

These studies, which are questionnaire surveys of all UK medical graduates, have been published most recently in the *British Medical Journal* on 28 September 2002.

The Department also funds the nursing research unit at King's College London to do similar work on nurses' careers.

Aids and Adaptations

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to publish his consultation document on the provision of aids and adaptations; and whether the document will include an assessment of the adequacy of staffing and financial resources in the provision of adaptations for elderly and disabled people. [92606]

Mr. McNulty: I have been asked to reply.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, jointly with the Department of Health, will very shortly be publishing guidance on delivering an effective housing adaptations service. This guidance deals primarily with how such a service should be organised by the relevant housing and social service departments of local authorities and is based on detailed field research about existing best practice. In relation to the adequacy of resources available for this programme the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will shortly publish a long-term programme of action to deliver sustainable communities in all regions. This will set out the allocation of spending review resources on housing and planning including the funding available for Disabled Facilities Grants over the next three years.

Ambulance Equipment (Chemical Incidents)

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* NHS acute trusts and *(b)* NHS ambulance trusts received a letter dated 22 October from the chief scientist because they had yet to order mobile decontamination units and personal protective equipment for chemical incidents. [84036]

Mr. Hutton: The Department of Health chief scientist wrote to the national health service on 22 October to remind all NHS trust chief executives of current policy on this issue.

Biological Warfare

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which organisation will be responsible for the *(a)* assessment of and *(b)* response to the health dimension of the threats of biological warfare. [86030]

Mr. Hutton: Assessment of the threats of biological warfare is undertaken in the context of the overall monitoring and assessment of potential terrorist threats to the United Kingdom done by the security and intelligence agencies, the police, scientific and other specialist advisors including the scientific resources of DSTL Porton Down. The Home Office is the lead Department for terrorist threats or incidents.

The Department of Health is the lead Department for dealing with infectious diseases in England. It is assisted in this role by the Public Health Laboratory Service. Assessment of the health dimensions and the operational responses needed to deal with the threat of biological warfare is undertaken by the Department of Health in concert with other Government Departments and agencies involved in the wider threat assessments.

Body Piercing

Ms Munn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has considered on the risks of body piercing to people with congenital heart disease. [92519]

Ms Blears: We are not aware of any research into the risks of body piercing for individuals with congenital heart disease, although there have been a small number of published case reports from abroad of endocarditis in individuals with congenital heart disease following skin piercing.

There has been a small study in the United States, which investigated ear piercing and tattooing in patients with congenital heart disease[1]. In this study, no patients experienced serious infections following ear-piercing or tattooing, although about a quarter of patients experienced minor local skin infections following ear piercing.

[1] Cetta F., Graham L. C., Lichtenberg R. C., Warnes C. A. Piercing and tattooing in patients with congenital heart disease: patient and physician perspectives. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 1999: 24: 160–162.

Buckinghamshire Hospitals NHS Trust

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to ensure a smooth handover from the boards and management of the Stoke Mandeville Hospital NHS Trust and the South Buckinghamshire NHS Trust to the new Buckinghamshire Hospitals NHS Trust from 1 April; [92806]

(2) when he will announce the names of *(a)* the Chief Executive designate and *(b)* the Directors-designate of the Buckinghamshire Hospitals NHS Trust. [92807]

Ms Blears *[holding answers 23 January 2003]*: A comprehensive project plan for the development of the new Buckinghamshire Hospitals National Health Service Trust and for the transfer of the functions and responsibilities of the Stoke Mandeville Hospital NHS Trust and South Buckinghamshire NHS Trust has been in place for some time.

The plan covers, among many other things, the appointment of the chair and chief executive, the transfer arrangements for staff and legal aspects of property and finance.

Interviews will take place shortly for the post of chief executive and an announcement will be made as soon as possible. The appointment of executive directors will follow this.

Cancelled Operations

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients whose operation was cancelled on the day of surgery did not receive a new binding date for an operation within 28 days in each quarter of the last year; and what arrangements were put in place to provide these patients with treatment at a time and hospital of their choosing. [85302]

Mr. Hutton: The NHS Plan cancelled operations guarantee came into force on 1 April 2002. Under the NHS Plan, if a patient's operation is cancelled by the hospital on the day of surgery for non-clinical reasons, the hospital will have to offer another binding date within a maximum of the next 28 days or fund the patient's treatment at the time and hospital of the patient's choice.

Data on the number of operations cancelled on the day of surgery and on the number of patients who were still waiting for treatment after 28 days of their original cancelled operation date were collected from Quarter 1, 2002–03. The latest available for Quarter 2, 2002–03 have been placed in the Library and are available at national health service trust level on a quarterly basis at http://www.doh.gov.uk/hospitalactivity/data requests/cancelled operations.htm

NHS trusts are performance managed on their performance against the NHS Plan guarantee by strategic health authorities. In doing this StHA will ensure that they have mechanisms in place which will provide them with the necessary evidence that patients whose operations have been cancelled on the day of surgery for non-clinical reasons, subsequently receive treatment at the time and hospital of their choosing, in line with the guarantee.

Child Protection

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his policy is on profiling of individuals in assessing the basis of unsubstantiated allegations in relation to child protection. [92290]

Jacqui Smith: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has no policy on the profiling of individuals in assessing the basis of unsubstantiated allegations of child abuse.

Not all allegations of child abuse are substantiated. However, it is essential that all reports of child welfare concerns, whether made by professionals or the general public, are taken seriously and responded to promptly. The response should take into account any concerns that may previously have been received and focus on assessing the needs of the referred child.

Children's Services (Greater Manchester)

Mr. Graham Stringer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress he has made in establishing a supervisory board for children's services within Greater Manchester for primary, secondary and tertiary paediatric services. [[illegible]4571]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 2 December 2002]:* I am aware that senior representatives of the strategic health authority and the Central Manchester and Manchester Children's University Hospitals NHS Trust recently met local hon. Members to inform them of progress.

I understand that the Greater Manchester strategic health authority recently circulated proposals to establish a children's network supervisory board. Comments have been requested by the end of January.

Cleft Lip and Palate Services

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to reply to the letters of the Chairman of East Dorset Community Health Council of 27 September and 29 October, regarding cleft lip and palate services. [85474]

Ms Blears: This concerns an appeal to the Secretary of State by East Dorset Community Health Council regarding recommendations for the reconfiguration of the cleft lip and palate service. I will be writing to Mr. McCarthy as the Chair of the CHC, shortly.

Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will define the term "traditionally marginalised groups" used in his Department's press release of 31 December 2002, New Era in Patient and Public Involvement in NHS. [92595]

Mr. Lammy: The Department does not hold a definitive list of marginalised groups as it is for local health communities to determine which are the relevant groups in their area who do not generally have an opportunity to be involved in decisions about matters affecting their health.

Paragraph 13.2 of the NHS Plan talks about

> "tackling disadvantage in all its forms—poverty, lack of educational attainment, unemployment, discrimination and social exclusion"

and recognises that inequity in access to services is not restricted to social class and geography and that people with disabilities and minority ethnic communities have specific needs.

Community Care

Tony Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the proposed fee increases from the Department of Health to be administered by local authorities for the provision of community care. [92872]

Jacqui Smith: The Department does not set or recommend the rates at which councils contract with residential care and nursing homes. The detail of contracting arrangements between councils and independent sector providers of care is a matter for local decision.

The Government are providing records levels of funding for social services. Resources have increased nationally by 20 per cent. in real terms between 1996–97 and 2002–03, an average real terms increase of 3 per cent. per annum.

In addition, as announced on 17 April, we are increasing the resources for personal social services by an annual average of 6 per cent. in real terms from 2003–04 to 2005–06. Local councils will be able to use the extra resources to stabilise the care home market and provide more care home places.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what definitions he uses of *(a)* continuing care and *(b)* nursing care in a person's own home; and if he will make a statement. [92989]

Jacqui Smith: Guidance to the national health service and councils on eligibility for continuing care is contained in HSC 2001/015: LAC (2001) 18, published in June 2001.

The guidance makes it clear that fully funded NHS continuing health care can be provided in a person's own home, if the individual meets the criteria and it is possible to provide the care they need in their own home. In addition, the NHS routinely provides or arranges care from registered nurses and other staff in people's own homes.

Community Health Councils

Mr. John Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the future of community health councils. [93963]

Mr. Lammy: An announcement on the future of community health councils will be made shortly.

Delayed Discharge

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the accuracy of the delayed discharge figures; and what audit mechanisms are in place to ensure the figures are accurately collected and collated. [92992]

Jacqui Smith: The NHS Plan set out the Government's commitment to reduce substantially the number of people waiting to be discharged from hospital when they are fit to do so. Good progress has been made so far, with over 1,500 fewer people waiting to be discharged on any one day between September 2001 and September 2002. The Department is concerned to ensure that all data are as accurate as possible. Since April 2002, primary care trusts are responsible for submitting quarterly data to the Department. The Department can, and does, query data via the relevant strategic health authority on a regular basis.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many delayed discharge patients there were in hospital in *(a)* the latest month for which figures are available and *(b)* May 2002, broken down by local authority area in England. [89694]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answers 14 January 2002]:* The information requested is not available in the form requested. Delayed discharge data for England from September 2001 to September 2002 are shown in the table. These data are not available by council areas. Delayed discharges are a joint health and social services indicator and data are submitted to the Department on the basis of national health service organisations, the data having been agreed with their social services partners.

Since April 2002, this has been broken down by primary care trust areas and prior to that; by health authority. The detailed breakdowns by health authority and primary care trust have been placed in the Library.

England: Numbers of delayed discharges of patients of all ages by primary care trust[1]

	Delayed discharges
September 2002	5,385
June 2002	5,489
March 2002	5,473
December 2001	6,419
September 2001	7,065

[1] March 2002, December 2001 and September 2001 figures were collected by health authorities

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the recent levels of delayed discharges in *(a)* North Yorkshire and *(b)* England. [93015]

Jacqui Smith: There has been a continued reduction in delayed discharges in England, the latest figures for September 2002 show 5,385 delays compared to 7,065 in September 2001. Delayed discharges are a joint health and social services indicator and data are submitted to the Department on the basis of national health service organisations, the data having been agreed with their social services partners. Since April 2002, this has been broken down by primary care trust (PCT). The detailed breakdowns by PCT for June 2002 and September 2002 have been placed in the Library.

Dentists (Fareham)

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the dental practices that accept NHS patients in Fareham. [93201]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* There are five dental practices with addresses in Fareham who have national health service patients on their books. They are listed as follows:

(i) 16 Park lane
Fareham
PO16 7JX

(ii) 4 Grove Road
Fareham
PO16 0NX

(iii) 8 Kings Road
Fareham
PO16 0NX

(iv) 98 Highlands Road
Fareham
PO15 6JF

(v) 12 South Street
Titchfield
Fareham
PO14 4DJ

Performance Report

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when his Department's autumn performance report for 2002 will be published. [93153]

Mr. Lammy: In December 2002, the Department published the Chief Executive's Report to the National Health Service, setting out progress during 2001–02 and for the first six months of the year.

This report sets out clearly how the increased resources within the NHS are being used to improve performance by providing more care for patients, improving quality and providing investment for the future.

Doctor: Patient Ratios

John Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he is taking to improve doctor-patient ratios within Havering Primary Care Trust; and if he will make a statement. [85078]

Mr. Hutton: We are committed to expanding the primary care workforce both through national and local initiatives. The London Workforce Development Confederation has introduced a number of specific programmes to expand the general practitioner workforce in London by 225 GPs. These include:

> The London Deanery's successful expansion of the number of training places in GP practices for GP registrars. This year there are an additional 51 training places for GPs in London. Primary care trusts will be able to build on this success by setting up new and more flexible contracts for newly qualified GPs.
>
> More flexible career opportunities, particularly those designed to retain GPs close to retirement age, are also being put into place by London PCTs including a Flexible Career Scheme which will commence shortly, designed to attract GPs back into practice for part-time working.

Havering PCT is supporting nine applications for personal medical service status which includes seven salaried GP posts. The PCT is also working to make Havering a more attractive proposition for GPs to retain and further recruit doctors in the area. Some of the areas being progressed are the development of specialist GPs and a means of retaining registrars after they qualify. Developing the primary care infrastructure is also a key element of the PCT's strategy and its involvement in the local improvement finance trust process should further enhance its ability to retain GPs by making improved facilities available to them.

Free Eye Tests (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many free eye tests to pensioners there were in each year since 1997 in *(a)* Shropshire and *(b)* Shrewsbury and Atcham. [93020]

Mr. Lammy: The table shows the number of national health service sight tests paid for in Shropshire health authority (HA) for 1997–98 to 2001–02. Figures for the number of sight tests by constituency and age are not collected centrally, the nearest eligibility category for pensioners is those aged 60 and over.

Eligibility to NHS sight tests was extended to those aged 60 and over from 1 April 1999. There was an increase of 24,660 sight tests between 1998–99 and 1999–2000. It is fair to assume that the vast majority of this increase was due to newly eligible people aged 60 or over obtaining NHS sight tests.

General Ophthalmic Services: Number of sight tests paid for in Shropshire HA for the years 1997–98 to 2001–02

Year	*Total number of sight tests*	*Total number of sight tests for aged 60 and over*
1997–98	61,460	—
1998–99	64,350	—
1999–2000	89,010	33,460
2000–01	91,160	38,230
2001–02	94,880	24,210

Frictional Discharge

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his Answer of 5 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 965W, on frictional discharge, what percentage and how many people classify as minimal numbers of delayed transfers in England. [92165]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* As Government investment and the Community Care (Delayed Discharges, etc) Bill takes full effect, nobody should need to remain in hospital unnecessarily when they are fit to be discharged.

GP Recruitment

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much the recruitment of general practitioners has changed in *(a)* Shropshire and *(b)* the UK, in the last five years. [84493]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 2 December 2002]:* Information relating to general practitioner recruitment in the Shropshire health authority area over the last five years is shown in the table. We do not collect this information on a UK basis.

Unrestricted principals and equivalents (UPEs)[1]: Numbers from annual census 1996–2002—Shropshire health authority

Year	*Numbers (headcount)*
1996	239
1997	239
1998	241
1999	250
2000	243
2001	243
2002	245

[1] UPEs include GMS unrestricted principals, PMS contracted GPs and PMS salaried GPs.

UPEs: joiners and leavers in Shropshire HA between 1996–97 and 2001–02

	Joiners	*Of which: New joiners*	*Re-joiners*
October 1996-October 1997	14	10	4
October 1997-October 1998	9	9	0
October 1998-October 1999	9	5	4
October 1999-October 2000	8	8	0
September 2000-September 2001	10	8	2
September 2001-March 2002[1]	8	7	1

[1] This relates to a six month comparison and may not show seasonal variations.

Notes:

Numbers of UPEs as at 1 October 1996 to 1999, 30 September 2000–01 and 31 March 2002.

Other rows relate to changes between successive censuses.

Source:

Department of Health General and Personal Medical Services Statistics

Mr. Owen Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many trainee GPs failed to complete their training in each year since 1977. [84494]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 2 December 2002]:* Summative assessment of general practice registrars was introduced throughout the United Kingdom in 1996. A review of the five year period to 30 September 2001 shows that 7,643 candidates undertook the test with 7,370 being successful, and 273, 3.6 per cent, unsuccessful: A breakdown of this is set out in the following table. However, this does not include those doctors undertaking GP training who may have dropped out prior to being summatively assessed for which no figures are held.

	Total GPRs	*Failed to complete*	*Percentage*
September 1996-August 1997	1,218	36	3.00
September 1997-August 1998	1,469	53	3.60
September 1998- August 1999	1,607	64	4.00
September 1999-August 2000	1,688	67	4.00
September 2000-August 2001	1,661	53	3.20
	7,643	273	3.6

A recent investigation showed that out of the 273 unsuccessful GP registrars

183 have now successfully completed the summative assessment process 67 per cent. after a further period of training.

eight are still in training 3 per cent.

82 did not complete their training, however these doctors may return to GP registrar training at a later date 30 per cent.

There are no centrally held figures in respect of doctors completing or not completing GP training prior to 1996.

Health Protection Agency

Mrs. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions his Department has held with representatives from the Public Health Laboratory Service in relation to the creation of a Health Protection Agency. [84250]

Ms Blears: The Public Health Laboratory Service board and management have been closely involved at each stage of the process and are represented on the steering group, the project group and all of the working groups associated with creating the Health Protection Agency and transferring to the national health service those laboratories that are to be transferred in preparation for its creation.

In addition, the staff representative organisations have been involved in regular trade union liaison group meetings which were established at the outset to oversee the implementation of the HPA. I met with staff side representatives on 13 January 2003 to review progress.

Health Workers

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the freedom to work provisions in the Treaty of Rome apply to all health workers. [93634]

Mr. Hutton: The Treaty confers the right of freedom of movement for workers, without specifying the kind of work done.

Healthcare Acquired Infection

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what work Strategic Health Authorities are undertaking to assess healthcare acquired infection data from local trusts; and if he will make a statement. [91466]

Ms Blears: The Commission for Health Improvement has recently announced two performance indicators for acute and specialist trusts for 2003, which relate to healthcare associated infections.

One performance indicator concerns infection control procedures and the other is an improvement score for methicillin resistant Staphylococcus aureus bacteraemia. Both indicators are based on healthcare associated infection data provided by acute national health service hospital trusts. Strategic health authorities will be using these indicators to manage the performance of their trusts in the future.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what monitoring his Department has undertaken on the availability of sufficient hand basins for effective infection control procedures in NHS hospitals. [91126]

Ms Blears: The design of new facilities is monitored by NHS Estates via the business case approvals process to ensure that proposals conform to design guidance issued by NHS Estates. This includes recommendations on the number of wash-hand basins for specific situations.

Trust chief executives are responsible for ensuring that there are effective arrangements in place for infection control. Monitoring of facilities for infection control, including provision of wash-hand basins within existing buildings, is undertaken by their infection control team.

Hospital Shift Patterns

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact of shift patterns of working in acute hospitals on *(a)* continuity of patient care and *(b)* overall quality of patient care. [92108]

Mr. Hutton: The majority of health professionals have always worked on shift patterns. The main exception has been the provision of resident out of hours medical cover, which has been largely provided by doctors in training. The most common arrangement is for these doctors to work a 'resident on call' where the doctor is resident on hospital premises for the full 24 hour period but only deemed to be working when actually called.

With the extension of the European Working Time Directive (EWTD) to doctors in training from August 2004, current resident on call working patterns are unlikely to represent the best use of available resources. Doctors providing out of hours cover will generally have to either move on to some form of shift pattern or provide cover through non-resident on call working.

The Department recognises the need to introduce these changes to working patterns in a way that maintains or improves the continuity and quality of patient care. To this end guidance on the implementation of EWTD for Doctors in Training has been issued (HSC 2003–001) and the Department is funding a programme of pilot projects to test a range of solutions. These pilots will be rigorously evaluated to ensure that standards of patient care have been maintained or improved. The key to continuity of care is the implementation of effective shift hand-over arrangements and good record keeping and this will also be evaluated in the pilot programme.

Hyperactivity

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what training is provided within the health and social services system on attention deficit hyperactivity for workers with personal contact with sufferers. [93163]

Jacqui Smith: In recent years, the Department has supported a number of initiatives taken by professional bodies and other agencies to raise awareness of attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and to facilitate accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment. These include an evidence-based briefing for clinicians on the use of stimulant medication (1999) and fact-sheets for parents, teachers and young people on attention deficit problems and hyperactivity, both produced by the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

We have also collaborated with the Department for Education and Skills in issuing guidance for teachers on promoting children's mental health, including attention deficit/hyperactivity, within early years and school settings, in 2001. The Department has also grant-aided the ADHD UK Alliance, an organisation which helps to co-ordinate voluntary sector activity and development work in this field.

In general the content of professional training is a matter for the relevant professional bodies. However the Department's requirements for social work training from September 2003 will include elements covering child development and mental health and communication skills with children.

Irwell Mill, Bacup

Janet Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost is of the proposed development by the Burnley, Pendle and Rossendale primary care trust on the site of Irwell Mill, Rochdale Road, Bacup; who will be responsible for the demolition and at what cost; and what payments in connection with the purchase of this site will be made to Stylegleam Ltd. [91935]

Jacqui Smith: The Burnley, Pendle and Rossendale primary care trust will be the owners of Irwell Mill in the very near future. The site was purchased at an auction, at an overall purchase price of £36,500. £14,500 was paid to the part owners, who are not Stylegleam Ltd., but may be associated with them. The purchases have been agreed by the district valuer.

Most of the mill will be demolished, with the Burnley borough council acting as the agents. The Regional Development Agency is funding the demolition work as part of its contribution to the regeneration of the town. A grant of £292,880 has been made available for this purpose.

From September 2003, the site will be transferred into a new public/private company. The primary care trust will have to repay any betterment value to the Regional Development Agency. This is likely to be in the region of £60,000. Any payments to the Regional Development Agency will be paid out of enabling monies, which have been made available to the East Lancashire local investment finance trust project. Thus, the cost of the acquisition and demolition to the primary care trust will be nil.

Once the site has been transferred into the public/private company, the latter will construct a new health centre on the site, estimated at £4.087 million including equipment, to provide health care facilities to national standards.

Kava-kava

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what health risks have led to the decision to ban Kava-kava; and how many incidences of health-related problems arising from such risks there have been in each of the past 10 years; [91484]

(2) how many deaths in the past 10 years in the UK have been attributed to consumption of Kava-kava; [91482]

(3) how many medical products containing Kava-kava are licensed; [91481]

(4) how the Medicines Control Agency determines what is an acceptable level of risk for the voluntary consumption of a medical product; [91470]

(5) what recent discussions he has had with other countries about safety issues related to Kava-kava; and how many have also banned products containing Kava-kava. [91483]

Ms Blears: In the United Kingdom, there are three licensed products containing the herbal ingredient Kava-kava (Piper methysticum). The majority of medicinal products containing Kava-kava sold in the UK are unlicensed and are exempt from licensing under section 12 of the Medicines Act 1968.

Evidence has emerged that consumption of medicinal products containing Kava-kava may be associated with liver toxicity in rare cases. To date, 70 cases of liver damage, suspected to be associated with the consumption of Kava-kava, have been reported worldwide. The case reports originate from Switzerland, Germany, Australia, Canada, France, the United States and four from the UK.

The severity of the liver damage suffered varies widely. Suspected adverse reactions include abnormal liver enzyme activity, jaundice, hepatitis and liver failure. In seven cases the patients suffered irreversible liver failure and received liver transplants. Four patients have died, including two of the patients who received liver transplants. None of the UK cases were associated with a fatal outcome.

The following table provides a breakdown of the number of cases of suspected liver damage associated with Kava-kava submitted to regulatory authorities in the last 10 years.

Year reaction reported	Number of cases of hepatotoxicity
1992	1
1993	1
1994	2
1995	0
1996	0
1997	1
1998	4
1999	4
2000	10
2001	22
2002	11

In addition the Medicines Control Agency (MCA) received 13 case reports of hepatotoxicity associated with Kava-kava in 2002 from regulatory authorities world wide, where the date of the adverse reaction or received date were not specified.

A report of a suspected adverse reaction does not necessarily mean that it was caused by the herbal medicine. The number of reports received cannot be used as a basis for determining the incidence of a reaction as neither the total number of reactions occurring, nor the number of patients using the herbal medicine is known. Herbal medicines are often supplied without prescription and are taken without advice from doctors or pharmacists. It is generally recognised that the reporting rate for medicines supplied over the counter is lower than that of suspected adverse reactions associated with prescription medicines. Therefore, data obtained on suspected adverse reactions associated with herbal medicines through the Yellow Card Scheme cannot be directly compared to reporting for licensed pharmaceutical medicines.

The acceptable level of risk for a medicine will depend on the seriousness of the disease it is being used to treat and its efficacy in treating that disease as well as the availability of alternatives. A risk of an adverse effect that would be acceptable for a life saving treatment such as an anti-cancer medicine would not necessarily be acceptable in a treatment for a non-serious or self-limiting condition.

Each safety issue is considered on a case by case basis. In the case of Kava-kava the limited evidence of efficacy, the unpredictable and serious nature of the adverse reactions, the difficulty in regularly monitoring liver function without medical supervision and the lack of regulatory powers to require label warnings for unlicensed medicines were taken in to account.

The safety of Kava-kava has been discussed with European member states via the pharmacovigilance working party of the Committee for Proprietary Medicinal Products. The MCA has in addition communicated with the regulatory authorities of the USA, Australia and Canada. Other European member states have revoked or suspended the licences and Australia and Canada have initiated recalls of all products containing Kava-kava.

King Edward VII Hospital, Midhurst

Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what *(a)* volume and *(b)* type of NHS work was undertaken by King Edward VII Hospital, Midhurst, in 2002–03; and if he will make a statement on its future. [92039]

Ms Blears: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Ministers and departmental officials have received a number of representations regarding the situation at the hospital. Discussions with the liquidator are currently ongoing. In view of that, it would not be appropriate for Ministers to comment further, although these discussions will of course focus on the continuing provision of appropriate care for national health service patients.

Maintenance Work

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost was of outstanding maintenance work necessary to achieve estate code condition B in the NHS in 2001–02, broken down into *(a)* fire safety and *(b)* health and safety costs in (i) England and (ii) each NHS region. [92790]

Mr. Lammy: The cost of outstanding repair and maintenance work necessary to achieve estate code condition B standards in England is commonly termed backlog maintenance costs and are generally broken down into fire safety, health and safety and physical condition elements.

For the year 2001–02 these costs, broken down by the former eight regions and current four Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) regions are shown in the tables.

By former region 2001–02

£000

Region	*Cost to achieve Physical Condition B*	*Cost to achieve Statutory Health and Safety Compliance Standard B*	*Cost to achieve Fire Safety Compliance Standard B*	*Total backlog*
Eastern	269,018	17,779	21,607	308,404
London	687,774	97,676	62,937	848,387
North West	311,394	38,105	23,130	372,629
Northern and Yorkshire	408,689	27,279	22,540	458,507
South East	375,483	56,954	25,113	457,551
South West	212,008	26,285	10,270	248,564
Trent	199,643	43,496	51,315	294,454
West Midlands	401,518	33,834	23,632	458,983
Total for England	2,865,526	341,409	240,544	3,447,479

By DHSC region 2001–02

£000

DHSC region	*Cost to achieve Physical Condition B*	*Cost to achieve Statutory Health and Safety Compliance Standard B*	*Cost to achieve Fire Safety Compliance Standard B*	*Total backlog*
London	687,774	97,676	62,937	848,387
Midlands and Eastern	857,720	90,084	90,311	1,038,115
North	796,643	72,759	53,144	922,547
South	523,388	80,890	34,151	638,429
Total for England	2,865,526	341,409	240,544	3,447,479

National targets on backlog maintenance set in the NHS Plan are incorporated into the Department of Health priority and planning framework document 2003–06.

Meat (Safety)

Tony Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Food Standards Agency will issue advice on the safety of eating meat from animals which have been vaccinated against foot and mouth. [92881]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* I am advised by the Food Standards Agency that the agency issued advice in April 2001 that eating meat, milk or other produce from animals that have been treated with authorised foot and mouth disease vaccines would not have any implications for food safety.

Medical Staff

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what right he will have to veto European proposals to introduce the 16 week provision relating to medical staff in the United Kingdom. [93633]

Mr. Hutton: The proposed provision forms part of a draft directive, which is the subject of continuing negotiation. In publishing it, the European Commission stated that its adoption would be by qualified majority insofar as its implementation did not require changes in the law of any member state governing the professions regarding training and conditions of access by natural persons. If that presumption failed, adoption would require unanimity.

Mental Health Treatment

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance has been issued to primary care trusts for the prescription of Aricept, Exelon and Reminyl for patients with mental health problems. [92527]

Jacqui Smith: In January 2001 the National Institute for Clinical Excellence issued guidance to the national health service on the use of Aricept (donepezil), Exelon (rivastigmine) and Reminyl (galantamine) for the treatment of mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many primary care trusts prescribe *(a)* Aricept, *(b)* Exelon and *(c)* Reminyl. [92528]

Jacqui Smith: Information about the number of primary care trusts in England where these drugs are prescribed is shown in the table.

Number of primary care trusts where dementia drugs were prescribed in GP practices and were dispensed in the community: England

	April-November 2002	
	Number	*Percentage*
Aricept (Donepezil Hydrochloride)	304	100
Reminyl (Galantamine)	273	90
Exelon (Rivastigmine)	285	94

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the current cost to the NHS is of prescribing *(a)* Aricept, *(b)* Exelon and *(c)* Reminyl. [92533]

Jacqui Smith: Information showing the net ingredient cost of prescribing *(a)* Aricept, *(b)* Exelon and *(c)* Reminyl in England is shown in the table.

Net ingredient cost (£000) of dementia drugs dispensed in the community in England

	Prescribed in GP practices[1]	*Prescribed in hospitals*[2]	*Total NIC*[3]	*Percentage of NIC of drugs dispensed in the community which were prescribed in hospitals*
Aricept (Donepezil Hydrochloride)				
October-December 2001	1,818.3	1,137.3	2,956.0	38
January-March 2002	2,046.7	1,170.8	3,217.6	36
April-June 2002	2,476.7	1,263.3	3,740.0	34
July-September 2002	2,865.0	1,405.6	4,271.7	33
12 months ending September 2002	9,206.8	4,977.0	14,185.3	35
Reminyl (Galantamine)				
October-December 2001	185.5	196.8	382.5	51
January-March 2002	240.6	215.8	456.4	47
April-June 2002	327.3	242.5	570.1	43
July-September 2002	410.3	263.5	673.9	39
12 months ending September 2002	1,163.7	918.6	2,083.0	44
Exelon (Rivastigmine)				
October-December 2001	264.7	126.8	391.4	32
January-March 2002	287.5	131.0	418.5	31
April-June 2002	325.7	138.5	464.0	30
July-September 2002	362.9	154.8	517.7	30
12 months ending September 2002	1,240.8	551.1	1,791.6	31

[1] Prescribed in GP practices in England, and dispensed in the community (this can include prescriptions written in England dispensed outside England).

[2] Prescribed in hospitals, and dispensed in the community in England (Also included are prescription written in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man but dispensed in England).

[3] NIC of all prescription items dispensed in the community in England.

Notes:

Total items may not necessarily equal the sum of 1 and 2, because of the slight difference in geographical cover.

Information about drugs prescribed and dispensed in hospitals is not available.

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients are currently prescribed *(a)* Aricept, *(b)* Exelon and *(c)* Reminyl on the NHS. [92550]

Jacqui Smith: We do not hold information in the form requested. However, information on the number of prescriptions for dementia drugs dispensed in the community in England is shown in the table.

Number of items (thousand) of dementia drugs dispensed in the community in England

	Prescribed in GP practices[1]	*Prescribed in hospitals*[2]	*Total items*[3]	*Percentage of items dispensed in the community which were prescribed in hospitals*
Aricept (Donepezil Hydrochloride)				
October-December 2001	22.2	8.2	30.5	27
January-March 2002	25.0	8.4	33.4	25
April-June 2002	30.2	9.3	39.4	24
July-September 2002	35.2	9.9	45.2	22
12 months ending September 2002	112.6	35.8	148.4	24
Reminyl (Galantamine)				
October-December 2001	2.9	2.0	4.8	41
January-March 2002	3.7	1.8	5.6	33
April-June 2002	4.9	2.2	7.2	31
July-September 2002	6.2	2.3	8.5	27
12 months ending September 2002	17.7	8.3	26.1	32
Exelon (Rivastigmine)				
October-December 2001	4.4	1.8	5.9	29
January-March 2002	4.8	1.8	6.3	27
April-June 2002	5.5	1.7	7.1	24
July-September 2002	6.2	1.8	7.9	23
12 months ending September 2002	20.9	7.1	27.3	25

[1] Prescribed in GP practices in England, and dispensed in the community (this can include prescriptions written in England dispensed outside England).

[2] Prescribed in hospitals, and dispensed in the community in England (Also included are prescription written in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man but dispensed in England).

[3] All prescription items dispensed in the community in England.

Notes:

Total items may not necessarily equal the sum of 1 and 2, because of the slight difference in geographical cover.

Information about drugs prescribed and dispensed in hospitals is not available.

Mental Health Wards

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many beds were available in secure mental health wards in each of the last five years. [93305]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is shown in the tables. The long-term secure bed numbers are included in these figures, but not separately identified in routine data collection.

Year	*Number of high secure beds*
1997	1,374
1998	1,366
1999	1,320
2000	1,290
2001	1,263
2002	1,244

	Secure beds	
Year	*Medium*	*Other*
1997–98	1,493	986
1998–99	1,642	1,032
1999–2000	1,994	1,191
2000–01	2,231	1,353
2001–02	[1]—	[1]—

[1] Figures currently not available.

Note:

Bed numbers are calculated from health authority returns of occupied bed days and assuming a 95 per cent. occupancy rate.

Ministerial Engagements

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many engagements were undertaken outside London *(a)* by him or his predecessor and *(b)* by Ministers in his Department in January (i) 2000, (ii) 2001 and (iii) 2002. [87354]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answer 16 December 2002]:* In January 2000 my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, undertook no visits outside London and made one visit in January 2001 and one visit in January 2002.

Members of the ministerial team made a total of 11 visits in January 2000, 16 visits in January 2001 and six visits in 2002 to venues outside London.

NHS Dentistry (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many patients were registered with an NHS dentist in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire in each year since 1997; [93022]

(2) what the average waiting time for an appointment was for the dental access centre in Shrewsbury in each month since its inception; [93024]

(3) how many patients were waiting for treatment at the dental access centre in Shrewsbury in each month since it opened. [93025]

Mr. Lammy: The table shows the number of registrations in Shropshire health authority at 30 September in each of the years 1997 to 2002.

Registrations lapse if patients do not return to their dentists within 15 months. Registrations will exclude patients who have not been to their general dental service (CDS) dentist within the past 15 months and patients who receive dental treatment from other national health service dental services.

During the period 1997 to 2002, the registration numbers are affected by the change in the registration periods for adults and children. Also, the figures do not include patients attending the dental access centres which opened during the period and whose patients are not registered.

Patients wishing to register with a GDS dentist can obtain details of dentists accepting new patients by contacting NHS Direct.

Monthly waiting list information for the Shrewsbury dental access centre is not collected.

General Dental Service: Number of registrations in Shropshire Health Authority area at 30 September 1997 to 2002

At 30 September	*Number of patients registered*[1]
1997	217,700
1998	191,000
1999	187,000
2000	186,000
2001	179,800
2002	182,300

[1] The registration number for September 1997 is not comparable with the later figures because of the change in the registration periods.

NHS Posts (Salaries)

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will which NHS posts in Kent are paid a salary in excess of £100,000. [92085]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* For reasons of data protection I am unable to provide a list, but there were 34 employees, excluding board members, in national health service trusts in Kent who received remuneration in excess of £100,000 in 2001–02. The remuneration includes gross salaries and wages, allowances for expenses and monetary value of benefits in kind.

The Government are committed to fair pay for all NHS staff. It recognises that the NHS needs good managers. Consequently guidance on managerial pay increases has been issued to the NHS in each of the past five years. This has taken into account increases in pay for other NHS staff as well as other relevant factors such as recruitment and retention. Local NHS employers have been advised to interpret the guidance appropriately and be able to justify decisions.

NHS Staff Assaults

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many sick days were taken by NHS staff last year as a result of being assaulted by patients. [92601]

Mr. Hutton: Information on levels of sickness absence resulting from work-related injuries or violence at work is not collected centrally, but may be held at a local level by individual national health service employers.

NHS Trusts (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the budget overspend was in each year since 1997 in each Shropshire NHS trust. [93021]

Mr. Lammy: The information requested is shown in the table.

Underspends/overspends for Shropshire trusts: 1997–98 to 2001–02

	£000	*Cumulative*
Robert Jones & Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital NHS Trust		
1997–98	-3	-3
1998–99	3	0
1999–2000	0	0
2000–01	0	0
2001–02	9	9
Princess Royal Hospital NHS Trust		
1997–98	153	153
1998–99	30	183
1999–2000	-826	-643
2000–01	260	-383
2001–02	-545	-928
Royal Shrewsbury Hospitals NHS Trust		
1997–98	21	21
1998–99	24	45
1999–2000[1]	-646	-502
2000–01	607	105
2001–02	-494	-389

[1] For 1999–2000 the cumulative position was amended due to a technical adjustment *Note:*

A minus figure represents an overspend

NHS Trusts (Surrey)

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what allocation of strategic capital Surrey NHS trusts have received in the current financial year. [91467]

Ms Blears: Total strategic capital earmarked for Surrey trusts in 2002–03 was £8.8 million.

Of this, Ashford & St. Peters National Health Service Trust received £2.5 million, Surrey Oaklands NHS Trust £2 million and Surrey and Sussex Healthcare £4.3 million.

Nicotine Replacement Therapies

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his estimate is of the likely *(a)* fatal and *(b)* non-fatal side effects of Zyban if used for six months. [92605]

Ms Blears: Zyban (bupropion hydrochloride) was licensed in June 2000 as an aid to smoking cessation in combination with motivational support in nicotine-dependent patients. The maximum treatment course authorised in the United Kingdom is seven to nine weeks. Zyban should not be used for six months and therefore it is not possible to give an estimate of the likely fatal and non-fatal side effects of Zyban if used for this period of time.

Zyban is an effective aid to smoking cessation, and like all effective medicines is not without side effects. Since its launch in the United Kingdom, full guidance on prescribing and use, including possible side effects, have been present in the summary of product characteristics for health professionals and patient information leaflet for patients.

The side effects that are recognised to occur more commonly, ie, could happen to more than one in 100 people, in association with Zyban are non-serious including insomnia, urticaria, rash, headache, dizziness and nausea. Serious side effects do occur in association with Zyban, albeit rarely. These include seizures (fits or convulsions) which occur with an incidence of approximately 0.1 per cent., (one in 1,000) and hypertension and severe hypersensitivity reactions (which may occur in between one in 1,000 and one in 10,000 people taking Zyban). Of these, seizures and severe hypersensitivity reactions are potentially life threatening.

Nurses (Recruitment)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 25 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 136W, regarding ethical foreign nurse recruitment, how he plans to inform *(a)* NHS organisations, *(b)* overseas Governments, *(c)* overseas nurses and *(d)* other interested parties, of agencies that have been reported by the Workforce Development, Confederation for failure to adhere to the code of practice. [84772]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 2 December 2002]*: Where reported breaches of the code of practice are substantiated the agency will be removed from the list of agencies who are compliant with the code of practice that the Department of Health publicises.

Nursing and Residential Homes (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many places there were in *(a)* nursing and *(b)* residential homes for pensioners in each year since 1997 in (i) Shrewsbury and Atcham and (ii) Shropshire. [93085]

Jacqui Smith: Information on the number of places in nursing and residential homes in Shrewsbury and Atcham is not available.

Information on the number of places for adults aged 65 and over in Shropshire at 31 March each year from 1997 to 2001 is shown in the table. Data for 2002 are not yet available.

Residential and nursing care home places for older people[1] in Shropshire[2], 1997–2001

Number of places

		Residential care		
As at 31 March	*Nursing care*	*Shropshire including Telford and Wrekin*	*Telford and Wrekin*	*Shropshire excluding Telford and Wrekin*
1997	[3]—	2,200	[3]—	[3]—
1998	1,710	3,190	[3]—	[3]—
1999	1,710	2,590	460	2,130
2000	1,740	2,460	420	2,040
2001	1,640	2,440	460	1,970

[1] People aged 65 or more.

[2] Residential data refers to Shropshire County for 1997 and 1998. Data for 1999 onwards are presented separately and combined for Shropshire County Council and Telford and Wrekin Unitary Authority.

Nursing data refer to Shropshire Health Authority.

[3] Data not available.

Note:

Nursing care places includes beds in private hospitals and clinics.

Nutrition

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much he is planning to spend on the promotion of nutritional issues in the next 12 months and how much he spent in each of the last five years. [88181]

Ms Blears: The Department of Health's spending plans for 2003–04 for programmes that aim to improve nutrition, including provision and promotion, have not yet been finalised. The Department plans to have spent £130 million in 2002–03, and spent £106 million in 2001–02, £108 million in 2000–01, £114 million in 1999–2000, and £118 million in 1998–99. This comprises the Welfare Foods programme, which is the largest single element; contributions to the Five-a-day programme and the National School Fruit Scheme, the main costs of both of which are at present met by the New Opportunities Fund; the Food in Schools programme; grants to charities promoting nutrition; and support for infant feeding. In addition, initiatives to promote nutrition have been funded by health action zones, sure start, healthy living centres, and through general funding allocations to the national health service.

Osteoporosis (Hull and East Riding)

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of fracture patients aged over 50 received an osteoporosis risk assessment in *(a)* Hull and the East Riding and *(b)* England and Wales, in the last two quarters for which figures are available. [92909]

Jacqui Smith: Information about identifying those at risk of osteoporosis was included in the Department's "Strategy to prevent fractures caused by osteoporosis", which was issued to all health authorities in 1998. This was based on the Royal College of Physicians' clinical guidelines for strategies to prevent and treat osteoporosis.

Osteoporosis, a condition characterised by a reduction in bone mass and density increases the risk of fracture when an older person falls. The development and implementation of integrated falls services, incorporating the identification of osteoporosis are covered in the national service framework for older people. This, when set in the context of the national priorities guidance establishes it as a high priority for local action and delivery. It provides the basis for a service model that will deliver the improvements in prevention, care, treatment and rehabilitation of those at risk of injury from falls.

Information on the percentage of fracture patients over 50 years of age who have received an osteoporosis risk assessment is not available centrally.

Palliative Care

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many vacancies there are for palliative care consultants in *(a)* Lancashire, *(b)* the North West of England and *(c)* England. [93268]

Jacqui Smith: The figures for palliative care consultant vacancies are shown in the table.

	Three month vacancy rate (percentage)	*Three month vacancy (number)*	*Staff in post (whole time equivalent)*	*Staff in post (headcount)*
England	5.2	7	118	152
North West region	7.7	1	12	16
Former North East Lancashire Health Authority	[1]—	0	[2]—	[2]—
Former North West Lancashire Health Authority	[3]—	0	0	0
Former South Lancashire Health Authority	[3]—	0	0	0

[1] Figures where sum of staff in post vacancies is less than 10.

[2] Number is greater then 0 and less than five to prevent breaches of the data protection act.

[3] Figures where sum of staff in post and vacancies is zero.

Key notes:
1. Three month vacancy information is as at 31 March 2002.
2. Three month vacancies are vacancies which trusts are actively trying to fill, which had lasted for three months or more (whole time equivalents).
3. Three month vacancy rates are three month vacancies expressed as a percentage of three month vacancies plus staff in post.
4. Three month vacancy rates are calculated using staff in post Consultant Census, March 2002.
5. Staff in post data are from Mini Consultant Census, March 2002.
6. Staff in post data exclude staff employed by health authorities, as vacancy information was only collected from Trusts, PCTs and Special Health Authorities.
7. Medical and dental figures exclude staff in training.
8. Vacancy and staff in post numbers are rounded to the nearest whole number.
9. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.

Other notes:
10. Due to rounding, totals may not equal the sum of component part.
11. Due to the rounding, calculating the vacancy rates using the above data may not equal the actual vacancy rates.
12. HA figures are based on Trusts, and do not necessarily reflect the geographical.

Sources:
Vacancy numbers and rates:
1. Department of Health Vacancies Survey March 2002.
2. Department of Health Consultant Census March 2002.
Medical and Dental staff in post:
3. Department of Health Consultant Census March 2002.

PCTs

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what account is taken of the age profile of the population in fixing financial allocations to PCTs. [93115]

Mr. Hutton: We allocate funding to primary care trusts on the basis of the relative needs of their populations. A weighted capitation formula is used to determine each primary care trust's target share of available resources, which then inform allocations.

The age profile of the population is taken into account through age weightings within the formula. The age weightings reflect the variations in the need for healthcare arising from the age structure of the local population.

Performance Ratings

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review the criteria for the annual performance rating for hospitals. [82992]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 2 December 2002]:* The criteria for the 2002–03 performance ratings will be reviewed by the Commission for Health Improvement (CHI) which will be responsible for future publications of national health service performance ratings. CHI will recommend suitable sets of indicators to criteria agreed by Ministers, in line with priorities and targets that have been set by Government for the health service.

Prescription Charges

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the likely cost impact on prescribing conventional medicines following the changes to the range of traditional herbal medicines available in the UK. [91586]

Ms Blears: We anticipate that, if agreed, the proposed Directive on Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products would lead to a substantial expansion in the availability of herbal remedies made to assured standards of safety and quality and accompanied by systematic information about safe use of the product. This would extend the options available for members of the public wishing to take responsibility for their own health and in particular would help the public to make an informed choice of a remedy appropriate to their needs.

We also agree with the views expressed by many in the herbal sector that the proposed directive could lead to increased public confidence in traditional herbal remedies, which could lead to a beneficial effect on the market.

Given an extension of products made to assured standards, we would expect a reduction in the risk of members of the public requiring medical treatment, including prescribed orthodox medicines, as a direct result of taking poorly labelled unlicensed herbal remedies inappropriate to their needs or containing dangerous or illegal ingredients.

Overall, there are likely to be many factors affecting the usage of traditional herbal remedies and there will also continue to be many other factors affecting expenditure on prescribed orthodox medicines.

Primary Care

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what account was taken of inherited deficit in fixing future financial allocations for primary care trusts. [93408]

Mr. Hutton: We allocate resources to primary care trusts on the basis of the relative needs of their populations. A weighted capitation formula is used to determine each primary care trust's target share of available resources.

Public Services (Isle of Wight)

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his statement of 14 January, *Official Report*, column 662, on public services on the Isle of Wight, if he will make a further statement on issues related to the King Edward VII Hospital that the honourable Member for Tottenham was discussing when the House adjourned. [92295]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* My hon. Friend's speech would have concluded with the words:

"There remains no lack of commitment on behalf of the National Health Service, who will continue to work with all parties to ensure the continuity of care for NHS patients. The NHS remains prepared to continue with its current commitment to the hospital, which is in excess of £3.4 million per annum."

Runaway Children (Counselling)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will issue guidelines on standards of counselling for children who run away from home. [93112]

Jacqui Smith: The recent Department of Health guidance, "Children Missing from Care and from Home—a guide to good practice" (November 2002), provides recommendations that a young person or child who goes missing from home may be a child in need and, where appropriate, should have access to an initial assessment provided by the local authority.

This assessment must conform to the requirements of the framework for the assessment of children in need and their families. It should evaluate the risks if a young person were to go missing again and whether or not they and their families might be appropriately offered local support services—such as mediation or counselling.

Social Services, Battersea

Martin Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many adults resident in Battersea pay for non-residential social services; and how many will no longer have to pay after April 2003. [92131]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is not held centrally.

The Department issued statutory guidance to local councils for home care charges in November 2001. This guidance does not seek to change councils' power to charge or not, but seeks to ensure that, where councils do charge, this will be based on fairer well designed charging policies. An important principle of the guidance is that people whose incomes fall below basic levels of income support plus a 25 per cent. buffer will not be charged for their home care services.

Specialised Services Commissioning

Dr. Richard Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the progress primary care trusts in England are making with preparations for the commissioning of specialised services, with particular reference to those for *(a)* genito-urinary medicine and *(b)* haemophilia. [87725]

Ms Blears: Since April 2002 primary care trusts have been responsible for securing health services for their local populations, including the commissioning of specialised services. Regional specialised commissioning groups, whose former health authority members have now been replaced by PCT members, are continuing to exist during 2002–03, to ensure stability and continuity, as are existing consortia arrangements including previously agreed financial commitments and programmes of service reviews.

Responses to the ministerial review on specialised services are now being considered and guidance will be issued shortly on commissioning arrangements for 2003–04 onwards. Haemophilia and HIV treatment and care services will be covered by these arrangements. Genito-urinary medicine (GUM) services are not covered by regional specialist commissioning groups as they are not specialised services. However we have recently issued a Sexual Health and HIV Commissioning Toolkit to support those commissioning and providing sexual health and HIV services including GUM.

Stroke Care

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish a definition of what constitutes a specialist stroke unit; which acute hospitals *(a)* have such a unit and *(b)* are without such a unit; and which hospitals have plans approved and fully funded to open such a unit before the end of 2004. [91822]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 22 January 2003]:* The term "specialist stroke unit" is used to describe hospital based acute care and rehabilitation services designed specifically for people who have had a stroke. A range of elements are associated with such units, in particular a complex multidisciplinary process of assessment, early management and ongoing rehabilitation. We do not routinely collect information about acute hospitals with and without such units.

The Sentinel Audit, carried out by the clinical effectiveness and evaluation unit of the Royal College of Physicians and led by the intercollegiate working party for stroke does collect this information but it is anonymous and cannot be used to identify particular hospitals.

The priorities and planning framework for 2003–6 requires all hospitals who care for people who have had a stroke to have specialist stroke services, which include specialist hospital based services, by April 2004. From monitoring against the April 2002 milestones for the national service framework, we know that well over 80 per cent, of such hospitals plan to have a specialist stroke service in place by April 2004.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans his Department has to improve *(a)* diagnosis, *(b)* treatment and *(c)* post-discharge support for stroke victims suffering from depression; [93372]

(2) what plans are in place to enable health service staff to receive training enabling them to screen stroke victims for depression. [93373]

Jacqui Smith: In March 2001 the Department published the national service framework (NSF) for older people. This includes a standard on stroke. It sets out a comprehensive strategy to ensure fair, high quality integrated health and social care and reduce variations in services.

The priorities and planning framework for 2003–06 requires all hospitals who care for people who have had a stroke to have specialist stroke services, which include specialist hospital based services, by April 2004. From monitoring against the April 2002 milestones for the NSF, we know that well over 80 per cent. of such hospitals plan to have a specialist stroke service in place by April 2004.

By April this year every hospital which cares for older people with stroke will have established clinical audit systems to ensure delivery of the Royal College of Physician's clinical guidelines for stroke. These guidelines include the assessing and treatment of depression.

Statutory Instruments

Mrs. Calton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many Statutory Instruments subject to negative procedure made by his Department *(a)* came into force and *(b)* were considered by a delegated legislation committee in each of the last three sessions. [88031]

Mr. Lammy: The information requested is shown in the table.

Number of Statutory Instruments that came into force for each session		*Number of Statutory Instruments that were considered by a designated legislation committee*	
1999–2000	224	1999–2000	3
2000–01	274	2000–01	1
2001–02	503	2001–02	5

Surgical Equipment

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the total amount of surgical equipment disposed of each year; and what steps are being taken to recycle this equipment. [91465]

Ms Blears: The Department does not hold central figures on the amount of surgical equipment disposed of each year.

Each national health service trust decides how to dispose of its surgical equipment. The NHS takes into account health and safety issues, such as risk of cross-infection when recycling or reselling surgical equipment. These issues include the possibility of the transfer of infections such as vCJD, HIV, hepatitis and the need for ensuring that staff using the equipment are properly trained.

The risks associated with the re-selling of surgical instruments could well outweigh any potential cost savings.

The Medical Devices Agency has issued guidelines entitled "DB9801 Supplement 2 Guidance on the sale, transfer of ownership and disposal of used medical devices". The key points addressed in the guidance are:

Transfer of ownership (sale or donation).

Decommissioning.

Disposal as waste.

Transitional Care Beds

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many transitional care beds have been created in each of the last three years in *(a)* each trust and *(b)* England; [92991]

(2) if he will set out his definition of transitional care beds. [92990]

Jacqui Smith: In previous years, a number of health and social care partnerships have used additional winter funding to create extra capacity in so-called transitional care. Essentially, this is short-term, temporary or "step down" care where people are cared for before they move on to the setting where they will receive any long-term care they need. The Department does not collect data on the number of transitional care beds.

Waiting Times

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the latest available waiting times are to receive a first consultant appointment following referral by a GP in each Trust area. [88163]

Mr. Hutton: Information on the number of outpatients waiting, following a general practitioner written referral who have yet to be seen at national health service trusts in England as at 30 September 2002, has been placed in the Library.

DEFENCE

Paper Supplies

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence who are the suppliers of *(a)* paper and *(b)* paper products used by his Department. [91827]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence uses a wide range of paper and paper products. Our current principal suppliers are:

Astron Document Services Ltd
Astron Group Ltd
Banner Business Supplies Ltd
WHBradyCoLtd
Canon (UK) Ltd
Duni Ltd
Hutamaki (UK) Ltd
Kimberley Clark Ltd
NRG Group Ltd
Oce Ltd
Pitney Bowes Management Services Ltd
Plastico Ltd
Norprint Labelling Systems Ltd
SCA Packaging Ltd
Supplies Team Ltd
United Tools Distributors Ltd
Vemacare Ltd

Afghanistan (Armed Forces)

Mr. Wood: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the strength is of British armed forces in Afghanistan. [93146]

Mr. Ingram: The United Kingdom contributes around 300 United Kingdom Service personnel to the International Security Assistance Force in Kabul.

Aircraft Crash (Mehamn)

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the opening by the Norwegian Government of a new inquiry into allegations that an RAF Harrier was involved in the crash of a civilian Twin Otter aircraft near Mehamn in Norway in 1982. [93836]

Dr. Moonie: Earlier inquiries in 1982 and 1987 into this civil air accident were both satisfied that no fighter aircraft were in the vicinity at the time of the accident. We will offer every assistance to the new inquiry set up by the Norwegian Government if requested to do so. No terms of reference for the inquiry have yet been announced.

Animal Welfare

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many animal experiments, broken down by *(a)* recorded category and *(b)* species, were carried out at Porton Down in each year since 1997. [93290]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 27 January 2003]*: Dstl Porton Down submits annual returns to the Home Office detailing the number of procedures undertaken which involve the use of animals as defined in the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986.

For the years 1997 to 2001 the returns broken down by the recorded category of primary purpose, as defined by the Home Office are detailed in the table:

	Year				
Primary purpose	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Fundamental biological research	6,052	6,702	7,265	7,193	7,074
Applied studies—human medicine	4,763	4,199	4,147	4,641	5,674
Protection of man, animals or environment by toxicological or other safety or environmental evaluation[1]	0	0	9	0	108
Education	2	3	7	3	0
Training	2	0	0	2	0
Direct diagnosis	137	187	73	146	99
Total	10,956	11,091	11,501	11,985	12,955

[1] Excluding medical or veterinary products or appliances

In the years 1997 to 2001 the annual returns to the Home Office, broken down by species are detailed below:

Species	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Guinea pig	1,109	1,039	636	636	727
Ferret	0	30	0	0	0
Hamster	396	222	144	24	0
Mouse	8,569	7,477	10,144	10,856	11,944
Pig	85	96	84	106	23
Rabbit	31	48	10	19	23
Rat	717	1,999	410	350	125
Goat	2	22	0	0	0
Sheep	17	30	13	9	45
Primate	30	128	60	34	68
Total	10,956	11,091	11,501	11,985	12,955

The figures for 2002 are expected to be available in late February.

Annual Report

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much producing his Department's latest Annual Report cost; how many copies were printed; how many copies of it were sold at its cover price; to whom copies of the report have been provided free of charge; and how many copies were provided free of charge. [90879]

Dr. Moonie: Production of the Ministry of Defence's annual Performance Report 2001–02 (Cm 5661) drew on performance management information collected within the Department for a variety of purposes. Its production involved a large number of people across the Department, and it is not therefore possible to calculate the cost without incurring disproportionate expense.

Decisions on print runs are a commercial matter for The Stationery Office Limited (TSO), who handle publication of the Report and who meet the costs of printing and publication.

The Ministry of Defence bought 650 copies and an electronic version from TSO at a cost of £8,536.25. All of the MOD's copies are distributed free of charge, the majority within the Department, but about 175 to other Government Departments, other nations, Parliament or the Press. ISO inform me that, as at 21 January 2003, they had sold a further 234 copies. The Report is also available on the MOD website (www.mod.uk).

Armed Forces (Deployments)

Mr. Wood: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the 10 largest current deployments of British armed forces broken down by country. [93148]

Mr. Ingram: The 10 largest deployments of the British armed forces on operations or involved in military tasks outside the United Kingdom are currently in (largest first) Cyprus, Kosovo, Bosnia, Falkland Islands, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Gibraltar and Turkey. There are also sizeable numbers of British Army personnel permanently based in Germany and deployed on operations in Northern Ireland.

Asset Tracking

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what improvements have been made to *(a)* his Department's asset tracking capabilities since April 2002 and *(b)* its ability to measure the re-supply targets for orders placed by units. [92667]

Mr. Ingram: Since April 2002, the Department has taken a number of steps to improve both the ability to track consignments and to measure the performance of our re-supply systems including the procurement of an interim system which will improve our consignment tracking capability and ability to measure the achievement of delivery targets, and facilitate better operations with coalition partners. In the longer term we are developing a programme which will consolidate the information from individual systems through the Department and further improve consignment tracking within the supply chain.

Combat 95 Clothing

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the armed forces indicated when last questioned that they were satisfied with their Combat 95 clothing; what percentage of respondents this represents; and if he will make a statement. [85013]

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many soldiers indicated when last questioned that they were *(a)* satisfied and *(b)* unsatisfied with Combat 95 clothing; what percentage of respondents this represents; what comments were made about the clothing; and if he will make a statement. [92145]

Dr. Moonie: The numbers of Army personnel indicating in their answers to the Continuous Attitude Survey (CAS) published in August 2002 that they were either satisfied or dissatisfied with their Combat 95 clothing was as follows:

	Satisfied		*Neutral*		*Dissatisfied*	
	Number	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
Officers	252	70	57	15	53	15
Soldiers	674	46	267	18	531	36

The CAS contained no question asking for specific comments about Combat 95 clothing.

Computer Misuse

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many cases of computer misuse there were in his Department in each of the last five years, broken down by each category of misuse; and how many of those cases resulted in disciplinary action. [93050]

Dr. Moonie: In the last five years, the following instances of computer misuse were recorded across Defence:

	Unauthorised access to computer material		*Unauthorised access with intent to commit or facilitate commission of further offences*		*Unauthorised modification of computer material*	
	Incidents	*Disciplined*	*Incidents*	*Disciplined*	*Incidents*	*Disciplined*
1998	1	1	0	0	0	0
1999	4	2	5	0	3	0
2000	6	1	1	1	3	1
2001	10	0	0	0	2	1
2002	5	0	1	0	1	0

The totals for disciplinary action are only those recorded at the time of the incident; there may have been subsequent action, but such numbers are not readily available under current reporting arrangements, and such additional information could be provided only at disproportionate cost. A new system of reporting is being introduced with effect from 1 April 2003. This will enable detailed data to be retrieved more readily in future years.

Departmental Houses

David Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many of his Department's houses were sold last year in the United Kingdom. [93308]

Dr. Moonie: During the period January to December 2002, sales were completed for a total of 477 residential properties.

Departmental Running Costs

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the running costs of *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of its sponsored agencies were in (i) 1997 and (ii) the most recent year for which figures are available. [90715]

Dr. Moonie: The running costs of the Ministry of Defence as a whole were £14,770 million in 1997–98. This figure is the net expenditure included in the Appropriation Account for that year, excluding systems procurement expenditure in the Procurement Executive (now the Defence Procurement Agency). It is cash based and includes expenditure on military and civilian personnel costs, movements, stores and spares, research and works services.

In accordance with the Government Resource Accounting Act 2000, the Department's financial performance is now reported to Parliament in the Consolidated Departmental Resource Accounts.

The net operating cost of the MOD as a whole, as reported in the 2001–02 Departmental Resource Account, was £32,239 million. This figure is on a resource basis and includes military and civilian personnel costs, property management and equipment support costs, stock consumption, depreciation, impairment on fixed assets and cost of capital charges.

Information on agencies' expenditure is contained in the Annual Report and Accounts of each agency, copies of which have been placed in the Library of the House.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many full-time equivalent staff are employed in *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of the agencies it sponsors; and what the figures were for 1997. [90677]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him on 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 697W, by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office.

Desert Equipment

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what Desert Equipment has been issued; and to which elements of British armed forces. [91046]

Mr. Hoon: We have been taking a range of preparatory measures to ensure that our Armed Forces have all the equipment they need to do any tasks required of them.

I am withholding information on equipment numbers and the units to which they are being issued in accordance with Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Exercise Saif Sareea

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the *(a)* cost of recovery and *(b)* amount written off as a result of the return, inspection and recovery of tents issued to Oman during Exercise Saif Sareea II. [92666]

Mr. Ingram: The cost of recovering the tentage from Exercise Saif Sareea II was £512,000. Tent writes-off amounted to £103,000. The refurbishment of tentage cost some £1.9 million. Had we decided to leave the tentage in theatre and replace it, the cost would have been around £9.5 million. The decision to return and refurbish represented good value for money.

Fleet Air Arm

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the *(a)* target and *(b)* actual recruitment figures have been for Fleet Air Arm *(i)* pilots and (ii) other personnel in each of the past five years. [92963]

Dr. Moonie: The target and actual recruitment figures for the Fleet Air Arm broken down by pilot and other personnel is each of the past five years is as follows:

	1998–99		*1999–2000*		*2000–01*		*2001–02*		*2002–03*	
	Target	*Actual*	*Target*	*Actual*	*Target*	*Actual*	*Target*	*Actual*	*Target*	*Actual*
Officers										
Pilots	45	42	36	36	40	36	48	48	45	50
Observers	37	34	30	29	24	23	30	27	34	34
ATC	12	7	11	7	7	7	6	6	6	5
Ratings										
AEM	282	287	312	312	188	181	232	235	298	310
NA(AH)	43	42	39	37	11	11	38	39	51	55
NA(SE)	29	29	20	22	18	18	18	15	19	20
NA(Met)	5	5	5	5	6	6	14	14	9	9

ATC—Air Traffic Controllers
AEM—Air Engineering Mechanics
NA(AH)—Naval Airman (Aircraft Handler)
NA(SE)—Naval Airman (Survival Equipment)
NA(Met)—Naval Airman (Meteorological)

Notes:

1. Figures for 1997–98 not available at level of detail.
2. 1998–99 Fleet Air Arm officer Sub-branch figures estimated—total officer figure correct.
3. Artificers have not been included as they are not streamed until further into their training.

Ground Proximity Warning Systems

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many RAF aircraft have been fitted with ground proximity warning systems, *(a)* in total and *(b)* by aircraft type; and if he plans that the successor to Hawk trainers will be fitted with GPWS. [92507]

Mr. Ingram: The following table shows the number of RAF aircraft that were fitted with Ground Proximity Warning Systems as at 20 January:

Aircraft type	*Number of aircraft fitted ground protection warning system*
BAe 146 Mk 2	2
C-17	4
Harrier GR7	28
Hercules C130J	25
Hercules C130K	1
Jaguar GR3/3a	45
Jaguar T4	12
Tornado F3	24
Tornado GR4	130
Tristar	9
Total	268

The Advanced Jet Trainer for the Military Flying Training System, to which I assume the hon Member is referring, is intended to be fitted with a Ground Protection Warning System.

Health and Safety

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether his Department and its agencies have met the commitment arising from Action Point 13 of the June 2000 strategy statement on Revitalising Health and Safety, to summarise health and safety performance and plans in annual reports from the year 2000–01 onwards. [89514]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence has since 1999–2000 published an annual report by the Chief Environment and Safety Officer Ministry of Defence (CESO(MOD)) indicating the progress made on health and safety issues, including performance and forthcoming initiatives in the Department. This includes all agencies in the Ministry of Defence, as CESO(MOD) has a remit from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to monitor their activities. The report is reviewed by the Defence Environment and Safety Board (DESB), which I chair, and when accepted by the DESB, it is published on the world wide web for public information.

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which senior officials within his Department and its agencies take responsibility for health and safety at board or equivalent level; and where their names are publicised. [89515]

Dr. Moonie: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence is the responsible person for health and safety in the Ministry of Defence. This is identified in the Ministry of Defence Policy Statement (July 2000) for the Management of Safety and Environmental Protection. Within the policy, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State appoints the Second Permanent Under-Secretary as the Senior Manager for the Defence Council to be responsible for MOD policy, standards, and where appropriate, regulations. As Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, I am appointed to act as Green Minister and Chair the Defence Environment and Safety Board. This role provides direction, sets objectives and monitors the Department's performance on environment and safety matters

The tasks required to discharge the Secretary of State's responsibilities are delegated to members of the Defence Council and to Chief Executives of Defence Trading Fund Agencies. They are required to produce their own Organisation and Arrangements Statement for health and safety, linked to the Secretary of State policy. The separate statements identify a Management Board member from their organisation who has a health and safety role. The Heads of the organisation will have ultimate accountability for health and safety in their organisation. The names of the persons with specific health and safety duties are identified in each of the Organisational Statements produced. These persons are identified by post rather than an individual's name.

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what information he has collated on the application to his Department and its agencies of the checklist, circulated by letter by Sir Richard Mottram, referred to under Action Point 12 of the Revitalising Health and Safety strategy statement; and if he will make a statement. [89516]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence accepted the checklist circulated by Sir Richard Mottram under Action Point 12 of the initiative of Revitalising Health and Safety. The checklist was assessed against the Ministry of Defence safety management system, and as a result, policy changes were made and the objectives contained in the checklist were integrated into the MOD's Safety Environment and Fire Audit Methodology. The MOD had already adopted the Health and Safety Executive guidance, Successful Heath and Safety Management (HSG 65), into its safety management system and the impact of the checklist was minimal.

The checklist was circulated to each of the Service and Trading Fund Agency safety focus, to review their own arrangements.

Health Care

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many soldiers when last questioned indicated that they were *(a)* unsatisfied and *(b)* satisfied with (i) military health care, (ii) waiting lists, (iii) remedial treatment and (iv) health care for their family; what percentage of respondents this represents; and if he will make a statement. [92146]

Dr. Moonie: Continuous Attitude Surveys (CAS) do not ask how satisfied or dissatisfied soldiers are with Military Healthcare per se. Instead, more specific questions are asked eg relating to waiting lists, remedial treatment and healthcare for the family. Responses given in the CAS published in August 2002 were as follows.

	Satisfied		*Neutral*		*Dissatisfied*	
	Number	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
Waiting lists						
Officers	152	43	79	23	119	34
Soldiers	720	50	419	29	297	21
Remedial treatment						
Officers	162	47	71	21	112	32
Soldiers	703	50	433	31	273	19
Healthcare for family						
Officers	49	19	86	34	118	47
Soldiers	315	30	430	42	290	28

Housing Stock

David Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much investment was made by his Department in housing stock in 2002 in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* other countries, broken down by country. [93309]

Dr. Moonie: The investment made in housing stock has been interpreted to mean expenditure on service family accommodation upgrades and new build, falling within the capital departmental expenditure limit (DEL), which for financial year 2001–02 outturn was as follows:

Country	*Outturn for FY 2001–02 (£ million)*
United Kingdom	27.162
Germany	0.481
Gibraltar	1.497
Cyprus	10.771

The figure for the UK excludes some £54 million, which falls within the resource DEL, which was spent by the Defence Housing Executive on its upgrade programme. Details of expenditure in financial year 2002–03 are not currently available.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many empty homes his Department *(a)* had five years ago and *(b)* has now, by region; if he will establish an empty homes strategy within his Department; and if he will set a target for reduction in empty homes. [92916]

Dr. Moonie: On 1 April 1998 the Defence Housing Executive (DHE) had 13,235 vacant properties. By 1 April 2002 the numbers of voids had reduced to 8,852. A breakdown, by DHE region, follows:

	1998	*2002*
Eastern	2,920	1,762
Western	1,421	1,176
South East Central	1,492	1,312
South East North	2,094	743
South East South	1,605	1,369
South West	2,480	1,785
Scotland	1,223	705
Total	13,235	8,852

To provide timely accommodation for service personnel and to allow for the high mobility of service life, DHE's long-term strategy is to operate with a management margin of no more than 10 per cent. of vacant properties. The welfare of military personnel and their families is paramount: requiring families to move mid-tour to facilitate property disposals is unpopular and could ultimately affect morale and retention. Maintaining a reasonable management margin allows DHE to keep these moves to a minimum. Unlike the situation with many other housing providers, turnover of occupants is generally high, and it would be inappropriate to keep void rates very low by using waiting lists and temporary accommodation such as bed and breakfast.

One of the key targets set for DHE is to reduce the management margin progressively towards 10 per cent. by November 2005. A policy of continuous review of all quarters has secured the disposal of nearly 11,000 properties in the last three years. In accordance with wider Government policy, properties that are temporarily surplus but held for known future deployments are offered to registered social landlords, local authorities, and more recently to key workers from the fire, police, prison, NHS, and education services.

International Criminal Court

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the impact of the UK's ratification of the Statute of the International Criminal Court on UK forces' scope for action in the event of any military intervention in Iraq. [92891]

Mr. Ingram: The offences contained in the Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) reflect international law provisions that were already applicable to the conduct of United Kingdom forces in any theatre of engagement. The ICC Statute does not therefore impose new conditions.

The consequences for our forces of UK ratification of the ICC Statute were carefully examined in preparation for the ICC Act 2001. Under the Statute, investigation and, if necessary prosecution of any allegations of war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide by a UK national would be carried out by the UK. The Court would intervene only if it determined that a state was unwilling or unable to pursue a particular case, but it is inconceivable that the UK would ever be unable or unwilling to investigate or take appropriate action.

Iraq

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, what assessment he has made of the number of Iraqi civilian casualties that could arise from a war against Iraq. [91967]

Mr. Ingram: No decision on military action in Iraq has been taken. In any military action it is our policy, consistent with international law, to avoid civilian casualties and damage to infrastructure wherever possible, and to minimise them where they cannot be avoided.

Mr. Austin Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he has had with *(a)* France and *(b)* Germany on (i) co-operation in military action against Iraq and (ii) a European Union military force against Iraq. [92926]

Mr. Hoon: There has been no decision to take military action against Iraq. I have not discussed with my French or German colleagues bilateral co-operation, or any European Security and Defence Policy operation, in that context. Military action in Iraq is neither imminent nor inevitable.

Mr. Lyons: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether British troops have been given orders in relation to protection of oil fields in Iraq. [93105]

Mr. Hoon: No decision has been taken to commit British forces to military action against Iraq. It would not be appropriate to comment on any tasks that might be undertaken by our forces in the event of military operations.

MOD Police

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Ministry of Defence police officers will be surplus to requirement at *(a)* Salisbury Plain Army Training Estate, *(b)* Boscombe Down and *(c)* DSTL Porton Down when Landmarc Support Services commence their strategic partnership; and if he will make a statement. [93483]

Dr. Moonie: Ministry of Defence police (MDP) numbers are kept under constant review. However, there will be no reduction of MDP personnel in the Salisbury Plain area when Landmarc Support Services undertake the contract to provide assistance with the upkeep of the Army Training Estate.

Naval Helicopters

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on *(a)* the current and *(b)* the future projected roles of the Royal Navy's (i) Merlin, (ii) Sea King and (iii) Lynx helicopters. [92898]

Mr. Ingram: The Royal Navy's Merlin Mark 1 helicopters provide an advanced anti-submarine search and attack capability, as well as wider utility in surface surveillance, Search and Rescue (SAR) and support roles. Merlin achieved its Initial Operating Capability deployed in HMS Ark Royal in June 2002, and has completed a successful embarkation in the Type 23 Frigate, HMS Lancaster. It will provide a crucial component of both open ocean and littoral operations for the foreseeable future.

The Sea King has provided the backbone of the Royal Navy's anti-submarine capability over the last three decades, but is being progressively withdrawn from service as Merlin becomes operational. The Sea King Airborne Early Warning Mark 2 has been upgraded to Mark 7 to provide enhanced airborne surveillance and control for air defence into the next decade. The Sea King Mark 4, supplemented by the conversion of some Mark 6 aircraft, will continue to provide a support helicopter capability, primarily for three Commando Brigade Royal Marines, until the turn of the decade. The Sea King Mark 5 will provide a SAR capability well into the next decade.

Lynx Mark 3 and Mark 8 aircraft provide surveillance and attack capability from assigned frigates and destroyers. This includes surface surveillance and targeting, anti-surface and anti-submarine weapon delivery, and battle damage assessment, as well as key elements of frigates' and destroyers' SAR, humanitarian support and constabulary capabilities. The Surface Combatant Maritime Rotorcraft (SCMR) will be phased into service during the second half of the decade to succeed and enhance the capability currently provided by the Lynx Mark 3 and Mark 8 helicopters.

Oil and Pipelines Agency

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place the latest report of the Oil and Pipelines Agency in the Library. [93715]

Dr. Moonie: The latest report of the Oil and Pipelines Agency was placed in the Library on 19 November 2002.

Pay Settlement

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the four year pay settlement reached with MOD employees. [93469]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence has negotiated a four year pay settlement which includes significant reform in line with the Modernising Government agenda, introducing automatic pay progression and focusing performance related pay on bonuses. Similar agreements were negotiated with both industrial and non-industrial staff.

Press Releases

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many press releases have been issued by his Department in each *(a)* year and *(b)* quarter from 1995–96 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92463]

Dr. Moonie: The number of press releases issued by the Ministry of Defence's central Press Office has been recorded by calendar year only for years 1995–96. Figures for the dates in question are:

Year	*Number*
1995	149
1996	176
1997[1]	160
1998	238
1999	282
2000	224
2001	159
2002	151

[1] Data only available from 1 May onwards

The number of press releases issued in each quarter from 1997 to 2002 is in the following table:

	Quarter 1	*Quarter 2*	*Quarter 3*	*Quarter 4*	*Total*
1997	n/a	25	44	91	160
1998	72	67	56	43	238
1999	75	67	56	84	282
2000	44	48	69	63	224
2001	53	29	38	39	159
2002	40	31	39	41	151

Note:

Figures by quarter for years before May 1997 are no longer available.

In addition to the figures, the single services, the regional defence press offices and defence agencies issue their own press releases. They also re-issue some central press releases for local distribution. Accurate figures on these, which take account of any "duplicate releases", could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what major *(a)* variations and *(b)* delays there have been to the Private Finance Initiative contract for the (i) Central Scotland Family Quarters, (ii) NRTA Fire Training, (iii) Army Foundation College, (iv) RAF Mail, (v) RAF Cosford/Shawbay Family Quarters, (vi) RAF Lossiemouth Family Quarters, (vii) Attack Helicopter Training and (viii) Light Aircraft Flying (LAFT) (Bulldog) since they were signed; what their cost has been; whether the partners in the PFI were required to meet these costs; and if he will make a statement. [90168]

Mr. Ingram: Of the specified PFI contracts, only two of the projects have experienced significant changes as follows:

Army Foundation College

The capping of contaminated mounds on site has led to programme delays and increased construction costs. The Ministry of Defence granted a four-month extension to the contractor, the cost of which is not yet known as it is subject to on-going detailed negotiations. As the site owner, MOD will fund the costs. There were no delays to service provision, which has been provided throughout the construction phase.

Attack Helicopter Training

Information relating to the software integration delays and costs for the Full Mission Simulator training service can be found in the report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, "Building an Air Manoeuvre Capability: The Introduction of the Apache Helicopter", published on 31 October 2002 [HC1246, Session 2001–2002].

Reservists

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many reservists served in *(a)* the Gulf War, *(b)* Kosovo and *(c)* Afghanistan; and what percentage of those fit for active duty this represented at the time. [92137]

Dr. Moonie: As of 22 January, 588 reservists have served in support of operations in Afghanistan. This figure excludes a small number of RAF reservists who served in Afghanistan between 1 July 2002 and 22 January 2003 for which figures are currently unavailable. It is not possible to state what percentage of those reservists fit for active duty this represented as the state of health for members of the reserve forces changes from day to day. A reservist's fitness for active duty only becomes apparent either when they report for service or if they make an application for revocation, exemption or deferral of call-out based on their health.

In the time available it has not been possible to collate information regarding the number of reservists who served in Kosovo or during the 1990–91 Gulf conflict as this is not held centrally.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* reservists and *(b)* medical reservists have responded to call-up notices; and if he will make a statement. [92665]

Dr. Moonie: As at 21 January 180 reservists called-out to support Operation TELIC had reported for mobilisation of which 98 were accepted for service. None of these individuals were medical reservists.

Mr. Cameron: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what legal protection to return to their existing jobs is afforded to reservists called up by the armed forces; and if he will make a statement. [93320]

Dr. Moonie: Reservists who are called out into permanent service benefit from employment protection under the Reserve Forces (Safeguard of Employment) Act 1985.Under Section 1 of that Act an employer must take into his or her employment, at the same conditions of service as they were previously serving, former employees who make a written application at the end of a period of called-out service. If this is not reasonable and practical, the Reservist must be reinstated on the most favourable terms of service available.

Should an employer fail to reinstate a Reservist in accordance with the provisions of that Act, the Reservist may apply to a Reinstatement Committee to hear his case. The Reinstatement Committee can order the employer to reinstate the Reservist, or to pay compensation to him/her, or both. Failure to comply with an order of a Reinstatement Committee is a criminal offence, and an employer may be fined on summary conviction. Appeals by either the employer or the Reservist against the determination of the Reinstatement Committee may be made to an Umpire appointed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

Royal Marines

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the *(a)* target and *(b)* actual recruitment figures have been for the Royal Marines in each of the past five years. [92964]

Dr. Moonie: The target and actual recruitment figures for the Royal Marines in each of the past five years is as follows:

	1998–99		*1999–2000*		*2000–01*		*2001–02*		*2002–03*	
	Target	*Actual*	*Target*	*Actual*	*Target*	*Actual*	*Target*	*Actual*	*Target*	*Actual*
Officers	36	35	36	39	44	45	61	61	52	54
RMOR	1,155	1,048	1,155	1,148	1,155	1,117	1,155	1,159	1,155	1,175
RMBS	24	21	31	26	31	25	27	25	29	29

Note:
RMOR—Royal Marines other Ranks
RMBS—Royal Marines Band Service

Royal Naval Reserve

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the *(a)* target and *(b)* actual figures have been for recruitment into *(a)* the Royal Naval Reserve and *(b)* the Royal Marines Reserve in each of the past five years. [92965]

Dr. Moonie: The target and actual figures for recruitment into the Royal Naval Reserve are recorded by financial year. The figures for the most recent five financial years are as follows:

	Target	*Actual*
1998–99	650	445
1999–2000	650	604
2000–01	650	562
2001–02	650	676
2002–03	480	[1]410

[1] As at 31 December 2002

The target and actual figures for recruitment into the Royal Marines Reserve are recorded by calendar year. The RMR figures for each of the last five years are as follows:

	Target	*Actual*
1998–99	300	285
1999–2000	300	328
2000–01	300	260
2001–02	300	288
2002–03	300	225

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will make a statement on the role and structure of the Royal Naval Reserve; [92969]

(2) what assessment his Department has made of the changed roles of *(a)* the RNR and *(b)* the RMR since 11 September 2001. [92966]

Dr. Moonie: The Royal Naval Reserve (RNR) exists to provide a corps of readily available, highly trained personnel to enable the Royal Navy to meet its operational commitments in times of stretch, crisis, tension and war—including peacekeeping and humanitarian operations and disaster relief.

The RNR is based upon 13 general-purpose Reserve Training Centres located throughout the United Kingdom. The majority of RNR Branches and Specialisations provide unique skill sets, which are not generally required in peacetime, but are used to augment the Fleet in times of crisis. The operational structure of the RNR has recently been updated to ensure that these requirements can be met. The structure comprises six branches, some of which cover a number of specialisations.

Following the events of 11 September, my hon Friend the Secretary of State for Defence announced that the Ministry of Defence would look again at its defence posture to ensure that we have the right concepts, the right forces and the right capabilities to meet the additional challenges we face from international terrorism and asymmetric threat. He described this work as a New Chapter to the Strategic Defence Review published in 1998. This was presented to Parliament by my hon Friend the Secretary of State for Defence by Command of Her Majesty in July 2002.

Following this review, there are no changes to the role of the Royal Naval Reserve. Neither have there been changes to the role of the RMR, which remains to reinforce the Royal Marines and other services as and when required with individuals and sub-units worldwide.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* professional and *(b)* voluntary personnel are in the Royal Naval Reserve. [92970]

Dr. Moonie: All members of the Royal Naval Reserve are volunteers. There were 3,222 volunteers as at 31 December 2002. There are 103 serving—i.e. regular armed forces—personnel and 13 Retired Officers employed in managing the RNR and training the volunteers.

Royal Navy

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what Royal Navy resources are allocated to meet commitments in *(a)* the Balkans, *(b)* Cyprus and *(c)* Sierra Leone. [92893]

Mr. Ingram: There are currently fifty Royal Navy personnel in the Balkans. Two patrol craft, one rigid raiding craft and fifty RN or Royal Marine personnel are currently allocated to British Forces Cyprus. In Sierra Leone, three RN personnel are assigned to UNAMSIL and two RN personnel to the International Military Assistance and Training Team.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what Royal Navy resources are allocated to combating *(a)* piracy and *(b)* drug-trafficking; and in which theatres. [92896]

Mr. Ingram: No Royal Navy assets are specifically allocated to combating piracy. International Maritime Law does however, place an obligation on any seafarer to assist others in distress if they are in a position to do so. RN ships would offer such assistance if appropriate. In areas where there is a known risk of piracy, RN warships would take this into consideration and adjust their own level of readiness accordingly.Again, there are no RN assets dedicated specifically to counter narcotics activities. Military Forces are, however, made available upon request, when operational commitments and resources allow, to support the counter drugs activities of the law enforcement agencies. In recent years, such assistance has been provided in the Caribbean, United Kingdom waters, Atlantic and the Arabian Sea.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what Royal Navy resources are allocated to training former Eastern Bloc countries' armed forces. [92897]

Dr. Moonie: The United Kingdom has pursued for several years an active programme of defence assistance to countries of the former Eastern Bloc, as an integral part of our policy to build stability and security in the region. For geographical and historical reasons, defence assistance is focused principally on land forces but, where practical, the Royal Navy contributes to the overall programme. In particular, students from the former Eastern Bloc attend Royal Naval Initial Officer Training and Tactical and Staff Training at the Naval module of intermediate staff training courses in the United Kingdom. In addition, the Royal Navy also undertakes joint mine warfare training in the Baltic with Allies and the Baltic states; and is supporting the operational sea training of the Polish frigate Pulaski to bring her into NATO's Standing Naval Force Atlantic for 2004. There is also a well established programme of naval co-operation with Russia which includes some limited elements of training.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the specialist *(a)* anti-aircraft, *(b)* anti-ship and *(c)* anti-submarine capabilities of each class of (i) frigate and (ii) destroyer (A) being built and (B) already deployed by the Royal Navy. [92900]

Mr. Ingram: The in-service Type 22 (Broadsword Class) and Type 23 (Duke Class) Frigates have been designed primarily for the Anti-submarine Warfare (ASW) role. To fulfil this, they have torpedo tubes fitted and Lynx or Merlin ASW helicopters embarked. Their anti-aircraft capability is provided by Sea Wolf missiles, and their anti-surface ship capability by Sea Skua missiles carried on Lynx helicopters, close-range guns and long-range Harpoon anti-surface missiles.

The primary role of the in-service Type 42 Destroyer is to provide air defence for task group operations. For this, it is equipped with Sea Dart anti-aircraft missiles, which also have a secondary anti-surface ship capability. As with the Frigates, Type 42 Destroyers also have torpedo tubes and Lynx ASW aircraft for anti-submarine warfare, with anti-surface capability provided by Sea Skua missiles on Lynx aircraft.

Equipped with the Principal Anti-Air Missile System (PAAMS), the prime role of the future Type 45 Destroyers will be anti-air Warfare. The Sea Skua missile, fitted to the Lynx helicopter, together with the ship's medium range gunnery system, will provide the anti-surface ship capability. Anti-submarine warfare capability will primarily be provided by the Lynx helicopter, equipped with Stingray anti-submarine torpedoes. The systems delivering these capabilities will be considered for progressive updates during the in-service life of the Type 45, which is designed with significant space and weight margins to meet emerging requirements.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the *(a)* Royal Naval and *(b)* Royal Marines shore establishments which have been (i) taken out of and (ii) brought into service since May 1997. [92960]

Mr. Ingram: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on multi-national training programmes with allied forces for *(a)* the Royal Navy and *(b)* the Royal Marines. [92971]

Mr. Ingram: The Royal Navy and Royal Marines, and the other services, take part in a wide range of multinational and bilateral training exercises to prepare for operations and enhance interoperability with NATO and coalition partners. In addition, United Kingdom operational sea training and joint maritime courses (JMCs) are carried out with participants from a wide range of European navies, USA, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, with the aim of preparing units to operate together.

The Royal Navy and Royal Marines maintain personnel exchange programmes with allies. In addition to core exercise activity, exercises are carried out with other nations in support of defence diplomacy initiatives, including Partnership for Peace countries. The Royal Navy and Royal Marines are also committed to the United Kingdom Netherlands Amphibious Force (UKNLAF), which has proved a model for amphibious co-operation for other nations in Europe. This standing force celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2003 and the capability has been maintained through regular shared training opportunities.

Examples of major Royal Navy and Royal Marines' multinational and bilateral exercises in 2002 included an integrated air defence exercise with Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia (five powers defence arrangements), exercise Destined Glory with other NATO members and exercise Blackhorse with the USA. Major elements of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines also participated in exercise Saif Sareea in late 2001, alongside the Omani armed forces.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what Royal Navy resources are allocated to duties in respect of Northern Ireland. [92972]

Mr. Ingram: The Royal Navy (RN) has a squadron of three Hunt Class patrol craft based in Faslane, which support naval operations in Northern Ireland. One patrol craft, with 35 personnel onboard, is routinely deployed to patrol Northern Ireland territorial waters every day of the year. This ship is supported by a team of eight Royal Marines (RM) with four rigid inflatable boats to conduct the boarding of vessels entering or leaving NI ports. There are also 20 RN/RM personnel based in the Province who provide operational support to the patrol vessel.

In addition, the Royal Navy have an Armed Forces Career Office in Palace Barracks, Holywood, consisting of one RN officer and four senior ratings. There is a staff of two officers and eight senior/junior ratings on HMS Caroline (reserve training ship). The Joint Helicopter Force (Northern Ireland) has one RN officer on its staff, and there is one officer in the post of Assistant Naval Regional Officer (Northern Ireland) also based at HMS Caroline.

A Sea King Helicopter Detachment (consisting of three helicopters and up to 40 personnel) deploys to the Province as operational requirements demand.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* male and *(b)* female personnel there have been in (i) the Royal Navy and (ii) the Royal Marines in each year since 1997, broken down into (A) officers and (B) other ranks. [92973]

Dr. Moonie: Royal Navy and Royal Marine strengths by gender 1997–2002 are shown in the table:

	January 1997	*January 1998*	*January 1999*	*January 2000*	*January 2001*	*January 2002*	*December 2002*
RN officer							
Male	6,800	6,640	6,540	6,450	6,460	6,440	6,440
Female	430	450	460	500	540	570	600
RM officer							
Male	700	690	690	680	680	720	750
Female	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
RN other ranks							
Male	28,780	27,830	27,200	26,370	25,640	24,790	24,200
Female	2,760	2,740	2,810	2,830	2,840	2,880	2,970
RM other ranks							
Male	6,000	6,070	5,990	5,990	6,160	6,220	6,340
Female	30	40	50	50	60	60	80

Note:

All figures are rounded to the nearest 10, and include untrained strengths.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* Afro-Caribbean and *(b)* Asian ethnic minority personnel there have been in (i) the Royal Navy and (ii) the Royal Marines in each year since 1997, broken down into (A) officers and (B) other ranks. [92974]

Dr. Moonie: The number of Asian and Black Caribbean personnel serving in the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines are shown in the tables:

Royal Navy[1]

		April 1997	*April 1998*	*April 1999*	*April 2000*	*April 2001*	*21October 2001*
Officers	*Asian*	*15*	*10*	*15*	*15*	20	20
	Black Caribbean	10	10	5	5	5	5
Other Ranks	*Asian*	20	20	25	25	30	30
	Black Caribbean	55	50	50	50	45	45

Royal Marines

Officers	*Asian*	—	—	≈	—	—	—
	Black Caribbean	—	—	—	—	—	—
Other Ranks	*Asian*	≈	≈	≈	5	5	≈
	Black Caribbean	15	15	20	15	15	15

[1] Royal Navy figures include QARNNS.

[2] A re-survey of the ethnic origin of Armed Forces personnel is currently being undertaken using the categories contained in the Population Census of 2001. The last available figures using the previous ethnic categories are those of 1 October 2001.

Notes:

Figures shown are for UK Regular forces (including both trained and untrained), and therefore exclude Full Time Reserve Service personnel and Naval Activated Reservists.

Asian consists of those classified as Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi.

All figures are rounded to the nearest five.

≈ denotes fewer than five

— denotes zero

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on educational opportunities for *(a)* officers and *(b)* other ranks in (i) the Royal Navy and (ii) the Royal Marines. [92975]

Dr. Moonie: Both the Royal Navy and Royal Marines offer a wide variety of educational opportunities for personnel as part of training, personal development or lifelong learning.

There are a number of educational opportunities that are available to all, regardless of rank. These consist of a university short course programme, a variety of short courses available to personnel at no cost to the individual, an HM Forces scheme administered under the University of Cambridge Local Education Syndicate which provides world-wide access to IGCSE/GCE programmes and a forces distance learning scheme.

For officers there is the opportunity to achieve accreditation for many Royal Navy and Royal Marines courses, examples include, supply officers, legal training for barristers and flying start degree scheme, for non graduate aircrew, plus sponsored post graduate study for selected officers and language training.

Other ranks of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines undertake national vocational qualifications, and accreditation for many training courses with national bodies such as higher national diplomas. Training for Royal Marine musicians has also achieved accreditation to BA Music. In addition, a high percentage of Royal Navy personnel are corporately sponsored through foundation for modern apprenticeship programmes, including NVQs, key skills and technical certificates.

Rough Terrain Fleet

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many fully trained *(a)* operators and *(b)* maintenance engineers with operational experience of container handling rough terrain there are in his Department; and how many are fit for active service. [92663]

Mr. Ingram: The Ministry of Defence has sufficient trained and fit operators and engineers to run the Container Handling Rough Terrain fleet.

Sea Cadet Corps

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the role and structure of the Sea Cadet Corps. [92967]

Dr. Moonie: The Sea Cadet movement is a national youth charity based on the customs and traditions of the Royal Navy. It provides young people from 10 to 18-years-old with life skills of teamwork, self-respect and social responsibility. It has a training programme ranging from seamanship and maritime skills to music, cookery and computing, and aims to provide teenagers with a serious, but fun, alternative to the youth leisure industry at the heart of the local community.

The Sea Cadet Corps has approximately 400 units. Each unit is a registered charity in its own right run by a management committee and supported by the Sea Cadet Association (SCA) which has branches around the country. The SCA is a fundraising charity which, along with the Ministry of Defence, provides essential resources for the corps. The MOD provides financial support for the running of the SCA HQ and a national training organisation.

Each Sea Cadet Unit becomes a member of the corps by act of affiliation with the SCA. It then becomes eligible for the umbrella support provided by MOD and the SCA, including management through six area offices.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* professional and *(b)* voluntary personnel there are in the Sea Cadet Corps. [92968]

Mr. Ingram: The professional personnel associated with the Sea Cadet Corps are the Royal Navy and Civil Service personnel employed nationally in support of the Corps, and employees of the Sea Cadet Association (SCA) which is the fund raising charity to which each Sea Cadet Unit is affiliated. There are 21 RN and Civil Service personnel and 204 full and part-time employees of the SCA.

The voluntary personnel associated with the Corps are the uniformed and civilian instructors that provide the training at the individual Sea Cadet Units. There are 3,247 uniformed instructors and 1,562 civilian instructors.

Sennybridge Range

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many soldiers from what regiments have been *(a)* killed and *(b)* injured at the Sennybridge Range in each year since 1990; what safety recommendations were made by the Special Investigation Branch and the Health and Safety Executive on each occasion; and what steps he has taken to ensure these were acted upon. [92783]

Dr. Moonie: The number of soldiers killed at the Sennybridge Range since 1990 and their regiments is as follows:

Regiment	*Year*	*Number of deaths*
Royal Regiment of Wales	1991	1
Cheshire Regiment	1992	1
Royal Green Jackets	1993	1
Queen's Gurkha Engineers	1995	1
Grenadier Guards	1998	1

A number of agencies may be involved in the investigation of range incidents resulting in death or injury including the Royal Military Police Special Investigation Branch (RMP SIB) and Land Accident Investigation Team (LAIT), who are responsible for liaising with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) as required. Further work is required to identify the number of injuries and any resulting safety recommendations, and I will write to my hon. Friend on these points and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Although the RMP SIB would normally attend the scene of a range incident resulting in death or serious injury, they would only carry out an investigation if a criminal offence or negligence is suspected and, in the case of a death, if responsibility for the investigation was ceded by the civilian police. It is not, however, within the remit of RMP SIB to make recommendations about matters of range safety.

Service Chaplains

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the cost of the chaplaincy was in each of the three services in the last 12 months, broken down by *(a)* uniformed and *(b)* civilian chaplains. [92676]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Suez Medal

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects the sub-committee chaired by General Lord Guthrie of Craigiebank to report regarding the issue of a Suez Canal Zone medal; and if he will make a statement. [93632]

Dr. Moonie: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 13 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 404W to the hon. Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mrs. Brooke).

Warships

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his *(a)* current and *(b)* expected warship orders are for the Royal Navy by 2015; and what their scheduled completion dates are. [92894]

Mr. Ingram: The United Kingdom has the largest programme of new warship building for decades.

Current warship orders are for:

Type 45

We have ordered six Type 45 Anti-Air Warfare Destroyers within a planned class size of up to 12. The ships are due to enter service between late 2007 and the middle of the next decade.

Landing Ships Dock (Auxiliary)

Four Landing Ship Dock (Auxiliaries) are under construction. The first vessel is expected in service in 2004, with the last entering service in late 2005.

Landing Platform Dock Replacement (LPDR)

Two LPDRs are on order. The first is planned to enter service by July of this year. The programme for the second is still under discussion with the contractor, but the current expectation is that she will enter service by the end of next year.

Hydrographic and Oceanographic Survey Vessels

The first Echo Class Survey Vessel is expected to be in service in May 2003. The second vessel is expected to be in service in December 2003.

Auxiliary Oilers

The two Auxiliary Oilers were accepted off contract in October 2002 and are due to enter service this spring.

Astute

A first buy of Astute submarines is currently on contract. The in service date is not now expected to be before late 2006, subject to confirmation by the contractor.

Offshore Patrol Vessels

MOD has contracted with Vosper Thornycroft to provide three Offshore Patrol Vessels. VT will own and support the vessels and lease them to MOD. They are due to become progressively available to the RN between February and December this year.

Detailed ordering plans for the period up to 2015 remain subject to review in the normal way. However, future planned orders include:

Future Aircraft Carrier

Two vessels are planned, with in service dates of 2012 and 2015. It is expected that a contract award will be made in spring 2004.

Astute

On current plans, we intend to place orders for further Astute Submarines which we expect to enter service from the next decade onwards.

Primary Casualty Receiving Ship

A contract is expected to be placed around the middle of the present decade and the vessel is expected to enter service in the latter part of the decade.

Future Surface Combatant (FSC)

Our present planning assumption is that the first of class will be in service around the middle of the next decade.

Military Afloat Reach and Sustainability (MARS)

We plan to introduce a MARS capability around the turn of the decade. The characteristics of the relevant platform*(s)* have yet to be determined.

A formal announcement of the placing of these orders will be made at the appropriate time.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 29 January 2003

CABINET OFFICE

Entertainment

Mr. Laws: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what his estimate is of the total spending of his Department on entertainment in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92365]

Mr. Alexander: Details of my Department's spend on entertainment in each year from 1997–98 to 2001–02 can be found below.

£000s

	Entertainment expenditure
1997–98	192
1998–99	170
1999–00	276
2000–01	277
2001–02	254

Information prior to 1997–98 is not held on the Department's accounting system and is therefore available only at disproportionate cost.

The estimated spend on entertainment in 2002–03 is £216,000.

External Consultancies

Mr. Laws: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body spent on external consultancy in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (planned); and if he will make a statement. [92226]

Mr. Alexander: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given in another place to the noble Baroness Wilcox by Lord Macdonald on 27 November 2002, *Official Report;* column WA42.

Expenditure by the Cabinet Office on external consultants is estimated to be £9,493,000 for 2002–03. The figures for the Central Office of Information (COI), the Government Car and Despatch Agency (GCDA) and the only non-departmental public body sponsored by the Cabinet Office with such spend are as follows:

	COI	*GCDA*	*Committee on standards in public life*
1997–98	66,395	n/a	0
1998–99	30,972	n/a	0
1999–2000	17,468	33,997	0
2000–01	48,980	21,715	0
2001–02	52,170	53,385	35,056
2002–03[1]	18,886	58,000	7,400

[1] Estimated

The figures for earlier years, and those for GCDA for 1997–98 and 1998–99, could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Government Policy (Online Access)

Mr. Allen: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans he has to extend the opportunities for members of the public to contribute to the development of government policy by online scrutiny and discussion of proposed initiatives. [93387]

Mr. Alexander: The Government have recently consulted on e-democracy which included issues concerning online scrutiny. A report on the consultation, entitled "In the Service of Democracy: Your Response", along with individual responses, has been posted on the Government's e-democracy website, *www.edemocracy.gov.uk.*

The majority of the responses are supportive of the Government's efforts to develop an e-democracy policy although many important and serious issues were raised that will require detailed analysis and consideration.

We are very grateful to all those who took time to consider the issues raised in the consultation document and we will, of course, keep the House informed as policy is developed on e-democracy.

Heritage Assets

Mr. Laws: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what sales of heritage assets and antique assets have been made by his Department since May 1997; if he will list such assets; and if he will estimate the total sales proceeds. [92366]

Mr. Alexander: The Cabinet Office has not sold any heritage assets and antique assets since May 1997.

Public Suggestions

Mr. Allen: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans he has to improve the analysis by Government Departments of suggestions from the general public. [93389]

Mr. Alexander: The Government are committed to making use of more diverse methods of involving the public and to engaging a broader range of people. The "Code of Practice on Written Consultation" provides guidance to Departments on written consultations with the public. To help policy-makers improve policy design through undertaking public involvement initiatives, the Cabinet Office has also published "Viewfinder: A Policy Maker's Guide to Public Involvement". Viewfinder is available on the Policy Hub Website www.policyhub.gov.uk. Viewfinder includes examples of good practice, features a wide range of involvement techniques (including e-consultation) and describes how effectively to plan public involvement activities, including analysis and evaluation. It informs policy-makers how to ensure that involvement includes different groups and individuals within society. It also addresses issues such as how to manage high volumes of responses and how to weight responses from different groups.

The Office of Public Services Reform in the Cabinet Office has developed five principles of good customer feedback to guide Departments in consulting on public services.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

2012 Olympics

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will place in the Library the results of the opinion survey undertaken by ICM on behalf of UK Sport on a London bid for the 2012 Olympics. [93376]

Mr. Caborn: I will arrange for a copy of the full results of the ICM survey of public opinion on a London 2012 Olympic Bid to be placed in the Library.

A summary of the results of the survey were published by my Department and presented to the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport on 15 January. The full results were published by ICM on their website at *www.icmresearch.co.uk* on 16 January.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what her estimate is of the total expenditure by her Department on ministerial travel *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* abroad, in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if she will make a statement. [92466]

Dr. Howells: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon Friend the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office on 22 January 2003, *Official Report,* column 334W.

DEFENCE

Air Traffic Contract

Mr. Goodman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether a risk assessment was made in the first assessment of the Nottingham Air Traffic (ATC) contract. [93693]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* I assume that the hon. Member is referring to the Wattisham air traffic contract. A risk assessment was included during the bid evaluation process for the first competition of the Wattisham air traffic contract, and that process identified areas of concern in all bids. The resulting contract with VT Aerospace (contract CS 4D/2017) was, however, terminated by mutual consent and the competition was re-run between the other bidders, leading to a contract with Serco (contract CS 4D/2027).

Accommodation Blocks (Portland)

Jim Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much money has been received by his Department in exchange for the sale of the Hardy accommodation blocks at Portland. [93617]

Dr. Moonie: The freehold of the Hardy accommodation blocks at Portland were owned in part by the Ministry of Defence and in part by the Crown Estate. The sale was on the basis of a shared receipt pro rata of those freehold areas. The Ministry of Defence received £300,000 for its part of the accommodation blocks site.

Blood/Plasma

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to his answer of 20 January (ref. 91885), what the expected requirements for blood and plasma are. [93594]

Dr. Moonie: I am withholding the information requested in accordance with Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Challenger II

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether the desertification of Challenger II tanks will be completed *(a)* before they are loaded for transport to the Gulf and *(b)* before they arrive in the Gulf; and if he will make a statement. [93937]

Mr. Ingram: The improvement in the performance of Challenger II tanks in desert conditions is achieved through the combined effect of a number of modifications. The first modification was completed prior to the tanks being loaded for transportation. The remaining modifications will be completed after they arrive in theatre.

Cluster Bombs

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if cluster bombs are part of the ordnance package on its way to the Gulf. [93938]

Mr. Ingram: I am withholding this information in accordance with Exemption la of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, which relates to defence.

Depleted Uranium Munitions

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether *(a)* British forces and *(b)* United States forces deployed to the Gulf have depleted uranium munitions available as part of their armoury. [91974]

Mr. Ingram: I can confirm that British Forces deployed to the Gulf will have depleted uranium munitions available as part of the armoury. The deployment of depleted uranium munitions by US Forces, is a matter for the US Government.

Financial Dynamics

Jim Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to his answer of 7 January 2003, *Official Report,* column 45W, on Financial Dynamics, when the two meetings which his Department's official attended with Financial Dynamics took place; and whether Financial Dynamics were authorised to represent his Department in liaising with the press. [92057]

Mr. Hoon: The two meetings took place on 10 and 12 December 2002. Financial Dynamics' role was to advise the Government on likely media perspectives of the market implications of the discussions between the Ministry of Defence and BAE Systems. The Ministry of Defence press office continued to represent the Department as usual in dealing with media inquiries on the issue, and continues to do so.

Graduates

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proportion of *(a)* Naval, *(b)* Army and *(c)* RAF officers received in each year since 1990 were graduates. [93657]

Dr. Moonie: Details of the graduate intake to the Officer Corps in the Armed Forces in recent years are as follows:

	Naval Service			*Army*			*RAF*		
	Officer Intake	*Graduate Intake*	*%*	*Officer Intake*	*Graduate Intake*	*%*	*Officer Intake*	*Graduate Intake*	*%*
1995–96	222	173	78	650	492	76	421	274	65
1996–97	374	290	78	616	493	80	471	284	60
1997–98	346	276	80	718	555	77	639	346	54
1998–99	376	283	75	635	480	76	694	340	49
1999–2000	367	275	75	598	461	77	776	370	48
2000–01	398	273	69	719	593	82	675	354	52
2001–02	386	268	69	727	559	77	767	336	44

Figures for all services are not available prior to 1995–96

Human Centrifuge

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress towards the procurement of a human centrifuge; and what discussions his Department has had with AMST of Austria on the matter. [93990]

Mr. Ingram: AMST is one of two companies currently in competition for the contract to provide a new human carrying High G Centrifuge for the RAF. An announcement on the award of this programme is planned for August 2003.

Military Forces Deployment

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what UK military forces are *(a)* deployed and *(b)* in the process of deployment in the Gulf and Middle East region, setting out how many personnel of which unit and service are *(i)* stationed and (ii) due to be stationed in each location in the region. [92340]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Premature Voluntary Release

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many applications there have been for Premature Voluntary Release from *(a)* 40, *(b)* 42 and *(c)* 45 Commando in each month of the past year. [93653]

Dr. Moonie: RM Commando PVR applications recorded during 2002:

	January to March	*April to June*	*July to September*	*October to November*
40 Commando	15	10	10	5
42 Commando	15	20	10	5
45 Commando	15	10	10	20

Notes:

1 The data for the final quarter of 2002 are not fully available, and do not therefore include December applications.

2 All figures are rounded to the nearest 5 to protect against individual identification, and data are presented quarterly due to small monthly numbers involved.

3 Data includes RM Officer and Other Ranks, but excludes small numbers of RN personnel assigned to the Commando units.

4 The data indicate the periods in which the PVR application was recorded, which may be slightly later than the date of submission, due to managerial or administrative delays.

Publicity and Advertising

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body sponsored by his Department spent on *(i)* publicity and (ii) advertising in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92257]

Dr. Moonie: Details of Ministry of Defence expenditure on advertising and publicity are contained in the annual MOD Performance Reports. For 1995–96 the information is shown on page 32, Cm 3448; for 1996–97 the information is shown on page 49, Cm 3781; 1997–98 the information is shown on page 49, Cm 4170; for 1999–2000 the information is shown on page 60, Cm 5000; for 2000–01 the information is shown on page 68, Cm 5290 and for 2001–02 the information is shown on page 71, Cm 5661.

Copies of these reports are available in the House.

Figures for 1998–99 were not provided in the annual performance report and are as follows:

£ million

Category	*Expenditure*
Recruitment	
Royal Navy/Royal Fleet Auxiliary	6.65
Army	11.77
Royal Air Force	10.17
Civilian	3.27
PR, Marketing and Business Support Services	0.84
Chief of Public Relations Expenditure	2.39
Sales Promotion	1.06
Scholarships	0.38
National Employers Liaison Committee (Territorial Army)	1.05

The expenditure for advertising and publicity is spread among many different budgets and budget holders. The Department thus does not have a central advertising and publicity budget and forecast information—in this case for financial year 2002–03—could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, as in past years, information on the outturn figure is collated and is expected to be included in the 2002–03 performance report, when that document is published.

The breakdown of expenditure on publicity and advertising by agencies and non-departmental public bodies sponsored by the Ministry of Defence is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Reserve Forces

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions he has had with employers of reservists currently on the reserve list; and how many reservists have been called up to date. [93869]

Dr. Moonie: As at 21 January 2003, 1,816 reservists had been sent call-out notices in support of Operation TELIC. Single Service Adjudication Officers have been in contact with reservists' employers to consider applications for revocation, exemption or deferral of employees' call-out and applications for financial assistance to cover the additional costs resulting from call-out as defined by the Reserve Forces Act 1996 (RFA 96).

In addition, the Ministry of Defence has been conducting a long-standing campaign designed to win and maintain the support of Britain's employers for the volunteer reserve forces, which was re-launched in September 2002 as the SaBRE (Supporting Britain's Reservists and Employers) campaign. Its purpose is to explain to employers not only the benefits of employing reservists, but also the attendant rights and obligations that employers have in respect of those of their employees who are also reservists.

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures he will take to prevent breaches of the Reserve Forces (Safeguard of Employment) Act 1985. [93870]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence has been conducting a long-standing campaign designed to win and maintain the support of Britain's employers for the volunteer reserve forces, which was re-launched in September 2002 as SaBRE (Supporting Britain's Reservists and Employers). Its purpose is to explain to employers not only the benefits of employing reservists, but also the attendant rights and obligations that employers have, including the requirement to reemploy reservists who have been called-out in accordance with the Reserve Forces (Safeguard of Employment) Act 1985. In addition, when a reservist is called-out, a letter is sent to their employer reminding them of their obligations under the Act.

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures he will take against companies in violation of the Reserve Forces (Safeguard of Employment) Act 1985. [93871]

Dr. Moonie: Under the Reserve Forces (Safeguard of Employment) Act 1985, an employer must take into his or her employment, under the same conditions of service as they were previously serving, those former employees who have been called-out as reservists who make a written application at the end of a period of called-out service. If this is not reasonable and practical, the reservist must be reinstated on the most favourable terms of service available.

Under the Act, where an employer fails to reinstate a reservist, the reservist may apply to a reinstatement committee. These committees, appointed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, have the power to compel an employer to reinstate an employee and/or order the employer to pay appropriate compensation. Failure to comply with an order of a reinstatement committee is a criminal offence and an employer may be fined on conviction.

The Act confers no powers on the Ministry of Defence to take measures against employers who fail to re-instate a reservist.

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what financial and legal support he will give to reservists sacked by companies in violation of the Reserve Forces (Safeguard of Employment) Act 1985. [93872]

Dr. Moonie: The Reserve Forces (Safeguard of Employment) Act provides for reinstatement and/or compensation for reservists dismissed from their jobs whilst called out. Reservists who feel they have been unfairly dismissed by their employer may apply to a reinstatement committee to hear their case.

Any decision to seek legal advice is a matter for the individual, and the Ministry of Defence is not in a position to offer legal advice in individual cases. However, The Forces Law Network, an association of solicitors with experience of the needs of service personnel, can provide independent legal advice. Advice on how to apply for reinstatement, and what to do if any employer fails to honour his/her legal obligations, is available to reservists at both unit and regional level. In addition, the SaBRE (Supporting Britain's Reservists and Employers) campaign can answer general queries about the provisions of the Act.

Reservists' Pensions

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what arrangements are in place for reservists to continue with company pensions when they are called up; and if he will make a statement. [93651]

Dr. Moonie: The Reserve Forces (Call-out and Recall) (Financial Assistance) Regulations 1997 (Statutory Instrument 1997 No 309) allows Reservists to continue payments into their civilian employers' pension scheme while they are called out. Under the regulations, the Ministry of Defence has powers to pay the employer's pension contribution, provided that the reservist continues to pay any employee's share required by the scheme. Pension scheme administrators must accept the MOD's payments for this purpose.

Service Personnel (Gulf)

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his estimate is of the cost of the deployment of troops and tanks to the Gulf announced on 20 January. [93900]

Mr. Ingram: The information requested is not yet available. When it is, I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence from which units the personnel in BARTs and RESTs under operation FRESCO are drawn; how many of them are due to be deployed to the Gulf and from which units will personnel be drawn to replace them; and if he will make a statement. [93936]

Mr. Ingram: Breathing Apparatus Rescue Teams (BARTs) and Rescue Equipment Support Teams (RESTs) have been assembled by withdrawing individuals from almost every unit of the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. Recognising the important contribution the teams have played during the national firefighters dispute, every effort is made to preserve the capability of BARTs and RESTs. Recently, six RAF and 124 Royal Navy personnel have been withdrawn from Operation FRESCO as a direct consequence of deployments to the Gulf. During the course of the industrial action, the Ministry of Defence has maintained a programme of replacing personnel who needed to be withdrawn for various reasons, including the Gulf deployment, in order to ensure that the overall fire and rescue capability remains broadly constant. As this is a rolling programme, there is no direct correlation between those personnel stood down from Operation FRESCO due to their deployment to the Gulf and those personnel (or their parent units) from across the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy being trained as replacements.

Services' Protective Clothing

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what tests have been conducted to ensure the reliability of *(a)* gas masks and *(b)* protective suits worn by services personnel. [93566]

Mr. Ingram: Both the S10 respirators ('gas masks') and Nuclear, Biological and Chemical (NBC) suits ('protective suits') are manufactured to required specifications (including stringent quality assurance) to ensure that a high level of reliability is achieved. The respirators have routine inspections covering fit, damage, distortion, wear and component life and are subject to periodic tests (normally annually) in a gas environment to confirm their operational effectiveness. The NBC suits, which are vacuum-packed by the manufacturer prior to dispatch, are subject to exacting quality assurance control. The integrity of the packaging is checked prior to issue to personnel.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the procedure is for repairing damaged protective suits used by service personnel to protect them from *(a)* chemical, *(b)* nuclear and *(c)* radiological attack. [93567]

Mr. Ingram: Due to the nature of the item, damaged nuclear, biological and chemical suits are replaced and not repaired.

Software Procurement

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make it his policy to mandate companies tendering for the supply of future software systems for the Royal Navy to use Open Source Software for the engineered operating systems. [86480]

Mr. Ingram: While the Ministry of Defence is examining the benefits of using Open Source Software in some areas, it is not envisaged that its use will be mandated to Project teams. The appropriateness and benefits of Open Source Software for any given project will be assessed against a range of criteria, on a case by case basis.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the potential financial savings for the Royal Navy of the adoption of Open Source Software for the operating systems of its future software packages. [86481]

Dr. Moonie: Software used in the Ministry of Defence is selected on its ability to meet business and operational needs, taking full account of value for money, long-term viability, security and interoperability. The Ministry of Defence currently has no explicit policy on the use of Open Source Software, but does follow the Government Open Source Software policy published and announced in Parliament on 22 July 2002. This policy is available on the e-Envoy website (www.e-envoy.gov.uk) or the Office of Government Commerce website (www.ogc.gov.uk).

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the security implications of adopting commercial off-the-shelf instead of made-to-measure operating systems for future software systems for the Royal Navy. [86483]

Dr. Moonie: It is recognised that, increasingly, systems which include commercial off-the-shelf software will be offered to the Ministry of Defence by potential contractors for defence applications. This can be beneficial in reducing development times and costs, but can give concern as off-the-shelf software may be of uncertain origin and not stringently tested prior to release. Projects are therefore treated on a case by case basis. The security requirements of each system will be specified in the design documents. When a commercial off-the-shelf product (e.g. an operating system) is to be used with specified security features, it is required to undergo security evaluation.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Council Housing

8. **Mr. Hopkins:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he expects to receive the National Audit Office report on council stock transfers; and whether his review of council housing finances will be published before he has received the report. [93773]

Mr. McNulty: The timetable for the National Audit Office's report has yet to be finalised. However it is scheduled for consideration by the Public Accounts Committee of this House on 31 March. The NAO research has been helpful in the broader review of the vehicles available for the delivery of the decent homes target.

The statement by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on the Government's comprehensive long-term programme for sustainable communities, including housing, will be made shortly.

Firefighters Dispute

9. **Hugh Robertson:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on recent progress in resolving the industrial action by firefighters. [93774]

14. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister, if he will make a further statement on the firefighters' dispute. [93779]

Mr. Raynsford: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister made a statement to the House on this issue yesterday.

10. **John Barrett:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many armed forces Breathing Apparatus Rescue Teams and Rescue Equipment Support Teams were on fire cover during the 24-hour strike by members of the Fire Brigades Union on Tuesday 21 January. [93775]

Mr. Raynsford: There were 331 Breathing Apparatus Rescue Teams and 59 Regional Equipment Support Teams providing emergency fire cover in the United Kingdom for the 24-hour strike on 21 January. This is the same number of teams as for the previous 10 days of strike action.

The number of red appliances in use by the military continues to increase. The armed forces are now able to deploy 177 red engines, 90 more than at the start of the last 8 day strike.

The military now also has a number of aerial water towers to provide additional cover in extreme situations.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many days were lost to industrial action by firefighters in each of the last 12 months. [92764]

Mr. Raynsford: In the year up to 23 January 2003, eleven days were lost to national industrial action by firefighters. Ten of these days were in November 2002, and one day from the 21–22 January 2003.

New Deal for Communities

11. **Mr. Mahmood:** : To ask the Deputy Prime Minister, if he will make a statement on the progress of the New Deal for Communities. [93776]

Mrs. Roche: Our New Deal for Communities Partnerships have a wide range of projects underway and are developing agreements with those who provide public services to make them more accountable to local people. Many partnerships can now point to important successes in reducing crime, improving the quality of the local environment and engaging with local people. Some of our partnerships do face challenging circumstances, but all are striving for success.

Key Workers

12. **Jonathan Shaw:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what steps he is taking to increase the number of houses and flats available to key workers. [93777]

Mr. McNulty: Under the Starter Home Initiative, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister aims to help 10,000 key workers to buy homes in areas where the high cost of housing is undermining recruitment and retention. In addition, the Housing Corporation's Challenge Fund in 2003/04 will provide some 2,800 new homes for rent or home ownership for key workers in the South East of England.

Next week's announcement by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will outline our future approach to key workers housing.

Local Government Finance

13. **Dr. Pugh** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister in which year the ceilings and floors arrangements in the local government settlement 2003–04 will finish. [93778]

Mr. Leslie: We expect floors and ceilings to be part of the system for the foreseeable future.

Capita Group

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will list the contracts that have been awarded to the Capita Group by his Department. [89972]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has awarded the following contracts to the Capita Group:

(1) Housing Employment Mobility Services

(2) Neighbourhood Renewal—recruitment of advisors

(3) Staff recruitment. A former DTLR call off contract for the external recruitment of staff below the senior civil service.

The Capita Group are also working on the Local Government on-line website development and implementation. This contract was awarded to the Cathedral Consortium, who then sub contracted this work to Capita Group.

Departmental Expenditure (Newsprint)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the total expenditure of his Department was on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in 2002. [90541]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister was established as a separate department on 29 May 2002. From its formation until 31 December 2002, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister expenditure on newspapers, magazines and periodicals is estimated at £144,000, (including Government Offices). This figure is rounded to the nearest £1,000.

East Riding of Yorkshire Council

David Davis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what measures he will take to ensure the East Riding of Yorkshire Council receives enough funding to guarantee the provision of nursery school places from April 2004. [93837]

Mr. Raynsford: In anticipation of the duty to secure universal provision for three-year-olds from April 2004, the new education formula, announced in the provisional local government settlement, allocated funding through Formula Sending Shares based on the greater of the number of pupils in the latest applicable (January 2002) count and 85 per cent. of the resident three year old population.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what meetings *(a)* he, *(b)* other Ministers and *(c)* officials of his Department have held with *(i)* Sir Jeremy Beecham, (ii) other Local Government Association Executive members and (iii) representatives of the Fire Authority employers since 1 December 2002; on what dates the meetings were held; and what was discussed in each case. [91632]

Mr. Raynsford: Ministers and senior officials meet with Sir Jeremy Beecham and other members of the Local Government Association Executive on a regular basis to discuss many issues. The last meeting took place at the Central-Local Partnership on 22 January.

Ministers and senior officials have also met representatives of the Fire Authority employers since 1 December 2002. Subjects discussed have included the proposals contained in the final report of Sir George Bain's Independent Review of the Fire Service, and how the Government intends to take them forward.

Planning Appeals

Helen Jones: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what advice he plans to issue to *(a)* regional planning bodies, *(b)* local authorities and *(c)* the planning inspectorate on the implementation of PPG3, following the decision in Rowlinson *v* Warrington Borough Council. [92352]

Mr. McNulty: Planning Policy Guidance Note 3, 'Housing', introduced a series of tough new measures designed to meet the country's future housing needs in the most sustainable way possible, including a sequential approach which gives priority to re-using brownfield sites in urban areas in preference to developing greenfield sites. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is not convinced that it is necessary to issue further advice in the light of the decision in Rowlinson *v.* Warrington Borough Council, which was determined on the facts of the case.

Helen Jones: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the impact on the Government's regeneration policies of the decision in the case of Rowlinson *v* Warrington borough council. [92351]

Mr. McNulty: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has no plans to make such an assessment. The judgment in Rowlinson *v.* Warrington borough council was made on the facts of that specific case, and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is not convinced that they are of wider or general application.

Thameslink 2000

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he received the planning application for Thameslink 2000; what associated applications have been submitted, and on what dates; what progress has been made in relation to the *(a)* planning and *(b)* associated applications; when he expects to make a decision; and if he will make a statement. [93073]

Mr. Leslie: Railtrack have, at various stages, made 47 separate applications in regard to the Thameslink 2000 project, many of which replaced or varied earlier ones. They first applied in November 1997 for an Order under the Transport and Works Act (TWA) and for planning permission, together with applications for listed building consent (LBC) and conservation area consent (CAC). These proposals were modified by further applications in 1998 and 1999 for LBC and CAC and, in September 1999, for an amending TWA Order and related planning permission. In October 2000, while the public inquiry was underway, Railtrack submitted a further tranche of amending planning and LBC applications. The position concerning the applications is therefore a complex one which has involved many changes.

The inspector who held the public inquiry provided a report in January 2002, followed by supplementary reports in May and June 2002. These were published in July 2002. In summary, he concluded that whilst the scheme would bring very substantial transportation, regeneration and economic benefits, there were three key deficiencies in the scheme—at London Bridge and Blackfriars stations and in the Borough High Street area—which required resolution before a decision could appropriately be made on the scheme as a whole. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has since been giving careful consideration to the inspector's conclusions and to the many representations which have been received since the inquiry closed. These include a letter of 31 October 2002 from the Strategic Rail Authority who proposed that the scheme be split into two phases and asked for approval to be granted subject to conditions to deal with the outstanding issues identified by the inspector.

We are today informing Railtrack that a decision on the scheme is to be deferred pending the submission and consideration of fresh applications aimed at addressing the deficiencies identified by the inspector, an amended Environmental Statement and a proper examination of the SRA's proposal to split the project into two phases. This will require a re-opening of the earlier inquiry.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

PFI (Schools)

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will make a statement on the findings of the Audit Commission report, "PFI in Schools". [92769]

Mr. Miliband: The Audit Commission's report found that whilst teaching staff and pupils were generally pleased with their new schools, there had been some difficulties in the procurement process and some design aspects were less than ideal. However, the report focused only on a small number of very early PFI pathfinder schools. Since those early days, as the report itself made clear, we have continuously refined and improved the schools PFI process in the light of experience. Over 500 schools are now covered by PFI deals, representing over £1.3 billion of private sector investment. Another 400 PFI schools are in procurement or provisionally approved. This is a major programme by any standards and many schools are now receiving substantial investments to help provide high quality accommodation, raise educational standards and transform working conditions for pupils and staff.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what assessment he has made of the merits of funding the building of schools through the Private Finance Initiative. [92771]

Mr. Miliband: The Private Finance Initiative (PFI) has significant merits. For example, it allows for risk sharing with the private sector. The public sector does not pay anything until construction work on the school building is complete and the school is receiving the contracted service. New schools are generally completed on time and are then maintained to a high standard over the whole life of the contract. This prevents the deterioration of the schools estate which has been so common in the past. Also, teaching professionals can focus on teaching without the distractions of facilities management and poor accommodation.

Using the PFI to fund the building of schools has so far meant that an extra £1.3 billion has been invested to provide better conditions for pupils and teachers in over 500 schools. Transforming school accommodation is helping us to raise educational standards.

As far as individual PFI projects are concerned, each one is assessed at the outset to ensure it will provide best value over the whole life of the contract. Further checks are made at various points during the procurement process to ensure that value for money for the public sector is delivered. Once the project is operational and transactions appear in the local authority's accounts, the authority's auditors will give an opinion on whether these have been compiled in accordance with the relevant accounting standards.

Annual Report

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much producing his Department's latest Annual Report cost; how many copies were printed; how many copies of it were sold at its cover price; to whom copies of the report have been provided free of charge; and how many copies were provided free of charge. [90880]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Department pays for the design and typesetting of its departmental Annual Report. The costs of printing are met by the publisher, The Stationery Office (TSO). The Department buys in copies from the TSO at a discount to distribute to Ministers, Ofsted, the Education and Skills Select Committee, DfES and House of Commons Libraries, senior managers and some of our partners and stakeholders.

At the time of this answer, 1,166 copies have been sold, including 750 purchased by the Department.

The cost to the Department of typesetting and design was £42,346 and buying in copies from TSO cost £16,773. The total cost to the Department was therefore £59,119.

Class Sizes

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will list the class sizes of *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools in Haltemprice and Howden for the current academic year. [92852]

Mr. Miliband: In January 2002, the average class size (taught by one teacher) in primary and secondary schools in Haltemprice and Howden parliamentary constituency was 27.2 pupils and 22 pupils respectively. This compares with the average class size (taught by one teacher) in primary and secondary schools in England of 26.3 pupils and 21.9 pupils respectively.

Class Sizes (Kirklees)

Ann Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will list the class sizes of *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools in Kirklees in each of the last five years. [93788]

Mr. Miliband: The information requested is shown in the table.

Maintained primary and secondary schools[1]*, average class size*[2]*, Kirklees local education authority*

Position in January each year	*Primary*	*Secondary*
1998	29.3	22.3
1999	28.5	22.8
2000	27.6	23.0
2001	26.8	22.6
2002	27.0	22.9

[1] Includes middle schools as deemed.

[2] Classes as taught during the one selected period in each school on the day of the census.

Source:

Annual School's Census.

GCSE Results

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will list the secondary modern schools that achieved better results at GCSE than the average for all-ability comprehensive schools in 2001. [88938]

Mr. Miliband: The secondary modern schools which achieved better results at GCSE than the average of 47 per cent. for all-ability comprehensive schools in England in 2001 are as listed:

School	*Town*	*County*	*Percentage of 15-year-olds achieving 5 or more GCSE grades A*- C or GNVQ equivalent*
Hillview School for Girls	Tonbridge	Kent	75
Tolworth Girls' School and Centre for Continuing Education	Surbiton	Surrey	73
St. Benedict's Catholic High School	Alcester	Warwickshire	73
Waddesdon Church of England School	Aylesbury	Buckinghamshire	69
Pensby High School for Girls	Wirral	Merseyside	67
Upper Wharfedale School	Skipton	North Yorkshire	67
The Holy Cross School	New Malden	Surrey	65
St Bernard's Catholic School	High Wycombe	Buckinghamshire	65
Bowland High School	Clitheroe	Lancashire	64
Richard Challoner School	New Malden	Surrey	62
The Misbourne School	Great Missenden	Buckinghamshire	62
Ribblesdale High School Technology College	Clitheroe	Lancashire	62
Blackfen School for Girls	Sidcup	Kent	61
Stratford-upon-Avon High School	Stratford- upon Avon	Warwickshire	61
Alcester High School Technology College	Alcester	Warwickshire	60
Coombe Girls' School	New Malden	Surrey	59
The St George's College of Technology, Sleaford	Sleaford	Lincolnshire	59
John Colet School	Aylesbury	Buckinghamshire	58
Holmer Green Upper School	High Wycombe	Buckinghamshire	56
Henley-in-Arden High School	Solihull	West Midlands	56
St. Edmund's Church of England Girls' School and Sports College, Salisbury	Salisbury		55
Caistor Yarborough School	Market Rasen	Lincolnshire	55
Studley High School	Studley	Warwickshire	55
Wellington School	Altrincham	Cheshire	54
Bilton High School	Rugby	Warwickshire	54
The Gartree Community School	Lincoln		53
The Monks' Dyke Technology College	Louth	Lincolnshire	53
The Maplesden Noakes School	Maidstone		52
Ashton-on-Mersey School	Sale	Cheshire	51
The Chalfonts Community College	Gerrards Cross	Buckinghamshire	51
Glenmoor School	Bournemouth		51
Great Marlow School	Marlow	Buckinghamshire	50
The Astor of Hever Community School	Maidstone		50
Avonbourne School	Bournemouth		49
Wrotham School	Sevenoaks	Kent	49
The Bradbourne School	Sevenoaks	Kent	48
The Hayesbrook School	Tonbridge	Kent	48

Press Releases

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how many press releases have been issued by his Department in each *(a)* year and *(b)* quarter from 1995–96 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92447]

Mr. Miliband: We are unable to provide the quarterly figures for the number of press releases dating back to 1995 without incurring disproportionate costs.

The total number of press releases issued each year between 1995 and 2002 is set out in the table.

	Total number of press releases
1995	472
1996	443
1997	447
1998	598
1999	605
2000	538
2001[1]	395
2002[1]	210

[1] Employment issues were transferred to the Department for Work and Pensions in 2001 as part of the machinery of Government changes. This saw a reduction in the number of press releases issued.

Press releases dating from 1998 can be accessed via the Department's website, www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/newsiist. Press releases prior to 998 can be accessed via the Government News Network (GNN) website www.nds.coi.gov.uk.

School Playing Fields

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what his policy is on the disposal of a school playing field site for development, where the school has ceased to exist as a result of merger with an adjoining school. [93947]

Mr. Miliband: A local authority, governing body or foundation body must obtain the Secretary of State's consent before disposing of any playing field that has been used for the purposes of a maintained school within the preceding 10 years. This applies to both continuing and closed schools.

Applications to dispose of school playing fields are assessed against three main criteria. These are:

(i) schools' needs: that playing field provision and curriculum requirements at the school making the disposal, and at other schools in the local area, will be met;

(ii) community needs: that community use of school playing fields is taken into account, with alternative facilities made available if necessary; and

(iii) finance: that any sale proceeds are re-invested to provide new or improved sports facilities at schools, or are used otherwise to help raise standards by providing better educational facilities.

The criteria are set out in the Department's Guidance 0580/2001: The Protection of School Playing Fields and Land for City Academies. The criteria enable the Secretary of State to take into account the team game playing field provision at other local schools. This is to ensure that where there are surplus fields at one school, other local schools are given the opportunity to use those surplus fields. The School Playing Fields Advisory Panel provides advice on the extent to which applications meet the published criteria. The Secretary of State has no influence over what happens to a school playing field once consent has been given to its disposal. Any future development is a matter for the local planning authorities.

Selective Secondary Schools (Torbay)

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (1) how many and what percentage of Torbay Unitary Authority primary school pupils have gained selective secondary school places in the last three years for which figures are available; [92932]

(2) how many selective place secondary school pupils from outside the Torbay Unitary Authority attended *(a)* Churston, *(b)* Torquay Boys' and *(c)* Torquay Girls' Grammar Schools in each of the last three years; what percentage of the school roll this represented; and how many pupils and what percentage of the selective stream entry came from outside the Torbay Unitary Authority attending Westlands School in each of the last three years. [92933]

Mr. Miliband: The information requested is not held centrally.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Sulphur Dioxide Emissions

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list UK sulphur dioxide emissions in each year since 1997. [94292]

Alun Michael: The following table shows estimated UK emissions of sulphur dioxide (SO_2) from 1997 to 2000 (the latest year for which data are available). Data since 1970 on UK emissions of air pollutants, including sulphur dioxide, are published annually in the National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory (NAEI), which can be found at the NAEI website, *http://www.naei.org.uk*.

Year	*SO_2 emission (thousands of tonnes)*
1997	1,665
1998	1,588
1999	1,210
2000	1,165

Source:
National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory

"Living Places: Powers, Rights and Responsibilities"

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what arrangements her Department has made to consult *(a)* town, *(b)* parish and *(c)* community councils about the proposals contained in the document "Living Places—Powers, Rights and Responsibilities". [92654]

Margaret Beckett: The consultation paper Living Places—Powers, Rights, and Responsibilities was sent to 370 local authorities, 97 police authorities and constabularies, 17 Government Departments, 23 Government related agencies, 114 public bodies and non-government organisations and 168 companies.

The launch of the consultation at the Urban Summit received wide-spread high profile press coverage in all the major daily publications. 1,400 copies were given out at the summit and the consultation document has also been available since its launch free of charge from DEFRA publications and through the DEFRA website.

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs pursuant to her answer of 7 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 81–84W, concerning the Agriculture and Fisheries Council on 16 to 19 December 2002, what the Government's stance was on each of the 11 key features of the Council's conclusions, embodied in the three new regulations on the common fisheries policy. [91774]

Mr. Morley: We exerted strong pressure to secure the ending of subsidies for building new vessels at the earliest opportunity; retention of the coastal limits for a further period with a clear indication of expectation that they would continue beyond that; continuation of Hague Preference; and Regional Advisory Councils. On the rest of the key features we, with like-minded member states, generally gave steady support without which the points might not have been secured.

Bioterrorism

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what discussions she has held with the Home Office about strategies for safe handling of domestic pets in the event of bio-terrorist attacks. [92523]

Mr. Morley: Discussions are being held with the Home Office and other Government Departments on a number of different aspects, including those relating to animals.

Birds

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many *(a)* farm birds and *(b)* wild birds have been spotted on (i) special projects and (ii) non-special projects land in each region in each of the last 10 years. [93744]

Mr. Morley: There is no routine year-on-year monitoring of birds on Countryside Stewardship special projects. However, there are some data available regarding those special projects that are specifically targeted at particular bird species. For example a report published by RSPB in 2001 showed cirl buntings had increased by 83 per cent. on land under Countryside Stewardship scheme agreements, compared with an increase of only 2 per cent. on non-agreement land.

At present, only provisional results for regional bird data are available. Indicators have been developed based on on-going research by RSPB/BTO on behalf of DEFRA. These provisional estimates show that between 1970 and 1999 the Woodland species population index increased in the North East, North West, Yorkshire and the number, East Midlands and the West Midlands. The woodland species population index declined in the East, South East and South West regions. For the five regions where estimates are available, the Farmland species population indices decreased over the period. More detailed information is available on the Government's sustainable development website *http://www.sustainable-development.aov.uk/indicators/reaional/2001/h13.htm*

Cattle Passports

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many cases of non-compliance with the cattle passport rules are being investigated. [93726]

Alun Michael: There are currently seven cases of breach of the Cattle Identification rules being pursued by Defra's investigators as a result of referrals by the British Cattle Movement Service. A further 27 cases are being considered for referral by BCMS. Local authorities also investigate cases independently of Central Government Agencies.

Civil Servants

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many civil servants have been employed by *(a)* her Department and *(b)* each of its agencies and non-departmental bodies in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if she will make a statement. [92388]

Alun Michael: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Alexander) on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 333–34W.

Civil Servants (Psychometric Testing)

Mr. Flook: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many civil servants have *(a)* been tested and *(b)* will be tested using psychometric testing. [92592]

Alun Michael: *(a)* This information is not held centrally by the Department, *(b)* The inclusion of psychometric testing is being considered as part of the senior managers' development Programme, which will cover approximately 560 people. We are awaiting advice from the consultants recently appointed to design and deliver the programme on the role of psychometric testing within it.

Flooding (Insurance)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what estimate she has made of the number of homes in England and Wales that are uninsurable against the risk of flooding. [89626]

Margaret Beckett: No such estimate has been made. Some properties have always been uninsurable against flooding.

Compost

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs whether mechanically separated municipal solid waste organic matter used as a compost feedstock will be treated in the same way as source-separated feedstocks under the amendment to the Animal By-products Order. [93275]

Mr. Meacher: Waste that has, or may have, come into contact with meat or meat products will be classified as catering waste and will need to be treated as catering waste, in line with the requirements of the Animal By-products Order. As it may be difficult to demonstrate that household waste collected unsorted and then mechanically separated has never been in contact with meat or meat products, this is that it has been kept apart from meat and meat products may be more straightforward, if that cannot be done, then source separated waste must also be treated as catering waste.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will publish the standards required for compost derived from mechanical separation of municipal solid waste organic matter for use on land. [93276]

Mr. Meacher: There are no statutory standards for compost, although by virtue of Best Value Indicator BV82b, compost counts towards local authority statutory targets for recycling and composting. The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), in close co-operation with the Composting Association, has developed a BSI Publicly Available Specification (PAS) for compost. The delivery of this PAS for compost should help to create markets for organic waste derived products by creating confidence in the product. Achieving the PAS will depend on, for example, the suitability of the feedstock and the composting process used. We expect the EU Commission to issue a proposal for a Bio-waste Directive later this year; this should contain harmonized EU standards for composting.

Departmental Running Costs

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the running costs of *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of its sponsored agencies were in (i) 1997 and (ii) the most recent year for which figures are available. [90713]

Alun Michael: Detailed information on administration costs for Defra and its agencies, going back to 1998–99 and with projections to 2003–04, is set out in Table 5.5 of the 2002 Departmental Report (Cm 5422). Data for years before 1998–99 are not available on the same basis. Provisional outturn for gross and net administration cost limits were published in Public Expenditure 2001–2002 Provisional Outturn (Cm 5574), Tables 4 and 5. Updated information, with plans to 2005–06, will be published in the 2003 Departmental Report in the spring.

Equine Passports

Mr. David Cameron: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what estimates she has made of the costs of administrating equine passports. [93363]

(2) what steps her Department is intending to take to minimise the costs to horseowners of introducing equine passports. [93366]

Alun Michael: At present there are 56 organisations approved in the UK to issue horse passports. The administration costs to them will vary according to their own requirements and the number of passports they each issue. We have not therefore made any estimate of the costs of administering horse passports.

Current costs to horseowners of buying horse passports is expected to decreasedue to economies of scale which will occur when every horse is required to have a passport.

Flooding

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs which *(a)* agencies and *(b)* authorities are responsible for (i) flood prevention, (ii) flood management and (iii) remedial action in respect of the village of Pitton in Wiltshire; what their functions are; and if she will make a statement. [92758]

Mr. Morley: The Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has policy responsibility for flood defence in England while operational responsibility for delivering the service falls to the 'operating authorities': the Environment Agency, local authorities and Internal Drainage Boards. The Environment Agency has a general supervisory duty over all matters relating to flood defence and they are also responsible for flood forecasting and flood warning arrangements. In respect of Pitton, Salisbury district council and Wiltshire county council have responsibilities as flood defence and highways authorities respectively.

I understand that flooding in Pitton is due to a combination of high groundwater and springflows. The Agency has exercised its supervisory power by producing reports into the flooding that occurred in 1995 and 2000. Following the 1995 report, Salisbury district council undertook some works with Defra grant aid. I understand that all the authorities have signed up to an action plan following the 2000 report.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the total estimated financial cost of flood damage in Nottinghamshire was for 2002–03 [92856]

Mr Morley: The Environment Agency does not hold data for total financial cost of flood damage for all flooding events in all locations.

Fraud and Theft

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much money has been lost by her Department and its agencies and non-departmental public bodies through *(a)* fraud and *(b)* theft for each year since 1996–97. [92461]

Alun Michael: The Department has only been in existence since June 2001. Information covering earlier periods is therefore not available, and could be constructed retrospectively only at disproportionate cost. Annual reports, which the Treasury prepares on fraud, covering returns from both the former MAFF and DETR, are deposited in the House of Commons Library.

However, annual returns of fraud submitted by DEFRA, including its Agencies to HMT covering the financial years 2001/2002 show the total cost of theft and fraud to the department to be as follows:

	Fraud (£)	*Theft (£)*
Core-DEFRA	61,066	38,678
Agencies	—	226,111
Non-departmental bodies	N/a	N/a

Horticulture Research International

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much the mailshot on the Horticulture Research International, dated 20 January 2003, cost broken down into *(a)* postage, *(b)* publication and *(c)* envelopes. [93018]

Mr Morley: The Government announced its response to the Quinquennial Review of Horticulture Research International to Parliament on 20 January 2003. A copy of the statement has been made available on DEFRA's website: www.defra.gov.uk. reference: News Release 24/03 of 20 January. The Department has also written to more than 150 individuals or organisations who made representations about the Review to alert them to the statement. The cost of this exercise has not been identified separately but is estimated to be less than £50.

In-farm Slaughter

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what discussions she has had with the Food Standards Agency about in-farm slaughter; [93873]

(2) what plans she has to devise a procedure which would allow in-farm slaughterers to continue to operate within the law; [93875]

(3) what her policy is on in-farm slaughter. [93874]

Mr. Morley: There have been no recent discussions with the Food Standards Agency regarding on-farm slaughter. The on-farm slaughter of animals is permitted under the 'Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995'. The hygiene regulations covering the on-farm slaughter of animals are a matter for the Food Standards Agency.

Landfill

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) how many hazardous waste landfill sites operate in the United Kingdom; how many of these are in-house sites; and if she will make a statement; [89753]

(2) how many landfill sites have submitted applications to deal with hazardous waste after July 2004; how many of these are in-house sites; and if she will make a statement. [89754]

Margaret Beckett: The information that is available on landfill sites relates to England and Wales and comes from a conditioning plan exercise conducted by the Environment Agency. The figures requested are set out in the table, broken down by region:

Region	*Hazardous (post 2002)*	*Of which in-house*[1]	*Hazardous (post 2004)*	*Of which in-house*[1]
Anglian	47	8	9	7
Midlands	42	4	4	2
North East	39	10	11	6
North West	27	6	8	5
South West	16	1	2	1
Southern	13	0	1	0
Thames	19	1	0	0
Wales	15	6	3	3
Total	218	36	38	24

[1] In-house is defined as those landfill sites owned and operated by a company for disposal of its own waste.

Minimum Wage

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will estimate the impact of increasing the minimum wage *(a)* in line with average earnings, *(b)* to £4.17 per hour, *(c)* to £4.87 per hour, *(d)* to £5.00 per hour and *(e)* to £5.30 per hour, on the cost of salaries of departmental employees *(i)* in total and (ii) for each nation of the United Kingdom in the next financial year. [90604]

Alun Michael: There would be no impact to the cost of salaries to core Defra employees by increasing the national minimum wage by the amounts quoted, either nationally or across the Department in total. The minimum salary for a Defra employee is already above the rates quoted. This is a national salary payable to Defra employees across the United Kingdom.

Special Projects

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much has been spent on special project schemes in each region in each of the last 10 years. [93743]

Alun Michael: The amount of Government funding for Countryside Stewardship Special Projects[1], in each Government Office region over the last 10 years has been as follows:

Government funding per year (£1,000s)

Region	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*	*Total*
East Midlands	44	49	82	90	72	109	67	120	154	109	894
Eastern	36	27	15	9	21	6	24	15	15	25	186
Greater London	1	1	10	2	1	26	1	1	7	1	52
North East	3	1	8	9	18	13	26	15	6	93	192
North West	17	16	42	4	18	42	31	25	72	170	437
South East	17	62	42	52	57	234	196	159	284	546	1,648
South West	15	51	147	81	173	333	360	390	395	595	2,541

Government funding per year (£1,000s)

Region	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*	*Total*
West Midlands	2	23	16	7	93	57	74	65	120	212	670
Yorks/ Humberside	2	10	25	5	15	52	54	126	127	175	590
Total	138	241	386	258	456	887	816	924	1,179	1,926	7,211

[1] These figures include two types of Countryside Stewardship special projects: projects for land management (e.g. overwintered stubbles for cirl buntings) where the payment is made annually for 10 years and capital works projects (e.g. restoration of traditional buildings) where the payment is made in one year only.

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to rationalise the special projects scheme; and if she will make a statement about her plans for its future. [93745]

Alun Michael: We are carrying out a wide-ranging review of English agri-environment schemes, including the Countryside Stewardship scheme, under which special projects are available.

The review has now reached the second consultation stage, within which views have been invited regarding the Agri-environment Framework document. This document contains a proposal that a higher tier scheme should:

> "...include provision for special projects, focussing particularly on encouraging group applications aimed at tackling localised environmental problems requiring collective or co-ordinated management, especially where this falls outside the standard menu of options".

Responses to this consultation should be received by 28 February 2003.

Statutory Instruments

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many statutory instruments were issued by MAFF in each calendar year from 1979 to 2001; and how many have been issued by her Department since June 2001. [89837]

Alun Michael: The number of Statutory Instruments issued by MAFF in each calendar year from 1979 June 2001 is as follows:

	Number
1979	95
1980	128
1981	110
1982	119
1983	108
1984	82
1985	88
1986	102
1987	127
1988	96
1989	135
1990	158
1991	111
1992	145
1993	150
1994	115
1995	138
1996	162
1997	139
1998	130
1999	116
2000	127
2001[1]	—

[1] To 7 June 297 (of which 259 related specifically to the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak)

Defra was created on 8 June 2001. The number of statutory instruments laid by Defra in 2001 was 219 of which 159 related specifically to the Foot and Mouth disease outbreak, and seven were on topics previously the responsibility of DETR.

The figure in 2002 was 127 of which 29 were on topics previously the responsibility of DETR and 6 related to the aftermath of the Foot and Mouth Disease.

Teleworking

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what estimate she has made of the effects on the environment of the level of teleworking *(a)* now and *(b)* over the next five years. [91541]

Mr. Meacher: Any measure which reduces the need to travel and leads to reductions in emissions of local air pollutants and greenhouse gases would generally have a positive effect on the environment, but no quantification has been undertaken to measure this.

Thames (Dredging)

Mr. Goodman: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when the Environment Agency or other Government body last dredged the Thames in the Marlow and Medmenham area. [93210]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* The Environment Agency last dredged the River Thames in the Marlow and Medmenham area in 1995.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Chechnya

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations Her Majesty's Government has made to the Russian Government about renewal of the OSCE's mandate in Chechnya; and if he will make a statement. [93135]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 28 January 2003]*: I discussed the issue with the Russian Foreign Minister on 27 December 2002, and sought an extension to the

OSCE Assistance Group's existing mandate to allow further negotiations about the future of the mission's presence in Chechnya.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps have been taken by Her Majesty's Government to ensure that human rights monitors from the OSCE remain in Chechnya, and if he will make a statement. [93136]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* With our EU and international partners, we have repeatedly pressed the Russian Government to agree a new mandate for the OSCE Assistance Group in Chechnya, which includes the monitoring of the human rights and humanitarian situation as one of its key responsibilities.

Health and Safety Strategy

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what information he has collated on the application to his Department and its agencies of the checklist, circulated by letter by Sir Richard Mottram, referred to under Action Point 12 of the Revitalising Health and Safety strategy statement; and if he will make a statement. [89495]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office will be issuing a revised health and safety policy statement which outlines the responsibilities of all staff. This also gives clear guidance on how to access the arrangements to ensure the health and safety of staff, visitors and contractors and provides contact details of the health and safety advisers employed by the FCO. Staff are involved in health and safety issues through health and safety liaison officers and consultation with the Trade Unions.

The FCO's health and safety experts report quarterly to the Administration Board, chaired by the FCO's health and safety champion, on the incorporation of health and safety awareness in the Department's work. All new staff in London receive health and safety induction training. The health and safety team regularly review the training provision to ensure its suitability.

Iraq

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with EU partners in advance of the General Affairs and External Relations Council on 27 and 28 January on the subject of Iraq, with particular reference to the formulation of a common position; and if he will make a statement. [93625]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 28 January 2003]*: I have had frequent discussions with my EU counterparts and other Foreign Minister colleagues on Iraq in the run-up and in the margins of the General Affairs and External Relations Council on 27–28 January; I shall continue these contacts.

EU Foreign Ministers were united on Iraq at the General Affairs and External Relations Council on 27 January. We reaffirmed our view that UN Security Council resolution 1441 represents a final opportunity for Iraq to resolve the crisis peacefully. We urged Iraq to engage in full and active co-operation with the weapons inspectors and provide them, without delay, with all additional and complete information on questions raised by the international community. The question of an EU Common Position did not arise.

The full conclusions of the Council on Iraq are as follows:

> "The Council, deeply concerned about the situation in Iraq, reaffirms that its goal remains the effective and complete disarmament of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. The Council fully supports the efforts of the UN to ensure full and immediate compliance by Iraq with all relevant resolutions of the Security Council, in particular with UNSCR 1441 of 8 November 2002. The resolution gives an unambiguous message that the Iraqi government has a final opportunity to resolve the crisis peacefully.
>
> The Council therefore urges the Iraqi authorities to engage in full and active co-operation with UNMOVIC and IAEA. The Iraqi authorities must, as an imperative, provide the inspectors, without delay, with all additional and complete information on questions raised by the international community. The Council expresses its appreciation for the work accomplished by the inspectors so far and reiterates its confidence and full support for Dr. Blix and Dr. El Baradei to complete their mission in accordance with UNSCR 1441. It welcomes their intention to continue and intensify their operations.
>
> The Council recalls that it stands ready to engage all necessary efforts to answer the needs of UNMOVIC and IAEA in personnel and practical means.
>
> The Council underlines the fundamental importance of preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in accordance with the relevant international instruments. The Security Council has a key role to play in these endeavours.
>
> The Council reaffirms the role of the UNSC in the implementation of UNSCR 1441. The responsibility of the UNSC in maintaining international peace and security must be respected."

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what powers member states of the United Nations Security Council have to offer political immunity to Saddam Hussein in inviting him to go into exile. [93894]

Mr. Rammell: The powers of the Security Council are set out in the Charter of the United Nations, Chapter VII of which provides that the Council shall decide what measures are to be taken to maintain or restore international peace and security.

Nuclear Weapons

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will set out the direct and indirect trade, barter or other form of exchange that has taken place since 1973 between the United States and the United Kingdom on nuclear weapons, nuclear weapons components or nuclear weapons materials under the provisions of the 1959 amendment to the 1958 US-UK Agreement on Mutual Defence on Atomic Energy Matters. [92307]

Mr. Hoon: I have been asked to reply.

Exchanges of information between the United Kingdom and the United States on nuclear weapon matters take place only under the auspices of the 1958 Mutual Defence Agreement, and its amendments.

There have been no transfers of nuclear weapons between the UK and the US. The UK is a member and a Depositary state for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (1968) and our actions, including under the Mutual Defence Agreement, are in compliance with that treaty. I am withholding other details under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Pakistan

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many people applied from Islamabad for *(a)* visitor visas and *(b)* permanent settlement in the UK in each year since 1997; and if he will make a statement. [93427]

Mr. Rammell: The number of settlement and non-settlement applications received in Islamabad since 1997 is given below:

	Settlement	*Non-settlement*
1997	9,183	23,828
1998	10,837	38,250
1999	10,279	40,537
2000	9,956	54,390
2001[1]	2,595	13,256
April 2001 to March 2002	10,271	65,149
April 2002 to December 2002	2,005	37,774

[1] These figures are for the period January to March 2001. During 2000 UK visas changed to collecting annual statistics over a financial year period.

HEALTH

General Practioners (Training)

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many places are available for the training of GPs in England and Wales; and what percentage of trainee places have been filled. [84492]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 2 December 2002]*: Information on the places available for the training of general practitioners in England are collected by the Directors of Postgraduate General Practice Education. The information is shown in the table and indicates an increase of 14.9 per cent., since 1999.

Year	*Number available to provide GP training*
1999	2,111
2000	2,235
2001	2,264
2002	2,425

From the latest figures it is estimated that 90 per cent. of trainee places were filled.

Information in respect of Scotland and Wales is the responsibility of the devolved administrations, whilst the institutions in Northern Ireland are dissolved, responsibility rests with Ministers in the Northern Ireland Office.

NHS IT Projects

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list IT projects with a total contract value of more than £5 million which are being undertaken by the NHS. [86038]

Ms Blears: The Department of Health, only approves National Health Service Information Management and Technology business cases that exceed £20 million whole life cost. This category currently consists of one case, the Swindon and Marlborough NHS Trust electronic patient record scheme (whole life cost £25.3 million). The remaining cases are dealt with at various intermediate levels in the NHS; previously by regional offices and now strategic health authorities. We do not maintain a central list of cases approved in the NHS.

Acute and Primary Care Trusts

Hugh Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will state for each NHS acute trust and each NHS primary care trust for the latest year for which figures are available *(a)* the national reference cost index (Market Forces Factor adjusted), *(b)* the increase or decrease in funding which the trust would require if its costs were the national average and *(c)* the trust's surplus or deficit that year. [93081]

Mr. Hutton: The information is available in the Library in the Reference Cost Index 2002.

It is not possible to identify the potential increase or decrease that each trust would require if costs were moved to the national average at this point. Approximately 11 per cent. of services are still excluded from reference costs and national average costs do not yet exist for these services. This does not allow a full analysis and assessment of the overall impact on an individual organisation's income flows.

Information on National Health Service trusts' surplus and deficits have been placed in the Library.

Asthma

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for each year since 1997, broken down by ethnicity, the percentage of children suffering from asthma. [91987]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is not collected centrally. The table shows the number of hospital episodes by age where the primary diagnosis is asthma. The International Classification of Disease 10 codes J45-J46 has been used. The data is for 1997–98 to 2001–02.

Information on the number of hospital episodes where the primary diagnosis is asthma is collected by age. This is shown in the table for the years 1997–98 to 2001–2002.

Ordinary admissions and day cases combined: completed episode primary diagnosis 493 (ICD9 code) diagnosis asthma J45-J46 (ICD10)

	Number of admissions within the year in NHS hospitals				
Age	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
0 to 4	21,061	19,431	17,493	14,580	15,253
5 to 14	12,885	11,896	11,703	11,147	11,796
15 to 44	21,271	20,245	18,796	17,993	17,084
Unknown	13	10	20	57	69

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent guidelines he has issued to general practitioners on accepting asylum seekers; and what assessment he has made of the effect on existing patients. [92843]

Ms Blears: The most recently published guidance is Health Service Circular 1999/018. This explains that refugees or persons applying for asylum in the United Kingdom are regarded as ordinarily resident. They are therefore eligible to register with a general practitioner or personal medical services pilot provider for national health service primary care services.

Primary care trusts are responsible for securing all health services for their populations. In doing this they will continually assess whether or not the current configuration of primary care services matches the need of the current population. This will include assessing the local impact of asylum seekers.

Bio-terrorism

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures are in place to prevent contamination in the event of a terrorist attack using biological agents. [88386]

Mr. Hutton: Emergency service personnel will play a central role in dealing with any possible contamination, in the event of a potential attack using biological agents. To this end all the 'blue light' emergency services have been provided with suitable personal protective equipment to protect them against the effects of contamination in the event of a bio-terrorism attack. Protocols for washing down and decontamination of emergency service and national service personnel, the public and premises have been developed with the fire service. The NHS already has in place sound working procedures to deal with biological agents, the spread of infectious diseases and to deal with contaminated equipment and premises. The advice of the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens will be sought on how to tackle any new risks from dangerous pathogens should they emerge.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent training has been provided to NHS personnel to deal with a terrorist incident involving biological agents. [88395]

Mr. Hutton: Public health guidance was issued to regional directors of public health in October 2001. General guidance "Planning for Major Incidents: The NHS Guidance" issued by the Department is now openly available on the Department's website *www.doh.gov.uk/epcu/cbr/intro.htm* with links to complementary guidance on dealing with key biological agents and investigating unusual illnesses on the Public Health Laboratory Service website www.*phls.co.uk/topics az/deliberate release/menu.htm*. In addition, four specialties have been targeted for immediate training in dealing with the deliberate release of a biological agent: consultants in communicable disease, infectious disease physicians, clinical microbiologists/virologists and accident and emergency (A&E) physicians. Training has started and is being developed further. The Department has consulted with the relevant royal colleges concerning the training it is doing and with the British Infection Society. Training programmes have been devised for primary care trusts and general practitioners and are due to be piloted in Eastern region in early 2003.

Specific training materials such as videos and information packs have also been prepared for occupational health physicians and other clinicians involved in implementation of the national smallpox plan which is available on the Department's website.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice he is giving to the public on action in the event of a terrorist attack using biological agents. [88398]

Mr. Hutton: Advice about key biological agents is available to the public on the Department's website www.doh.gov.uk/epcu/cbr/intro.htm with links to complementary guidance on the Public Health Laboratory Service website www.phls.co.uk/topics az/deliberate release/menu.htm. Information leaflets concerning the deliberate release of smallpox, plague, anthrax, tularaemia and botulism have been prepared and will be made available to the public in the event of any outbreak. The Department is working across government to develop further public information. A wide range of techniques is being considered to find the most effective way to convey information to the public, such as posters and the internet, to help people maintain vigilance and prepare for the consequences of terrorist acts.

Cancelled Operations

Dr. Richard Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many planned operating lists at *(a)* the Alexandra hospital, Redditch and *(b)* the Worcestershire Royal infirmary were cancelled due to staff shortages between 23 December 2002 and 3 January 2003. [93252]

Mr. Lammy: No planned lists were cancelled at Worcestershire Royal hospital, and only two operations from the 23 planned were cancelled during this period at the Alexandra hospital. These were cancelled as a result of an outbreak of diarrhoea and vomiting resulting in a loss of bed capacity, not due to staff shortages.

Chiropody

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what response the Department has made to the Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists' report of 6 December. [86984]

Mr. Hutton: The Department has not issued a formal response to the document "NHS Chiropody/Podiatry Services—Cause for Continuing Concern, Time for Government Action", issued by the Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists.

However, I wrote to the chairman of the Society on 27 January, a copy of which has been placed in the Library.

Civil Servants

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many civil servants have been employed by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each of its agencies and non-departmental bodies in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92382]

Mr. Lammy: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State at the Cabinet Office (Mr. Alexander) on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 334W.

Computer Misuse

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cases of computer misuse there were in his Department in each of the last five years, broken down by each category of misuse; and how many of those cases resulted in disciplinary action. [93042]

Mr. Lammy: The Department takes any misuse of its information technology systems very seriously. All staff are regularly reminded of the Department's policy on misuse of IT, with detailed guidance contained in the document Acceptable Use of Information Technology available on the Department of Health Intranet.

The table shows the total recorded cases of computer misuse within the central Department of Health. A more detailed breakdown of these figures is not available. Management checks indicate only a small number of the breaches involve inappropriate content.

Type of misuse	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*	*Totals*
Internet	20	21	15	—	1	57
E-mail	1	2	9	4	10	26
Internet and e-mail	2	—	2	—	—	4
Total number of cases	23	23	26	4	11	87
Disciplinary Action Taken	22	22	26	4	11	85

Correspondence Protocol

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice he will provide to health authorities and NHS trusts on observing the requirements of the protocol of the administrative court that public bodies must reply to all correspondence over disputed matters in 14 days. [87547]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 17 December 2002]*: The Pre-Action Protocol for potential judicial review claims stipulates that public bodies exercising a judicial function should respond to letters before action in an instance where judicial review is threatened within 14 days. National health service organisations' duty to follow the Protocol requires no further guidance from the Department, and as statutory bodies, they will need to consult their own legal advisers on how to proceed in each case. However, compliance with the Protocol and with other statutory bodies forms part of the requirements set out in 'Improvement, Expansion and Reform', the NHS planning and priorities framework for 2003–06.

Departmental Offices (Running Costs)

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the running costs were of his Ministers' private offices, separately identifying expenditure on staff, in each financial year from 1997–98 to 2001–02. [80954]

Mr. Lammy: The running costs for Ministers' private offices for the financial years 1997–98 to 2001–02 are shown in the table.

£000

Year	*Staff*	*Non staff*	*Total*
1997–98	1,385	464	1,849
1998–99	1,564	580	2,144
1999–2000	1,983	670	2,653
2000–01	2,323	624	2,947
2001–02	2,242	634	2,876

Note:

Private Office Expenditure

An additional Minister was appointed during 1999–2000. The data is taken from the Department's Accounts system and is in cash terms. The salaries of Ministers themselves are not included.

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the outcome was of the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council held on 3 December; what the Government's stance was on the issues discussed, including its voting record; and if he will make a statement. [87251]

Ms Blears: My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Health represented the United Kingdom for the Health element of the first day of the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council in Brussels on 2 December 2002; the consumer affairs items were also taken on that day.

The main health business of this Council related to tobacco. The Council reached qualified majority on a First Reading Deal on the Tobacco Advertising Directive. He emphasised that the UK supports

European Union legislation on tobacco advertising, having strong domestic legislation in place. He made clear the Government's determination to ensure the legal victories secured by the tobacco companies over previous European legislation would not be repeated with this Directive. He therefore voted against the Directive because he did not think that the drafting of some provisions was good enough or that it went as far as it could in some areas (for example by not covering cigarette papers).

A Council Recommendation on the prevention of smoking and on initiatives to improve tobacco control was adopted by a qualified majority, with support from the UK. The Commission also gave an update on the World Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

Member States set out their positions on the pharmaceuticals reviews with a discussion on three key outstanding issues in the European Medicines Evaluation Agency (EMEA) Regulation. There was no vote on this item. On scope, the UK was amongst several Member States who spoke out against extension of the centralised procedure for human medicines, and in favour of a choice for companies. Others supported the Commission. Most felt that Member States should appoint at least one member to the management board. Many were willing to consider also accepting representatives of patient groups or the European Parliament. A majority of Member States and the Commission were able to accept the Presidency compromise of a single renewal of an authorisation after five years.

Council adopted a Recommendation on the prevention and reduction of risks associated with drug dependence. Council Conclusions on action against obesity were adopted unanimously. The UK voted in favour of both of these items.

The Presidency presented a progress report on negotiations on a Directive setting standards of quality and safety for the donation, procurement, testing, processing, storage and distribution of human cells and tissues. The Commission said that they would look carefully at the changes in scope the Council was proposing in relation to the medicinal products and medical devices Directives.

The Commission updated the Council on the high level process of reflection on patient mobility and health care development, and on the programme of co-operation on bioterrorism and health security. The Commission will be tabling a proposal to set up a network centre for disease control in May 2003, to be set up in 2005. The aim is to enhance the EU capacity to prevent the spread of communicable diseases, working closely with Member States' own institutions.

The Commission reported that it had established a working group, to consider the quality of information on internet sites in the health sector. The group, consisting of representatives from government, Non-Government Organisations and industry, has reported and agreed actions including measures on transparency, privacy and accountability. The Commission will monitor work through the E-Europe 2005 ActionPlan.

Items under any other business included an information paper from Ireland on post-polio syndrome. There was also a brief discussion on the follow-up to the G10 initiative on the pharmaceutical industry. A Commission communication, was under preparation, and should issue in May 2003. Italy announced they would have an Informal Ministerial meeting on this during their Presidency. Finally, there was a presentation from Belgium on their candidate for the Director-Generalship of the WHO, Peter Piot.

The consumer part of the Council met with minimal discussion over a short agenda.

The Council adopted a Resolution on Community consumer policy strategy 2002–06 without debate, endorsing the aims and objectives of the Commission's strategy as published in May 2002, namely a high common level of consumer protection, effective enforcement and the involvement of consumer organisations. The UK voted in favour, as did all other Member States.

The Council and the Commission endorsed the Presidency's conclusions on a joint Commission-UK seminar held in November on using consumer statistics to inform and prioritise consumer policy. In accordance with the conclusions, the Commission will take forward technical work on definitions and the comparability of consumer statistics.

As an information point only, the Council took note of a Commission presentation on the preliminary results of the European Extra-Judicial Network (EEJ-Net), the EU network of clearing houses designed to facilitate and resolve cross-border, out-of-court consumer disputes.

Finally, Greece informed the Council that it wanted to contribute to the consumer agenda during its forthcoming Presidency by strengthening its involvement in the internal market. It highlighted in particular a seminar on the Commission's Green Paper of 2003, and a Ministerial conference on unfair trading to be held on 7 May 2003.

Empty Homes

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many empty homes his Department *(a)* had five years ago and *(b)* has now, by region; if he will establish an empty homes strategy within his Department; and if he will set a target for reduction in empty homes. [92915]

Mr. Lammy: The Department has no residential accommodation on the administrative estate, empty or otherwise.

Five years ago, the Department was in the process of disposing of the St. Charles Youth Treatment Centre, Brentwood, which included nine houses and eight flats that were empty. The site, including the housing, was eventually transferred to the Home Office for re-use within Government.

No information about residential accommodation owned by National Health Service trusts or primary care trusts in England is currently held that could answer this question, although a database of residential accommodation available for NHS staff in London has been built.

A survey of the NHS residential estate was last conducted in September 1998, which showed that there were 895 houses and flats vacant at that time. This was however a snapshot in time, and does not take account of units being held back for occupancy within a short time, as might be expected in a managed portfolio in periods of high staff turnover.

NHS Estates produced 'Sold on Health' (2000), which highlights opportunities to improve management of the NHS healthcare estate and new ways of driving out surplus estate and getting best value from the whole asset lifecycle.

The NHS housing initiative was established in April 2000 to tackle the problem of a lack of affordable accommodation for health workers on moderate incomes.

The NHS Plan announced, in July 2000, a target to deliver an additional 2,000 units of affordable accommodation for nurses in London by July 2003.

The initiative extends to cover the south east of England and other areas of high property prices throughout the country.

Green Minister

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which Minister in his Department is the nominated Green Minister; how often he has attended meetings of the Green Ministers; and which official has responsibility for the DEFRA rural proofing check-list in his Department. [88458]

Mr. Lammy: My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Public Health (Ms Blears) is the nominated Green Minister in the Department of Health.

It is established practice under Exemption 2 of Part II of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information not to disclose information relating to the proceedings of the Cabinet and its committees-such as Ministerial attendance at committees.

Officials in the Department's policy and planning directorate have lead responsibility for co-ordinating rural proofing activity in the Department of Health.

Homeless People

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assistance is given to homeless people to have access to a nutritionally balanced diet. [87421]

Ms Blears: The Homelessness Directorate within the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister are working with the Department of Health and the clinical practitioners and health visitors association to improve access to and raise awareness of the benefits of a healthy diet.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action his Department takes by way of partnership agreements with other Departments to improve the health care needs of homeless people. [87448]

Ms Blears: Vulnerable groups—including homeless people—have been identified as a key priority in the Government's cross-cutting review on health inequalities. In the review, Departments across Government gave commitments to take action where their programmes, policies and resources can make an impact on inequalities, including for vulnerable groups. A forthcoming All-Government delivery plan on health inequalities will set out how Departments' commitments will translate into action; the Department will drive forward the implementation of that plan.

Hospital Food

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the nutritional standards of hospital food for *(a)* adults, *(b)* children and *(c)* vulnerable elderly people. [83346]

Ms Blears: The Better Hospital Food programme has been designed to improve both the quality and availability of food for all patients through, amongst other things, the introduction of a 24-hour catering service and the provision of additional daily snacks.

Hospitals should have available to them expert dietetic advice, which should be called upon when designing hospital menus to ensure they meet the need of all patients. Additionally the essence of care, issued by the Chief Nursing Officer in 2001, highlights the importance of nutritional screening to identify patients who are at risk.

The National Health Service recipe book, issued in May 2001, sets out the minimum standards to be provided by hospitals and also provides additional guidance on meeting the nutritional needs of children, elderly and long stay patients as well as those requiring food with modified consistency. There is additionally guidance on common therapeutic diets.

A guidance document on providing catering services to children and young adults is due to be issued to the NHS shortly.

Hospital Fractures

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people experienced bone fractures while being cared for in NHS hospitals in each of the last five years; and how many of the injured persons died while still in hospital. [93100]

Mr. Lammy: The Department does not collect this information centrally. In-patient central records monitor why a patient has entered a hospital, but do not necessarily record subsequent changes to the reason they are being cared for in hospital.

However, the Government are concerned about national health service patients affected by adverse events, including bone fractures. It established the National Patient Safety Agency in July 2001 to improve the safety of NHS patient care by promoting an open and fair culture and by introducing a national reporting and learning system for adverse events. It is planned for the system to be rolled out across the NHS from summer 2003. The reporting and learning system will, in time, enable us to understand the nature and extent of adverse events in the NHS, including bone fractures and take action to prevent them being repeated.

In addition, the national service framework for older people requires the NHS to take action to prevent falls and reduce resultant fractures or other injuries to older people.

HPA

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions are taking place about the future pension situation for HPA employees after 1 April; and when he expects these to be concluded. [90052]

Ms Blears: The intention is for transferring staff to be able to retain membership of their existing pension scheme. As a special health authority, the Health Protection Agency will be able to admit existing and new staff to the NHS occupational pension scheme.

The current Transfer of Undertaking (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981 statutory regulations do not cover occupational pension schemes. If for any reason it were not possible for individuals to retain their membership of their existing pension scheme, all necessary steps will be taken to ensure that staff retain broadly comparable pension arrangements in the future. Advice is being sought from the Government Actuary's Department and if appropriate to seek a certificate of comparability.

Inequality Review

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he intends to take to address the community development aspects of the Tackling Inequality 2002 Cross-cutting Review. [84886]

Ms Blears *[holding answer 9 December 2002]*: We will shortly be publishing an all Government delivery plan for tackling health inequalities. This will set out priorities for action across Government including local Government and in the national health service, in partnership with the community, voluntary and business sectors and will address the community development aspects of tackling health inequalities.

Kava-kava

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will place in the Library *(a)* the discussion paper that the Medicines Control Agency used to provide the framework from which risk management options have been considered regarding kava-kava, *(b)* the information used to assess the economic impact of the various regulatory options considered by the Medicines Control Agency regarding kava-kava and *(c)* the Medicines Control Agency risk analysis for kava-kava on the viability risk management options other than banning kava-kava; [91471]

(2) if he will place in the Library data used by the Medicines Control Agency in considering the safety of kava-kava that relates to potential enzyme induction caused by *(a)* kava-kava and *(b)* registered medicines in association with kava-kava in adverse reaction case reports; [91472]

(3) if he will place in the Library the Medicines Cont[illegible] Agency's *(a)* risk benefit analysis in relation to kava[illegible] *(b)* supporting documents and *(c)* expert advic[illegible] [91474]

(4) if he will place in the Library correspondence and submissions *(a)* sent to and *(b)* received by the Medicines Control Agency regarding the regulating of kava-kava. [91473]

Ms Blears: I am placing in the Library of the House copies of the following documents: the Medicines Control Agency's letters to interest groups about kava-kava; a summary of the responses received in response to the Agency's public consultation (MLX 286); copies of responses to the consultation received where permission has been received from the author; papers considered by the Committee on Safety of Medicines (CSM) and by the Medicines Commission; minutes of the meetings of the CSM held on 12 December 2001, 10 July 2002 and 16 October 2002; minutes of the meeting of the CSM's working group held on 12 March 2002; the final regulatory impact assessment (RIA).

Some of the papers considered by the advisory committees have been anonymised under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, as have parts of the minutes of meetings, under exemptions 10, 13, 14 and 15 of the code.

Minutes of the Commission's meeting of 7 November 2002 will be placed in the Library once the minutes have been formally ratified by the Commission. This is expected in February.

We will review all other documents sent and received by the MCA relating to kava-kava to assess what, if any information is subject to non disclosure under the code and seek permission for disclosure from external parties where necessary. The main categories into which these additional documents fall include: factual advice sought from and given by the MCA following inquiries from a wide range of external parties, including members of the public, about the regulatory position of kava-kava and the progress of consideration of safety issues; legal advice sought by and given to the MCA; factual information exchanged between the MCA and the Food Standards Agency, other Government Departments, regulatory authorities elsewhere in the European Union, papers reflecting policy advice to and discussion with Ministers. Some of these categories of information will be exempt from disclosure under the code.

In relation to kava-kava medicines with a marketing authorisation, exemptions 10, 13 and 15 of the code apply. This information remains confidential and publication would be premature while the issues are still under consideration; however, the advice will be published (some papers may be anonymised) once a regulatory decision has been made.

MMR

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what regulations and restrictions apply to the import of the single *(a)* rubella, *(b)* measles and *(c)* mumps vaccine; and what the licensing arrangements are for each. [93419]

Ms Blears: Single rubella vaccine and single measles and mumps vaccines are licensed in the United Kingdom. However, the pharmaceutical companies that hold the UK marketing authorisations for single measles and mumps vaccines do not manufacture the products for, or market them in, this country and the vaccines being prescribed and administered are imported unlicensed medicines. Licensed single rubella vaccine is currently available in the UK. However, unlicensed rubella vaccine may also be imported on occasions when the licensed vaccine is unavailable.

An unlicensed medicine, such as a single vaccine, may only be imported in accordance with The Medicines (Standard Provisions for Licences and Certificates) Amendment Regulations 1999 No. 4. An importer must hold the appropriate Wholesale Dealer's or Wholesale Dealer's Import Licence issued by the Medicines Control Agency (MCA), and is required to notify the MCA on each occasion that they intend to import such a product. Importation may proceed unless the importer has been informed by the MCA that it objects to importation. The MCA may object and prevent importation if it has concerns about the safety or quality of the product, or if there is an equivalent licensed medicine available. The maximum quantity that may be imported per notification is defined in the regulations.

NHS (Private Sector Treatments)

Dr. Richard Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust's expenditure on NHS patients treated surgically in the private sector was between 23 December 2002 and 3 January 2003. [93253]

Mr. Lammy: Approximately £100,000 was spent by the Worcestershire Acute Hospitals National Health Service Trust on treatments for NHS patients in private hospitals in Halesowen, Droitwich and Worcester during the period.

NHS Hospitals (Tendering)

Dr. Richard Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which of the private companies on the Government's register of expertise for tendering to run NHS hospitals have experience in managing emergency services; and what safeguards are in place to prevent these firms recruiting the best managers from the NHS. [93251]

Mr. Lammy: The independent panel set up by the National Health Service Appointments Commission assessed the general ability of each private sector organisation to run a hospital trust. The expertise and experience of every organisation which tenders for a NHS franchise will be thoroughly and rigorously assessed before any contract is awarded. The Government's aim is for the best managers from either the public or private sectors to be put into franchised hospitals to help turn around their performance.

NHS Hotmail System

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library the specification for the NHS hotmail system being developed by EDS. [91590]

Ms Blears: A copy of the output base specification for email and directory services has been placed in the Library.

NHS Trusts (Powers of Direction)

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what direction he has given to NHS trusts in the last three months; and if he will make a statement on his powers of direction to *(a)* NHS trusts and *(b)* foundation trusts. [88240]

Mr. Hutton: There have been no instances over the past three months where my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has used his powers of intervention to give direction to a particular trust.

As set out in A Guide to NHS Foundation Trusts (paragraph 1.11), national health service trusts will not be subject to Secretary of State powers of direction.

Parking Charges (Hospitals)

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS hospitals in England charge for parking for *(a)* visitors, *(b)* medical staff and *(c)* medical staff at discounted rates. [89926]

Mr. Hutton: This information is not held centrally. It is a matter for individual hospitals to decide whether or not to charge for car parking and the cost of such charges in the light of local circumstances. Where charges are introduced, patients who are eligible to claim reimbursement of travelling expenses under the hospital travel costs scheme may have the charges reimbursed.

Patients (Homelessness)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients in NHS hospitals were homeless in each year between 1997–98 and 2000–01, broken down by health authority. [93371]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 27 January 2003]*: Information on the total inpatient admissions to national health service hospitals in English health authorities for 1997–98 to 2000–01, where the address is classified as 'no fixed abode' has been placed in the Library.

Pregnant Women

Jim Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what provision *(a)* has been made and *(b)* is planned to support pregnant mothers engaged in (i) alcohol and (ii) substance abuse and to protect their unborn children from such abuse. [93216]

Ms Blears: Midwives provide the majority of care for pregnant mothers as well as advice and support on healthy lifestyles including alcohol and substance misuse. Specialist staff may also be attached to antenatal clinics.

The Department produces health promotion resources which are targeted at pregnant women to reduce drinking and increase awareness of risk to the unborn child, e.g., Drinking for two. A recent survey indicated that 30 per cent. of women gave up drinking during pregnancy and around 70 per cent. of those who did drink, drank less than one unit per week on average.

Specialist alcohol treatment services provide support and treatment for people with more serious alcohol problems, including pregnant women. There are around 475 specialist alcohol treatment services in England, providing treatment worth approximately £95 million per year.

Obstetric and substance misuse services exist throughout the country. The Department of Health's Drug Misuse and Dependence—Guidelines on Clinical Management (Clinical Guidelines) recommends different approaches to deliver care to pregnant drug misusers, such as specialist midwives, or drug dependence staff attached to the antenatal clinic. The type of service in each area will depend on local circumstances, the number of pregnant drug misusers presenting for care, expertise of the obstetric and primary care services, and availability of specialist or shared-care support. Further information is available at http://www.doh.qov.uk/druqs/pdfs/dmfull.pdf

Primary Care Trust Chair Salaries

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what the average salary was for chairs of primary care groups in England in the year to 31 October 2002; [93968]

(2) what the average salary is of *(a)* primary care group and *(b)* primary care trust chairpersons in England. [93262]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* There are no longer any primary care groups in existence. The current average annual remuneration for primary care trust chairs is £12,600. All non-executives on PCT boards receive £5,294 per annum.

Primary Care Trusts

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the extent to which the new national health service funding formula for primary care trusts is governed by rural factors. [92902]

Mr. Hutton: The new national health service funding formula takes account of a wide range of health and socio-economic factors associated with the need for health care.

In calculating health need in rural areas the new formula takes account of the effects of access, transport and poverty.

The new formula provides a better measure of health need in all areas.

Private Health Schemes

Sue Doughty: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 2 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 619W, on private health schemes, if it would interfere with the duties of an NHS body if it allowed the use of beds by private health care funded patients for operations for which there is a waiting time longer than three months for NHS patients. [93150]

Mr. Hutton: It is for national health service bodies themselves to determine whether it is permissible and appropriate to offer private patient services in the light of relevant local circumstances.

Residential Care Homes (Top-up Fees)

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the Government's policy towards top-up fees for patients in residential care homes. [90785]

Jacqui Smith: When a local council supports individuals in care homes, it should provide and fund accommodation sufficient to meet resident's assessed needs. Residents should only contribute to care costs according to the National Assistance (Assessment of Resources) Regulations 1992 and neither they nor third parties should be asked to make top-up payments in addition to the resident's assessed contribution in order to meet assessed needs.

Furthermore, council supported residents may not top-up from their own resources for more expensive accommodation than the council would normally pay for to meet assessed need unless they have a deferred payment agreement or are subject to the 12-weeks property disregard.

Otherwise, a resident can still opt for more expensive accommodation as long as they have a third party such as a friend or a relative who is willing make up the difference on their behalf. In order to agree a third party top-up agreement the local council needs to be satisfied that the third party has sufficient resources in order to continue to make the additional contribution on behalf of the resident.

Silicone Cosmesis (Artificial Limbs)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answers of 7 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 542W, and 27 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 356W, on NHS funding of silicone cosmesis for artificial limbs, if he will list the sums allocated to individual *(a)* health authorities and *(b)* primary care trusts in *(i)* 2001–02 and (ii) 2002–03 out of the £0.5 million and £1.5 million baseline allocations made respectively for those years. [92884]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answer 27 January 2003]*: Allocations to individual health authorities and primary care trusts in 2001–02 and 2002–03 did not separately identify sums for silicone cosmesis.

Smallpox Vaccinations

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what advice he is giving to the public regarding smallpox vaccinations; [88397]

(2) what plans he has to make smallpox vaccinations available to the public. [88508]

Mr. Hutton: There are no plans to vaccinate the whole population as a contingency measure against the threat of a bio-terrorist incident involving smallpox. Mass vaccination of the population could be justifiable if there was a smallpox attack or outbreak but it would not be acceptable to expose people to the risk of vaccination in the absence of any possible exposure to the smallpox virus. This is consistent with the approach recommended by the World Health Organisation.

Smallpox vaccine has a much higher rate of serious complications than vaccines that are in regular use today. Certain groups are at even higher risk, such as those with weak immune systems or with severe eczema.

We have already announced that a small number of key frontline national health service staff and a small number of military personnel who would provide the first response in the event of a confirmed, suspected or threatened release of smallpox will be vaccinated shortly. We are discussing with other Government Departments how to identify key workers in the emergency services and agreeing circumstances and timing under which they might be vaccinated.

Our contingency plans for dealing with smallpox are detailed in the draft guidelines on smallpox available on http://www.doh.gov.uk/epcu/cbr/biol/smallpoxplan.htm.

Speech Therapists

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what the ratio of speech therapists to population is in *(a)* Coventry, *(b)* the West Midlands and *(c)* the UK as a whole; [93137]

(2) how many speech therapists are working in Coventry. [93138]

Mr. Lammy *[holding answer 28 January 2003]*: The latest available information is shown in the table. Figures for the United Kingdom are not available, so England figures have been used.

NHS hospital and community services (HCHS): qualified scientific, therapeutic and technical staff rates per 100,000 population within the speech and language therapy area of work for Coventry health authority, West Midlands regional office area and England as at 30 September 2001

	Numbers of staff		*Rate per 100,000 population*	
	Whole-time equivalents	*Headcount*	*Whole-time equivalents*	*Headcount*
England	4,207	5,685	8.6	11.6
of which: West Midlands	446	576	8.5	10.9
of which: Coventry HA	33	41	11	13.6

Statutory Instruments

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many statutory instruments have been issued by his Department in each calendar year since 1979. [89844]

Mr. Lammy: The Department of Health was formed in July 1988. Information for the period between July 1988 and December 1998 could be provided only at disproportionate cost, but is available on the website of Her Majesty's Stationery Office at www.legislation.hmso.gov.uk/stat.htm and in the Library.

Information for the years 1999–2002 is shown in the table.

	Number of Statutory Instruments issued
1999	170
2000	216
2001	399
2002	392

Tuberculosis

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to the answer of 10 December 2002 ref: 83330, how much his Department spent on educating the public about prevention and awareness of turberculosis in each year since 1997; and what form this year's Awareness campaign took. [87577]

Ms Blears: Approximately £43,000 was spent annually on tuberculosis awareness campaigns between 1997–98 and 2000–01.

In 2001–02, £309,178 was spent on a campaign which incorporated press, television and radio advertising as well as the distribution of leaflets and posters throughout England in English, Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, Urdu, Somali and Russian. £80,821 has been spent so far in 2002–03 in support of this campaign.

Worcestershire Health Economy

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assumptions were made in the service and financial framework for the Worcestershire health economy for 2002–03 in terms of *(a)* anticipated additional allocations from the Department of Health during the financial year and *(b)* the uplift for GP prescribing budgets; if these assumptions were in line with the external advice available to those preparing the framework; and who approved the final service and financial framework. [93007]

Mr. Lammy: Worcestershire health authority received an increase of £34.630 million to its revenue resource allocation, a 9.68 per cent. increase on the total 2001–02 allocation, in 2002–03.

The assumptions made in the 2002–03 service and financial framework by Worcestershire health authority (HA), which co-ordinated the process, were:

> There were no anticipated additional allocations from the Department of Health during the financial year. However, there was an assumption made of slippage in-year of £2.5 million, i.e., allocations received in 2002–03 but against which expenditure would not be incurred recurrently until future years. This forecast slippage was at the same level as previous years.
>
> The uplift for primary care prescribing costs assumed by Worcestershire health authority was 11 per cent. on the 2001–02 forecast outturn of these costs. This was in line with national guidance. The HA also proposed making efficiency savings of 3.6 per cent., giving a net increase of 7.4 per cent. As required by national guidance, where prescribing costs efficiency savings were planned, this was supported by an action plan prepared by the HA.

The chief executive designate for the new strategic health authority (StHA) played an active part in the local discussions and agreements with primary care groups and national health service trusts, and agreement of service and financial frameworks (SaFFs) was an important element of the franchise plan for the chief executive of the StHA.

In addition the Department of Health, both at regional office and national levels, had an overseeing role for the whole SaFF process in particular and to ensure that all key targets were planned to be met.

Working Time Directive

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost to each acute trust in the NHS of the introduction of the European Working Time Directive; how many extra staff he estimates will be required as a result of the application of the directive; how many have so far been recruited; and if he will make a statement. [88356]

Mr. Hutton: The European Working Time Directive (EWTD) has applied to the majority of national health service staff since October 1998. The EWTD will be extended to doctors in training from August 2004, initially with a maximum of 58 hours per week, reducing to 48 in 2009.

The Department has not collected figures on a trust-by-trust basis, as work force planning of this kind is the responsibility of local trusts. However, the Department's guidance makes clear that compliance with the EWTD will be achieved only by trusts employing a wide range of solutions and maximising the skills and experience of their whole workforce. This is part of the bigger challenge of modernising the NHS and the guidance will help contribute to finding solutions that work in different specialties, in different hospitals.

The guidance also makes clear that changes to the working practices of both medical and non-medical staff, and building on the increases in consultant and specialist registrars, will allow trusts to meet their objectives under the Directive.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum (Ports of Entry)

Tony Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to increase the percentage of applications for asylum at ports of entry. [92728]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 23 January 2003]*: In order to give advance publicity to the implementation of section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, I made a Ministerial Statement on 28 November 2002 and issued a press release on the same day. The press release was issued to foreign media in this country and those abroad in countries where we receive a high number of asylum applicants. A further press release was issued on 7 January 2003, and this triggered extensive media coverage here within the UK.

In addition, posters advertising the change in policy have been displayed in the arrivals hall at the major ports and airports since 10 December 2002. Copies of the posters have also been displayed in Voluntary Sector Offices, such as Migrant Helpline and the Refugee Action Project.

Asylum Appeals

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum appeals *(a)* between 1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002 and *(b)* since

1 April 2002 have been *(i)* lodged and (ii) heard; how many of these appeals have been refused; and, in relation to these refusals, how many applications for judicial review have been lodged. [93334]

Beverley Hughes: The available information is shown in the table. Appeal outcomes in any given time period do not necessarily relate to appeals lodged in the same period.

Asylum appeals determined by adjudicators of the Immigration Appellate Authority, excluding dependants, April 2001 to September 2002[1]

Number of principal appellants				*Appeals determined by adjudicators*					
				Allowed[4]		*Dismissed*[4]		*Withdrawn*[4]	
	Appeals received by Home Office[2]	*Appeals received by IAA*[3]	*Total determined*[3]	*Total*	*As % of total dismissed*	*Total*	*As % of total dismissed*	*Total*	*As % of total dismissed*
April 2001 to March 2002	63,900[5]	51,730	47,015	9,640	21%	36,365	77%	1,010	2%
April 2002 to September 2002	24,100[5]	32,500	33,785	7,385	22%	25,540	76%	855	3%

[1] Provisional figures rounded to the nearest 5. Numbers might not add up due to rounding.

[2] Appeals received based on electronic sources.

[3] Based on information supplied by the Lord Chancellor's Department. Determinations do not necessarily relate to appeals received in the same period.

[4] Based on data supplied from the Presenting Officers Unit within the Home Office.

[5] Estimate. Figures rounded to the nearest hundred, and subject to later revision.

In the calendar year 2001 there were 2,210 applications for leave to move for judicial review. 13 per cent. of the 2,300 decisions in the calendar year 2001 granted leave to move. Information is unavailable for the periods requested. Applications for leave to move for Judicial Review do not necessarily relate to appeals refused by the Immigration Appellate Authority in the same period. The figures exclude further appeals to the Tribunal and the House of Lords.

Asylum statistics are published quarterly. The latest published figures give information up to and including September 2002. The next publication giving figures up to and including December 2002 will be available from 28 February 2003 on the Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate website at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html.

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applicants under the expedited appeals process have received *(a)* legal advice and assistance in preparing their asylum appeal and *(b)* legal representation at the appeal hearing. [93335]

Beverley Hughes: The expedited appeals process commenced in August 2002 and ended when the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 was commenced in November 2002, and non-suspensive appeals came into force for the 10 EU accession countries.

Over 160 (rounded to the nearest five) appeals were dealt with under this process. All expedited appeal claimants passed through the Oakington fast track process and had access to on site legal advice from the Refugee Legal Centre or Immigration Advisory Service. Procedures were put in place to ensure the availability of legal advice once the claimants left Oakington and were detained pending determination of their appeal.

Asylum statistics are published quarterly and are available on the Home Office Research and Development and Statistics Directorate website at: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for asylum were refused in an initial decision in each year since 1997; and how many of these were subsequently allowed on appeal. [93325]

Beverley Hughes: The tables show the number of asylum applicants refused in an initial decision in each year from 1997 to 2001 and the number of appeals allowed in each of those years.

Initial asylum decisions in the United Kingdom[1] *by year 1997–2001*

	Number of principal applicants					
	Cases considered under normal procedures[3]				*Backlog clearance exercise*[4]	
	Initial decisions[2]	*Granted asylum*	*Granted ELR*	*Refused*	*Granted asylum or ELR under backlog criteria*	*Refused under backlog criteria*[5]
1997	36,045	3,985	3,115	28,945	—	—
1998	31,570	5,345	3,910	22,315	—	—
1999	33,720	7,815	2,465	11,025	11,140	1,275
2000	109,205	10,375	11,495	75,680	10,325	1,335
2001[6]	119,015	11,180	19,845	87,990	—	—

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest five, with * = one or two.

[2] Information is of initial decisions, excluding the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decisions.

[3] Cases considered under normal procedures may include some cases decided under the backlog criteria..

[4] Cases decided under measures aimed at reducing the pre 1996 asylum application backlog.

[5] Includes some cases where the application has been refused on substantive grounds.

[6] Provisional data.

Not all initial decisions to refuse an application result in an appeal. It is estimated that around 77 per cent. of refusals of applications made in 2001 resulted in an appeal, and that around a fifth of those appeals were allowed. The appeals allowed figures given in the following table do not necessarily relate to the refusals in the same year. These could be obtained only at disproportionate cost by examination of individual case records.

	Appeals received by the Appeals Support Section[2]	*Appeals received by the IAA*[3]	*Total determined*[4]
1997	20,950	22,385	21,090
1998	14,320	15,440	25,320
1999	6,615	7,775	19,460
2000	46,4190	28,935	19,395
2001[6, 7]	74,365	47,905	43,415

	Appeals determined by adjudicators					
		Allowed		*Dismissed*		*Withdrawn*
	Total	*As % of total determined*[5]	*Total*	*As % of total determined*[5]	*Total*	*As % of total determined*[5]
1997	1,180	(6)	18,145	(86)	1,720	(8)
1998	2,355	(9)	21,195	(84)	1,770	(7)
1999	5,280	(27)	11,135	(57)	3,050	(16)
2000	3,340	(17)	15,580	(80)	475	(2)
2001[6, 7]	8,155	(19)	34,440	(79)	825	(2)

[1] Figures (other than percentages) rounded to the nearest five. Numbers might not add up due to rounding,

[2] Figures for 1997 to 2000 are based on manual counts of data received in Appeals Support Section of the Home Office. Some cases are received elsewhere in the Home Office before being forwarded to ASS and so may be counted in a later month than when they arrived in the Home Office.

[3] Figures for 1997 and 1995 represent the number of appeals sent to the IAA by the Home Office.

[4] Based on information supplied by the Lord Chancellor's Department. Determinations do not necessarily relate to appeals received in the same period.

[5] Percentages based on total determined excluding without foundation appeals referred to Secretary of State for further consideration. Based on data supplied by the Presenting Officers Unit within the Home Office (October 1999-December 2001).

[6] Appeals received by the Appeals Support Section based on electronic sources.

[7] Provisional figures.

Asylum statistics are published quarterly. The latest published figures give information up to and including September 2002. The next publication giving figures up to and including December 2002 will be available from 28 February 2003 on the Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate website at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1 .html.

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many asylum seekers have been denied asylum in the UK in the last 12 months; and what percentage have been deported; [92838]

(2) how many asylum seekers from Algeria have been denied asylum in the UK in the last 12 months; and what percentage have been deported. [92839]

Beverley Hughes: In the period October 2001 to September 2002, 84,625 initial decisions were made on asylum cases, of which 1,185 had been lodged by Algerian nationals. In this period, 56,025 cases were refused asylum and exceptional leave to remain (ELR), of which 1,125 were Algerian. This information relates to cases and therefore excludes dependants.

Information on the number of these cases that were removed within the same period is not available except by examination of individual case files at disproportionate cost. However, 10,300 principal asylum applicants were removed in this period. Estimates of principal asylum applicants removed show 110 Algerian nationals removed in the period October 2001 to June 2002. Corresponding data for the period July to September 2002 will be available following publication of the next quarterly asylum statistics.

The number of asylum applications from Algerians increased between 1993 and 1995 from 275 to a peak of 1, 865.

Information on the number of asylum decisions and removals is published quarterly on the Home Office website at . The next publication will be available from 28 February and will cover the final quarter of 2002.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Afghan nationals sought asylum in Britain in the last five years for which data is available; and were *(a)* accepted and *(b)* rejected in each year; and how many were returned to Afghanistan or third countries. [92981]

Beverley Hughes: The available data on applications and initial decisions are included in the table. However, data on initial decisions are independent of applications data, and do not necessarily relate to applications made in the same period.

Applications received for asylum in the UK, excluding dependents, and initial decisions, for nationals of Afghanistan, 1997 to 2001 and January to September[1]

Year	*Applications*[2]	*Total initial decisions*[3]	*Cases considered under normal procedures*[4]			*Backlog clearance exercise*[5]	
			Grants of asylum	*Grants of ELR*	*Total refusals*	*Granted asylum or ELR under backlog criteria*[6]	*Refused under backlog criteria*
1997	1,085	730	20	635	75	[1]—	[1]—
1998	2,395	1,600	35	1,500	65	[1]—	[1]—
1999	3,975	1,295	15	1,180	90	10	[1]—
2000	5,555	2,590	375	695	1,515	10	[1]—
2001	9,000	12,155	2,260	7,370	2,530	[1]—	[1]—
2002	6,035	6,910	80	4,565	2,265	[1]—	[1]—

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest 5 with "—" = 0.

[2] May exclude some cases lodged at local enforcement offices between January 1999 and March 2000.

[3] Information is of initial decisions, excluding the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decisions. Decision figures do not necessarily relate to applications received in the same period.

[4] Cases considered under normal procedures may include some cases decided under backlog criteria.

[5] Cases decided under measures aimed at reducing the pre 1996 asylum application backlog.

[6] Includes cases where asylum or Exceptional Leave to Remain has been granted under the backlog criteria.

The latest available data on removals of Afghan nationals who have sought asylum at some stage are given in the table.

Removals and voluntary departures of Afghan principal asylum applicants, excluding dependants[1]

	Number
1997	40
1998[3]	15
1999	n/a
2000	n/a
2001[2, 3, 4]	125
January to June 2002[3, 4]	235

[1] Includes persons departing "voluntarily" after enforcement action has been initiated against them, persons leaving under Assisted Voluntary Returns Programmes run by the International Organisation for Migration, and removals on safe third country grounds.

[2] Figure may include a small number of dependants leaving under Assisted Voluntary Return Programmes.

[3] Data have been estimated due to data quality issues.

[4] Provisional data.

Note:

Figures are rounded to the nearest five.

Data on applications in the period October to December 2002 and removals by nationality in the period July to September 2002 are due to be published at the end of February 2003 on the Home Office website: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/whatsnew1.html

Mr. Philip Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will exclude Silverlands at Chertsey, Surrey from consideration for accommodation for asylum seekers. [92999]

Beverley Hughes: Chertsey is not within a designated dispersal area for asylum seekers requiring accommodation. Similarly for the trial of accommodation centres we are looking to provide accommodation away from London and Kent.

All adult asylum seekers will be required to attend an induction centre irrespective of whether they require support including accommodation. We are proposing a national network of induction centres and it is envisaged these will be up and running by the end of 2003. The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) is currently considering options for accommodation to support the Induction Centre to meet the needs of asylum seekers arriving in London and the South East.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to use *(a)* hotels, *(b)* hostels and *(c)* country homes in Shropshire as induction centres to house asylum seekers. [93017]

We are intending to have a national network of induction centres which are being introduced on a phased basis. To date we have opened one induction centre in Kent and are in the process of negotiating contracts for accommodation to support an induction centre for asylum seekers making their claim in London and the south east. The third phase of the project is to provide induction centres in regional areas. The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) has invited expressions of interest from each regional consortium. The West Midlands consortium, which includes Shropshire, has expressed an interest but has indicated to NASS that it is not currently considering using any properties in Shropshire.

Tony Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how he intends to monitor the impact of the withdrawal of asylum support for in-country applicants on asylum seekers in the UK. [92726]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 23 January 2003]*: Under section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, those people who make their asylum claim as soon as reasonably practicable on arrival in the UK, will continue to receive the support they need. The Home Office is working in close consultation with local authorities and voluntary sector organisations to establish the best way in which the impact of the changes may be monitored on the ground.

Tony Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what impact he estimates the withdrawal of asylum support for in-country applicants will have on the numbers of homeless people living in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [92727]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 23 January 2003]*: Section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 prevents the provision of support to asylum seekers who do not make their asylum claim as soon as reasonably practicable on arrival at a port in the UK. The purpose of the new policy is to ensure that those wishing to seek asylum do so at the earliest opportunity. If this purpose is fulfilled, there is no reason to suppose that there will be an increase in the number of homeless people. Since 8 January 2003, when the new policy was introduced, there has been no indication of increased homelessness.

Computer Misuse

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases of computer misuse there were in his Department in each of the last five years, broken down by each category of misuse; and how many of those cases resulted in disciplinary action. [93046]

Hilary Benn: The figures, so far as information is available in the form requested, are as follows:

Cases of computer misuse

Department	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
Home Office	[1]—	2	9	34	77
Disciplinary Cases	[1]—	2	8	30	[2]74
Prison Service Agency	[1]—	[1]—	2	[1]	3
Disciplinary Cases	[1]—	[1]	2	[1]	3
UK Passport Agency	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]	1
Disciplinary Cases	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]	1
Forensic Science Service	[1]—	8	6	2	[3]43
Disciplinary Cases	[1]	5	1	2	5

[1] Indicates that no comprehensive figures are available.

[2] Figure includes some cases dealt with by local management.

[3] Includes cases in which informal local action taken.

Criminal Records Bureau (Checks)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research was undertaken by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* Capita to determine the *(i)* likely level of demand for Criminal Records Bureau checks and (ii) Criminal Records Bureau customers' preferred means of submitting applications for checks. [89984]

Hilary Benn: Original research into the likely level of demand for Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks was undertaken by the Home Office and CRB. Two comprehensive market research studies were carried out by Coopers Lybrand (1996) and Accent Market Research (March 2000) to determine who would use the service and what likely levels of take up were anticipated. These studies were validated by the Labour Force Survey carried out between September and November 1999. A telephone survey with existing checkers was carried out to validate the baseline information created from the above research. In December 2001, Capita Account Managers conducted their own research to determine which Registered Bodies were likely to be major users of the service and there is ongoing joint Capita and CRB forecasting work based on latest actual demand and outputs from a forecasting model.

An analysis of legislation and its likely impact on CRB demand was also undertaken. The analysis looked at whether or not legislation would increase the number of sectors eligible for CRB checks or whether or not the impact would be neutral. It was determined that the outcome was likely to be neutral.

The original concept for the CRB was based on a call-centre, telephone-based and online application route, with capacity to deal with individual paper applications. That arrangement was expected to be convenient for applicants and would reduce errors. It was also in line with the Government's e-government objectives. Market research was undertaken by Rosslyn Research in 2000 to establish employer's requirements in terms of service standards.

However, during extensive consultation with registered bodies and employers from January to June 2001, there was strong pressure from them to introduce a full-scale paper-based application. Consequently, in May 2001, the CRB agreed to introduce more extensive capacity to deal with paper-based applications.

Departmental Expenditure (Newsprint)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the total expenditure of his Department was on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in 2002. [90527]

Mr. Blunkett: The total expenditure for the Home Office and Agencies during 2002 was £45,292.81. This does not include expenditure by non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs). Collection of this data could be achieved only at disproportionate cost.

Departmental Performance Report

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when his Department's autumn performance report for 2002 will be published. [93158]

Mr. Blunkett: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Howard Flight) on 21 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 302W.

External Consultancies

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body spent on external consultancy in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (planned); and if he will make a statement. [92232]

Hilary Benn: The information is not available in the format requested. Total expenditure figures on consultants by Non Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) for the period in question and also planned expenditure by core Home Office Directorates and its Agencies in 2002–03 is not held centrally. Total expenditure on external consultants in each year from 1995–96 to 2001–02 for the core Home Office and its Agencies.

£

Consultancy expenditure by the Home Department and Agencies

	Expenditure
1995–96	10,200,000
1996–97	11,804,984
1997–98	7,627,016
1998–99	4,588,445
1999–2000	10,302,672
2000–01	27,877,286
2001–02	21,147,058

The increase in expenditure on consultancy in financial years 2000–01 and 2001–02 is primarily due to a major investment programme in the modernisation of the Home Office and in particular on IT related modernisation and also the cost of setting up the National Probation Directorate.

Extradition Cases

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much was spent on each extradition case in the last five years, broken down by individual case. [93337]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The information requested is available only at disproportionate cost.

Failed Asylum Seekers

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many failed asylum seekers left the UK in each year since 1997, broken down by those *(a)* deported and *(b)* who left voluntarily. [93324]

Beverley Hughes: Information on the number of failed asylum applicants *(a)* removed; and *(b)* known to have left the United Kingdom voluntarily since 1997 is given in the table. It is not possible to separately identify the number of principal applicants who departed 'voluntarily' after enforcement action had been initiated against them.

Principal asylum applicants removed from the UK[1]

	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*[2] *(p)*	*January to September 2002*[3] *(p)*
Total number of principal asylum applicants removed[4]	7,165	6,990	7,665	8,980	9,285	7,780
Of which:						
Assisted voluntary returns programme[5]	—	—	50	550	980	640

[1] Persons who had sought asylum at some stage, excluding dependants.

[2] Removal figures exclude 1,495 dependants of asylum seekers removed in the period April to December 2001, of which 230 left under the assisted voluntary returns programme; data on dependants removed have only been collected since April 2001.

[3] In the same period 1,825 dependants of principal asylum seekers departed, of which 185 left under the assisted voluntary returns programme.

[4] Including persons known to have departed "voluntarily" after enforcement action had been initiated against them.

[5] Persons leaving under the assisted voluntary returns programmes run by the International Organisation for Migration. May include some on-entry cases and some cases where enforcement action has been initiated.

Family Visitor Appeals

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he plans to publish the final report of the inter-departmental review of family visitor appeals. [93094]

Beverley Hughes: The report of the inter-departmental review group and the report of the research commissioned by that group have been delayed by unforeseen circumstances They will be published shortly. A copy of the report will be placed in the Library as promised.

Foster Deportation

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department at what times on *(a)* 1 December, *(b)* 2 December and *(c)* 3 December 2002, members of the press office at 10 Downing street held conversations with members of the press office at the Home Office regarding the deportation of Mr. Foster; which officials in the Downing street press office and in the Home Office press office took part in these conversations; and what the duration was of each such conversation. [91364]

Mr. Blunkett *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* The Home Office press office has regular daily contact with their opposite numbers at Downing street press office. Records of these conversations and their duration are not kept.

Full-time Equivalent Staff

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many full-time equivalent staff are employed in *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of the agencies it sponsors; and what the figures were for 1997. [90672]

Mr. Blunkett: Home Office staff figures in each region and nation of the UK are published in "Civil Service Statistics" year on year and placed in the Library.

Health and Safety

Mrs. Helen Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) whether his Department and its agencies have met the commitment arising from Action Point 13 of the June 2000 Strategy statement on revitalising health and safety to summarise health and safety performance and plans in annual reports from the year 2001 onwards; [89496]

(2) what information he has collated on the application to his Department and its agencies of the checklist, circulated by letter by Sir Richard Mottram, referred to under Action Point 12 of the revitalising health and safety strategy statement; and if he will make a statement [89498]

(3) which senior officials within his Department and its agencies take responsibility for health and safety at board or equivalent level; and where their names are publicised. [89497]

Hilary Benn: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Work and Pensions (Nicholas Brown) on 20 January 2003, *Official Report,* column 85W.

Immigration

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what manpower complement is allocated by immigration services to each of the south coast ports; what his estimate is of how many persons entered through each port in the last year for which information is available; and what coverage is available for non-canalized ports of entry. [91252]

Beverley Hughes: The latest data on passenger arrivals that is available for public use is for 2001.

For a meaningful comparison, a snapshot taken on 31 December 2001 shows the actual number of staff in post at the south coast ports of Dover East, Dover Hoverport, Felixstowe, Folkestone, Newhaven, Plymouth, Poole, Portsmouth and Southampton on that date was 404 full time equivalent officers, comprising of 356 immigration service staff and 48 administrative staff.

The total number of passenger arrivals at south coast ports was 9,924,100. This figure is broken down as follows:

South Coast Port	*Number*
Dover East	6,340,000
Dover Hoverport	944,000
Felixstowe	55,200
Folkestone	28,900
Newhaven	169,000
Plymouth	328,000
Poole	140,000
Portsmouth	1,620,00
Southampton	299,000

Note:
Figures rounded to the nearest three significant digits.

The UK Immigration Service conducts regular risk assessments of small ports not routinely staffed and there is continuous monitoring of arrivals including spot checks. The details of passengers subject to immigration control arriving at small ports, which are not routinely staffed by the Immigration Service, are still checked against the Warnings Index system.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to his answer of 19 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 988W, on immigration, whether the Reporting Line is still in operation; and when he will publish the evaluation of the trial. [93834]

Beverley Hughes: The trial of the confidential hotline ran from May to July 2002. I have remitted the recommendations of the evaluation back to officials for further details on cost and application. I undertook, in my response to the hon. member's most recent question on this subject, 20 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 183W, to write to the hon. member once these details have been considered. I will do so as soon as this consideration has taken place.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his estimate is of the total expenditure by his Department on ministerial travel *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* abroad, in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92442]

Mr. Blunkett: I refer the hon. Member to the answer provided by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley South (Douglas Alexander) on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, Column 333W.

Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he plans to bring into effect section 4 and section 76 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002; and if he will make a statement. [93258]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* Section 4 will be brought into force as soon as administrative arrangements for giving effect to the new appeal rights have been put into place. Section 76 will come into effect on 10 February.

New Prisons

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his Department's proposed spending plans on new prison building in 2003–04. [91897]

Hilary Benn: Existing funding is being used to deliver a programme to increase prison capacity. This will conclude in 2003–04 when 450 places will become available at Birmingham prison. This completes a programme that planned to increase capacity by 2,660 places.

Following the outcome of the recent Spending Review (SR 2002) the Government have committed further funding to increase prison capacity. By the end of 2003–04 it is intended that this will provide another 740 places across the prison estate.

Roma People

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many central and eastern

European Roma he expects to migrate to the UK following the accession to the EU of *(a)* the Czech Republic, *(b)* Slovakia, *(c)* Hungary and *(d)* Poland. [93439]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* Research conducted by University College London for the Home Office, which will be published soon, suggests that the numbers of people who will migrate to the UK from the new member states will not be significant. This research corroborates a number of other independent studies which have looked at the scale of migration flows after enlargement. These have been summarised in reports by the European Commission in 2000 and the former Department for Education and Employment in 1999. None of this research has been able to predict exact numbers expected from specific countries or ethnic groups to the UK.

Whole-time Equivalent Staff

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the distribution of his Department's whole-time equivalent staff was, including the staff in agencies and other bodies reporting to him, in each Government office region and nation of the UK *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the most recent available period. [90470]

Mr. Blunkett: Home Office staff figures in each region and nation of the UK are published in "Civil Service Statistics" year on year and placed in the Library.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Departmental Performance Report

Tony Wright: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when her Department's autumn performance report for 2002 will be published. [93154]

Ms Rosie Winterton: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer I gave to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) on 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 200W.

Grandchildren (Access)

Mr. Wray: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what rights grandparents have regarding access to their grandchildren. [93549]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The Children Act 1989 requires that the court's paramount consideration must be the welfare of the child. Judges are guided by a list of factors set out in section 1(3) of the Act, known as the 'welfare checklist'. The court has the discretion to take into consideration all the facts and circumstances of the individual case when deciding any question concerning the child, including issues of contact and residence.

Any person (including grandparents) may, provided that the permission of the court is obtained, apply to the court for an order for residence or contact with a child. This requirement is designed as an early filter for those applications the court feels would not to be in the best interests of the child. Experience suggests that grandparents (or other interested relatives) do not usually experience difficulty in obtaining permission where their application is motivated by a genuine concern for the child.

Mr. Wray: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what proposals she has to ensure that grandparents have increased legal rights of access to their grandchildren; and what other rights grandparents have in the event of family breakdown. [93550]

Ms Rosie Winterton: The current requirement is for grandparents to obtain the leave of the court to issue an application for contact with grandchildren. Experience has shown that grandparents, or wider family members, do not usually experience difficulty in obtaining leave when the application is motivated by genuine concern for the child. Consequently, there are no plans to amend the Children Act 1989. In the event of a family dispute, any person, including grandparents, with a contact order can apply to the court to determine the implementation or variation of the existing order.

Magistrates Courts

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many magistrates courts have closed since May 1997. [87644]

Yvette Cooper: Decisions about magistrates court closures are made by independent Magistrates Courts Committees (MCCs). MCCs are not required by statute to inform the Government of court closures.

The best information indicates that the number of court closures is as follows:

	Number
1996	21
1997	[1]21
1998	25
1999	7
2000	13
2001	33
2002	5

[1] Five before May and 16 after May.

Details are in the following table:

	Date
Bromley (South Street)	28 February 1996
Mansfield (Commercial St)	28 February 1996
Hornsea	31 March 1996
Howden	31 March 1996
Market Weighton	31 March 1996
Old Street	12 July 1996
Halstead	31 August 1996
Biddulph	30 September 1996
Cheadle	30 September 1996
Kidsgrove	30 September 1996
Tonbridge	31 October 1996
Amlwch	31 December 1996
Colwyn Bay	31 December 1996
Bedale	31 December 1996
Blaenau Festiniog	31 December 1996
Easingwold	31 December 1996
East Dereham	31 December 1996
Ingleton	31 December 1996
Leyburn	31 December 1996
Llangollen	31 December 1996
Thirsk	31 December 1996

	Date
Ellesmere Port	31 March 1997
Hampstead	31 March 1997
Marylebone (185 Marylebone Rd)	31 March 1997
Otley	31 March 1997
Seaham	31 March 1997
Bromsgrove	31 May 1997
Ledbury	31 May 1997
Hebburn	5 June 1997
South Shields (Kepple Street)	5 June 1997
Chippenham (Market Place)	30 June 1997
Ashton under Lyne (Manchester Rd)	31 August 1997
Duckinsfield	31 August 1997
Thorne	31 August 1997
Pontardawe	9 October 1997
Braintree	31 December 1997
Stokesley	31 December 1997
Clacton on Sea	31 October 1997
Bargoed	31 December 1997
Monmouth	31 December 1997
Pontlottyn	31 December 1997
Pontypool	31 December 1997
Malton	6 February 1998
Marlborough Street	31 March 1998
Bishop's Stortford	31 March 1998
Hatfield	31 March 1998
Hitchin	31 March 1998
Market Rasen	31 March 1998
Chertsey	31 March 1998
Farnham	31 March 1998
Oxted	31 March 1998
Lutterworth	31 July 1998
Ripon	1 August 1998
Barnard Castle	31 December 1998
Clerkenwell	31 December 1998
Sheerness	31 December 1998
West Malling	31 December 1998
Lytham	31 December 1998
Diss	31 December 1998
Corwen	31 December 1998
Felixstowe	31 December 1998
Haverhill	31 December 1998
Saxmundham	31 December 1998
Stowmarket	31 December 1998
Newmarket	31 December 1998
March	31 December 1998
Saffron Walden	31 December 1998
Christchurch	31 March 1999
Abingdon	31 March 1999
Henley on Thames	31 March 1999
Windsor	31 March 1999
Morley	31 March 1999
Pudsey	31 March 1999
Stow on the Wold	30 June 1999
Apmthill	1 January 2000
Biggleswade	1 January 2000
Dunstable	1 January 2000
Leighton Buzzard	1 January 2000
Lichfield	31 March 2000
Keighley	1 April 2000
Keswick	30 April 2000
Windermere	31 May 2000
Wigton	31 May 2000
Appleby	31 May 2000
Gravesend	9 June 2000
Wootton Bassett	2 October 2000
Abergele	31 December 2000
Alfreton	1 January 2001
Ashbourne	1 January 2001
Bakewell	1 January 2001
Matlock	1 January 2001
Leigh	31 March 2001
Middleton	31 March 2001
Leek	31 March 2001
Worcester	31 March 2001
Warrington Patten Hall	1 April 2001
Macclesfield Park Green	1 April 2001
Bideford	30 April 2001
Exmouth	30 April 2001
Kingsbridge	30 April 2001
South Molton	30 April 2001
Teignmouth	30 April 2001
Tavistock	30 April 2001
Axminster	4 May 2001
Tiverton	4 May 2001
Newquay	30 June 2001
Southampton (Commercial Road)	31 August 2001
Womborne	1 September 2001
Gillingham	30 September 2001
Bridlington	9 November 2001
Brough	9 November 2001
Driffield	9 November 2001
Hull (Guildhall)	9 November 2001
Hull (Lowgate)	9 November 2001
Pocklington	9 November 2001
Withernsea	9 November 2001
Evesham	1 November 2001
Droitwitch	1 November 2001
Arundel	1 December 2001
Bridgenorth	31 January 2002
Leominster	31 January 2002
Fakenham	1 May 2002
Tunbridge Wells	2 June 2002
Beaconsfield	1 July 2002
Buckingham	1 July 2002
Fakenham	1 May 2002
Tunbridge Wells	2 June 2002
Beaconsfield	1 July 2002

PRIME MINISTER

Al-Qaeda

Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what his assessment is of the likelihood that *(a)* Al-Qaeda, *(b)* other terrorist groups and *(c)* Iraq might carry out an attack on the United Kingdom. [93897]

The Prime Minister: The terrorist threat remains real, and serious. As recent events have shown, no country is immune from attack, and it simply is not possible to guarantee against more attacks in the future. However, this Government are resolute in their determination to defeat terrorism regardless of its source.

External Consultants

Mr. Laws: To ask the Prime Minister how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body spent on external consultancy in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (planned); and if he will make a statement. [92224]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office today at column 855W.

Heritage Assets

Mr. Laws: To ask the Prime Minister what sales of heritage assets and antique assets have been made by his Department since May 1997; if he will list such assets; and if he will estimate the total sales proceeds. [92417]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office today.

Terrorism

Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what independent advice he has received on the terrorist threat to the United Kingdom. [94037]

The Prime Minister: Advice on any terrorist threat to the UK is the responsibility of the Security Service. The Director General of the Security Service is responsible to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for this advice, which is provided on a continuous basis. Strategic assessments about terrorist threats to the UK are provided to the Government by the Joint Intelligence Committee.

SCOTLAND

Broadband

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) when she last met the Regional Broadband Unit to discuss the rollout of broadband services in Scotland. [91737]

(2) if she will make a statement on her Department's role in how the money awarded to Scotland from the UK Broadband Fund is to be spent. [91740]

(3) if she will make a statement on her Department's policy on the development of broadband services for the benefit of *(a)* small businesses in rural areas and *(b)* consumers in rural areas. [91739]

Mrs. Liddell: The Scottish Executive is taking forward the rollout of broadband in Scotland with its strategy, 'Connecting Scotland our broadband future—Making it Happen', for accelerating and widening access, and for increasing take up across Scotland. Both the small business sector and rural consumers are recognised priorities.

Scottish interests on the UK Broadband Taskforce, previously the Regional Broadband Unit, are represented by the Executive, which also negotiates directly with the Department of Trade and Industry on awards to Scotland from the UK Broadband Fund.

Electronics Industry

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment she has made of the future viability of the Scottish electronics industry. [92291]

Mrs. Liddell: Despite the global downturn in the electronics sector, Scotland retains a number of key competitive advantages which can give confidence that the sector will continue to play a key role in the Scottish economy. We have a skilled workforce, investment in world class science and technology and an innovative business base.

Ferry Services

Mr. Peter Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans she has to provide further financial support for ferry services between *(a)* Campbell town and Ballycastle and *(b)* Rosyth and Zeebrugge. [90390]

Mrs. Liddell: Decisions on financial support for the Campbeltown to Ballycastle ferry service are a matter for the Scottish Executive. I have no plans to provide financial support for the Rosyth-Zeebrugge ferry service. The Scottish Executive provided funding by means of a Freight Facilities Grant to the port operator, Forth Ports plc, for improvements to the port infrastructure at Rosyth.

Industrial Action/Illness

Mr. Roger Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many working days have been lost in her Department due to *(a)* industrial action and *(b)* illness in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99, (iii) 1999–2000, (iv) 2000–01, (v) 2001–02 and (vi) 2002–03 to date. [93574]

Mrs. Liddell: The Scotland Office was established in its present form on 1 July 1999. No days have been lost due to industrial action. Details of working days lost due to illness are given in the following table:

Dates	*Working days lost due to illness*
1 July 1999 to 31 March 2000	396
1 April 2000 to 31 March 2001	662.5
1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002	601.5
1 April 2002 to 30 November 2002	479

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Infant Mortality

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what future funding plans the Medical Research Council has announced for research into reducing the number of baby deaths through *(a)* miscarriage, *(b)* premature birth, *(c)* still birth and *(d)* obstetrics. [93162]

Ms Hewitt: The MRC does not, as a rule, earmark funds for particular topics. Research proposals in all areas compete for the funding available. When appropriate, high quality research in the areas MRC is promoting may be given priority in competition for funds, but research excellence and importance to health continue to be the primary considerations in funding decisions. The MRC has not announced any future funding plans for research into reducing the number of baby deaths, but it always welcomes high quality applications for support into any aspect of human health.

The MRC spent an estimated £19.1 million in 2001–02 on its Reproductive health portfolio. Reproductive health research includes normal and abnormal fetal and placental development and growth, as well as conditions affecting pregnancy and childbirth.

Advisory Group on Nanotechnology Applications

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many times the Advisory

Group on Nanotechnology Applications has met since April 2001; what its budget is for financial years 2003–4 and 2004–5; and if she will make a statement. [91957]

Ms Hewitt: The Group met on four occasions and also communicated between these meetings. The Group has now completed its work and has no budget.

DTI is currently finalising its policy on Nanotechnology and one of the steps will be to establish a Nanotechnology Strategic Advisory Group as a formal non-departmental public body.

Agency Workers Directive

Mr. Bellingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what research her Department has conducted into the potential *(a)* financial impact and *(b)* impact on employment of the implementation of the agency workers' directive in its present form. [93398]

Alan Johnson: The Department of Trade and Industry held a 16-week public consultation into the proposal for a directive, and has published a regulatory impact assessment of the proposal which provides an assessment of the potential costs and benefits for the UK. I have placed a copy of this in the Library of the House.

Business Environment Simplifications Taskforce

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry who have been members of the Business Environment Simplification Taskforce since its inception; what *(a)* expenses and *(b)* salary each received; and if she will make a statement. [91662]

Mr. Wilson: The members of the European Commission's Business Environment Simplification Taskforce were as follows:

Prof Chris Evans (Chairman) (UK)
Dr Wolfgang Krebs (Austria)
Ms Kathy Vanhoorne (Belgium)
Mr Bjrn Meier (Denmark)
Mr Risto Suominen (Finland)
Mr Jean Prada (until 17/2/98) and Mr André Gauron (from 17/2/98) (France)
Mr Dieter Philipp (Germany)
Ms Antigone Lyberaki (Greece)
Mr Dominic Ellickson (Ireland)
Mr Carlo Borgomeo (Italy)
Mr Armand Berchem (Luxembourg)
Dr Elisabeth Steyger (Netherlands)
Mr Rui Gomes (Portugal)
Mrs Elisa Sainz Ruiz (Spain)
Mrs Camille Forslund (Sweden)

The Taskforce operated from October 1997 to April 1998, when it reported to the Commission. Details of whether the members were paid and the level of their expenses are not readily available from the European Commission.

I refer the hon. Member to my statement of 13 July 2000, *Official Report,* column 620W in response to the then hon. Member for Southport, in which I welcomed the Taskforce's recommendations. My right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South, who was President of the Board of Trade at the time they were published, had also welcomed the recommendations, which addressed improving the business environment in public administration, education and training, employment and working conditions, finance and research and innovation. Those recommendations have helped Member States and the Commission in their continued endeavours to promote enterprise and ease burdens on companies, particularly small- and medium-sized enterprises.

British Energy

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much public money has been given to British Energy in each of the last five years; and what this money has been used for. [93682]

Mr. Wilson: On 9 September 2002 the Government agreed to provide British Energy with a credit facility for up to £410 million in respect of its working capital requirements and cash collateral for trading in the UK and North America. On the 26 September 2002 the Government agreed to extend the credit facility and increase it from £410 million up to £650 million. As of 24 January 2003, £418 million of the facility has been drawn down.

Capital Expenditure (Energy)

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the principal elements of planned *(a)* current and *(b)* capital expenditure for financial year 2002–03 on *(i)* post office and telecommunications, (ii) nuclear liabilities, (iii) aerospace, (iv) departmental capital and other minor programmes and *(v)* capital investment in energy as listed in tables 2 and 3 of her annual report for 2002–03 to 2003–04.Cm 5416; and if she will make a statement. [92793]

Ms Hewitt: The principal elements of planned expenditure in 2002–03 in these categories at the time of publication of the annual report (Cm 5416) are as follows:

£ million

	(a) *Current*	*(b)* *Capital*
(i) Post Office and Telecommunications		
Modernisation of the Post Office network	70	—
(ii) Nuclear Liabilities		
Decommissioning (non-cash) costs on UKAEA sites	84	—
Decommissioning (non-cash) costs on BNFL sites	112	—
Resource Consumption of UKAEA	20	—
UKAEA net capital receipts	—	(7)
(iii) Aerospace		
Net expenditure on the Government's portfolio of Launch Investment Contracts	75	22

£ million

	(a) Current	*(b)* Capital
(iv) Departmental capital and other minor programmes		
National Physical Laboratory capital expenditure	—	31
Radiocommunications Agency capital expenditure	—	12
(v) Capital investment in Energy		
Renewable energy capital grant schemes	—	163

Commercial Policy (QMV)

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her policy is on the recommendation of Working Group VII of the European Convention that areas of commercial policy should be decided by Qualified Majority Vote. [91544]

Ms Hewitt: I am giving full consideration to the Convention's deliberations in co-ordination with my Ministerial colleagues. Many areas of commercial policy are already decided by QMV. Further moves on commercial policy cannot be considered in isolation and the full implications of these proposals, including their impact on trade policy, will need to be understood before UK position is finalised.

Consultations

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list consultations her department has conducted since 2 May 1997; and when each consultation *(a)* opened and *(b)* closed. [93799]

Ms Hewitt: Records relating to consultation documents issued before the introduction of the Cabinet Office Code of Practice on Written Consultations on 1 January 2001 are not held centrally. The list of consultations undertaken by the Department since 1 January 2001, and the dates they were opened and closed, are placed in the Libraries of the House.

Correspondence

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when she expects to reply to the correspondence from the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale of 13 January, regarding redundancies announced by Clarks at K Shoes in Kendal. [94016]

Ms Hewitt: A reply to your letter was sent on 28 January 2003.

Departmental Running Costs

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the running costs of *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of its sponsored agencies were in *(i)* 1997 and (ii) the most recent year for which figures are available. [90706]

Ms Hewitt: Detailed information on administration costs for the Department of Trade and Industry and its agencies, going back to 1998–99 and with projections to 2003–04, is set out in Table 5 of the 2002 departmental report (Cm 5416). Data for years before 1998–99 are not available on the same basis. Provisional outturn for gross and net administration costs limits were published in Public Expenditure 2001–02 Provisional Outturn (Cm 5574), Tables 4 and 5. Updated information, with plans to 2005–06, will be published in the 2003 departmental report in the spring.

Export Credits (Equitorial Guinea)

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment her Department has made *(a)* of the availability of ECGD support for investment in Equatorial Guinea and *(b)* of the adequacy of such support in relation to the current level of opportunity for British business investment in Equatorial Guinea. [92621]

Ms Hewitt: ECGD is able to offer Overseas Investment Insurance to protect UK direct investment in Equatorial Guinea against the risks of war, expropriation and restrictions on remittances. It will also consider approaches from UK exporters for cover under its "Good Projects" scheme which provides support for viable hard currency generating projects and relies on the use of structured finance techniques e.g. dedicated income streams and offshore escrow accounts.

ECGD recognises increasing demand from UK investors in and exporters to Equatorial Guinea, and a review of its risk assessment and cover policy is scheduled for the spring, following completion of the IMF's latest assessment of Equatorial Guinea.

Export Promotion Support

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what financial support is available for UK companies exhibiting abroad. [91843]

Ms Hewitt: British Trade International supports UK companies wishing to exhibit at overseas trade fairs through the Support for Exhibitions and Seminars Abroad (SESA) scheme. All UK businesses and organisations involved in exporting from the UK are eligible for support. Grant entitlement is currently limited to three participations in most countries (five in Japan, China (excluding Hong Kong), Russia and the USA).

The basic level of grant for eligible participants is 60 per cent. of their expenditure on stand space and stand construction up to a maximum of £2,300.

The scheme is over subscribed, resulting in restrictions on the number of exhibitions in the programme, and on the number of companies in each group. Estimated expenditure on supporting UK organisations exhibiting abroad during 2002–03 is £21 million.

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what financial support her Department gives to UK companies for the purpose of exchanging abroad; and what assessment she has made of support given by *(a)* France and *(b)* Germany to businesses based in those nations exhibiting abroad. [92356]

Ms Hewitt: British Trade International supports UK companies wishing to exhibit at overseas trade fairs through the Support for Exhibitions and Seminars Abroad (SESA) scheme. All UK businesses and organisations involved in exporting from the UK are eligible for support. Grant entitlement is currently limited to three participations in most countries (five in Japan, China (excluding Hong Kong), Russia and the USA).

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The Director of Trade Partners UK, International Business Schemes attends twice yearly meetings of the West European Trade Facilitation Exhibitions Group (WETFEG) this forum is attended by a number of European State countries with similar schemes to SESA. Through this committee Trade Partners UK receive periodic reports from the member states on their various trade fair schemes and programmes. We are not aware of any assessment on the support given by France and Germany.

GATS

Mr. Challen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on the estimated impact of GATS on *(a)* the UK economy and *(b)* developing countries. [91355]

Ms Hewitt: The UK can expect to gain from commitments taken by other WTO Members, as this will provide a more stable and competitive environment for UK companies seeking to expand into new markets. Similarly, for developing countries, GATS commitments should help to attract foreign participation in their markets and bring new investment and technology, while commitments by developed countries should confirm market access for service sectors and modes of supply (notably movement of people) of interest to them.

Liberalisation is always a domestic policy choice. Governments will always weigh the risks and benefits in their assessment of what is in their overall interest. GATS negotiations cannot and will not force countries to make commitments where they choose not to do so.

Iraq (Export Credit Guarantee)

Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what her estimate is of the potential export credit guarantee liability in respect of contracts entered into with companies in Iraq and the Government of Iraq; how much of this amount is in respect of military contracts; and what amount of export credit guarantee liability has been paid. [92338]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 21 January 2003]*: ECGD has not underwritten any business with Iraq since early 1990. Claims of £623 million were paid and remain outstanding, however as these guarantees have expired there are no further liabilities.

Of the £600 million outstanding, around £26 million is in respect of equipment with potential defence applications, (e.g. communications equipment).

Post Office

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on the state of negotiations between the National Federation of Sub Postmasters and Post Office Ltd. about the implementation of universal banking and the post office card account. [93377]

Ms Hewitt: Negotiations between the National Federation of Sub Postmasters and Post Office Ltd. are a matter for the two parties concerned.

Publicity and Advertising

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much *(a)* her Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body sponsored by her Department spent on *(i)* publicity and (ii) advertising in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if she will make a statement. [92259]

Ms Hewitt: For expenditure on advertising through COI from 1995–96 to 2000–01,1 refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Twickenham on 20 November 2001, *Official Report*, column 162W. Expenditure for 2001–02 and 2002–03 (to date) was £3,959,543 and £3,841,676 respectively. Information on publicity expenditure from centrally held budgets is contained in 'The Government's Expenditure Plans' which are available in the Libraries of the House.

Information on publicity and advertising by NDPBs is not held centrally and could be produced only at disproportionate cost.

Redundancies (Cumbria)

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions she has had with *(a)* South Lakeland district council and *(b)* Cumbria county council regarding the redundancies recently announced by Clarks at K Shoes in Kendal. [94011]

Alan Johnson: The North West Development Agency (NWDA) are in close contact with South Lakeland district council officials to coordinate the response to the situation in Kendal. NWDA will also participate in a task force meeting, convened by Cumbria county council, to discuss the K Shoes redundancies on 31st January 2003.

Scotch Whisky

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on the outcome of her recent visit to India and Thailand, with particular reference to representations she made on behalf of the Scottish whisky industry. [93265]

Ms Hewitt: During my recent visit to India and Thailand, I raised the issue of taxation on spirits and beer with Mr. Arun Shourie, the Minister for Commerce and Industry in New Delhi, and the Thai Prime Minister, Dr. Thaksin, and Deputy Finance Minister, Mr. Suchart, in Bangkok.

Mr. Tim Jackson, of the Scotch Whisky Association, accompanied me on my visit to India as part of a UK trade delegation and during my call on the Thai Deputy Finance Minister.

He raised the concerns of the Scotch whisky industry, in relation to the Indian Market, direct with Mr. Shourie.

During the call on the Thai Deputy Finance Minister, Mr. Jackson offered to provide assistance to the relevant Thai authorities in their analysis of alternatives to ad valorem excise duties.

The Thai Deputy Minister of Finance indicated that it was his aim to overhaul the current regime on Scotch whisky. He expressed the hope that this would be soon.

Temporary Workers

Mr. Bellingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps her Department is taking to help improve the competitiveness of Britain's temporary worker market. [93399]

Alan Johnson: The Department of Trade and Industry is seeking to maintain a modern and effective regulatory framework for temporary agency work. To this end we have consulted on proposed changes to the conduct of employment agencies and employment business regulations, and also on the proposed European Union directive on temporary agency work.

Third-world Producers

Helen Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will support the right of poor country governments to provide targeted support and protection for their local producers. [91607]

Ms Hewitt: Flexibilities for developing countries (with additional flexibilities for the least developed countries) to retain some targeted support and protection for their local producers already exist within all WTO trade defence instruments agreed in the Uruguay Round.

The Government recognise that trade reform can have significant adverse effects on particular sectors and groups, especially in the short-term. This is why it is important that trade reform is accompanied by complementary policies to manage the process of change and integration into the world trading system. This may include some measures to promote indigenous industrial development. But the evidence of the benefits of specific tariff protection is mixed so the Government do not see it as a particularly useful tool to foster economic growth and therefore poverty reduction. Greater protectionism by developing countries limits the opportunities for poor countries to trade both with each other and with developed countries, excluding them further from the benefits of international trade.

The Government also believe that existing WTO agreements should take better account of countries' specific development needs. Therefore, within the current Doha Development Agenda negotiations we support the further development of Special and Differential Treatment provisions to assist developing countries to integrate into the world trading system.

Trade Liberalisation

Mr. Challen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress has been made in the GATS negotiations with ensuring that impact assessments are made on the liberalisation of trade. [91352]

Ms Hewitt: The negotiating guidelines and procedures drawn up by WTO members for the current GATS negotiations call for impact assessment to be an on-going activity of the Council, with the negotiations adjusted in the light of the results of the assessment.

In March 2002, the Services Council held a two-day symposium devoted to impact assessment. All the papers tabled for that symposium are publicly available on the WTO website at http://www.wto.org/english/tratop—e/serv—e/symp—assessment—serv—march02—e.htm.

UK Space Strategy

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry whether the objectives of the UK Space Strategy 1999 to 2002 were met; and if she will make a statement. [91656]

Ms Hewitt: The objectives set out in the United Kingdom Space Strategy 1999 to 2002, 'New Frontiers', were: to help industry maximise profitable business opportunities in the development and exploitation of space systems which improve the quality of life and enhance choice for consumers; to pursue the highest quality astronomy and space science; to improve our understanding of the Earth's environment and natural resources; to foster the development of innovative technology, its commercial exploitation and its application to research; and to communicate the results and their significance to a broad audience.

I am satisfied that we have made good progress towards each of these objectives. The Strategy included a large number of key actions to monitor the implementation of the Strategy. Details of the actions and progress made have been made publicly available on the BNSC website: www.bnsc.gov.uk

These long-term objectives have been further refined. I published a new draft Strategy for public consideration on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 13WS. This further focuses on the use of space systems throughout the economy. Copies of the draft Strategy have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and the text is available on the BNSC website. We aim to publish the final Strategy later this year.

TRANSPORT

Airport Capacity

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he will complete his review of airport capacity in the south east of England. [93610]

Mr. Spellar: The consultation period, throughout the UK, has been extended until we have consulted on Gatwick runway options. We intend to issue a revised south east consultation paper next month. The consultation period will then run for four months after the date of publication of the new material. Those who have already responded to the consultation will be able to amend, add to, or replace their response having considered the new material, if they wish to do so.

All responses to the consultation will be considered and analysed carefully before final decisions are taken. These will be set out in an air transport White Paper, which we aim to publish towards the end of the year.

Bicyclists

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, if he will bring forward proposals to sections 28 and 29 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 so that the provisions in respect of dangerous or careless riding of bicycles apply to bicycles ridden on a public footpath which is not adjacent to a road. [94053]

Mr. Jamieson: This amendment is not necessary as a public footpath is a highway and therefore a 'road' for the purposes of sections 28 and 29 of the Road Traffic Act 1988.

Correspondence

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects to reply to the letter of the hon. Member for Reigate and East Surrey of 17 December 2002, concerning Redhill Aerodrome. [93785]

Mr. Jamieson: The letter to which the hon. Member refers was received in the Department on 30 December 2002 and acknowledged on the same day. A reply was sent on 27 January 2003.

Emissions

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate his Department has made of carbon dioxide emissions from transport from 1997 to 2002; and if he will make a statement. [93824]

Mr. Jamieson: Carbon dioxide emissions from transport between 1997 and 2001 (including from domestic aviation) were estimated to be as follows:

Million tonnes of carbon

	By 'end user'	*By 'source'*
1997	39	36
1998	39	36
1999	39	36
2000	39	35
2001	n/a	34

'End user' figures include a share of the emissions from fuel processing industries and the combustion of fossil fuels at power stations, whereas the 'source' figures do not. The 1997 to 2000 figures are published in "Transport Statistics Great Britain, 2002 Edition" and are obtained from the National Environmental Technology Centre (NETCEN). Only 'source' figures are available for 2001 and these are provisional estimates derived from DTIs "Digest of United Kingdom Energy Statistics 20022. No estimates are available yet for 2002.

Illegal Immigrants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many illegal immigrants were recorded as entering the UK via UK ports in each year since 1997, broken down by region; and what the estimates were in each year. [93242]

Beverley Hughes: I have been asked to reply.

I regret that information on the number of illegal immigrants recorded as entering at UK ports is not available.

Light Aircraft

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to reduce noise from light aircraft using grass airstrips in rural England. [93696]

Mr. Jamieson: Light aircraft have to comply with an internationally agreed noise certification standard, unless they were on the UK register prior to 1980. This standard was tightened for aircraft certificated after 1999. There are currently no plans for additional measures to reduce aircraft noise from light aircraft using grass airstrips in rural England. It is the responsibility of all aerodromes to ensure that appropriate rules are set and enforced to minimise noise nuisance.

M60 (Flooding)

Andrew Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport on how many occasions flooding has occurred on the stretch of the M60 between Denton and Hollinwood since it opened; how many accidents on this stretch have been attributed to flooding; who designed this stretch of motorway; what plans he has to undertake work to rectify design faults; and what estimate he has made of the cause of flooding in each case. [93420]

Mr. Jamieson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Tim Matthews, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Tim Matthews to Mr. Andrew Bennett, dated 29 January 2003:

I have been asked by the Transport Minister, David Jamieson, to reply to your recent question about flooding on the M60 Motorway between Demon and Hollinwood.

Since the M60 opened m October 2000, there have been no recorded occurrences of flooding caused by either failures of the motorway drainage system or overflow from external water courses. What has happened is that during periods of intense rainfall, excess water can collect on the surface of the carriageway.

Whilst we are not aware of any accidents that have occurred as a result, there are anecdotal reports from drivers that this is a matter of concern.

The section of motorway between Denton and Medlock was designed on behalf of the Highways Agency by Mouchel Consulting Ltd. The remaining length to Hollinwood was the subject of a Design and Build contract undertaken by Balfour Beatty who used Gifford and Partners to advise on the design.

At present, we are not aware of any design faults to which the excess water could be attributed. However, mindful of our duty of care towards motorway users, suitable warning signs were erected in Autumn last year. Additionally, and working with Greater Manchester Police, we have made use of variable message signing which is currently being used to good effect by encouraging drivers to slow down and take extra care in wet conditions.

Investigations are currently in hand to identify causes of the surface water problems and I will write to you again when we have a clearer picture.

Rail Crime

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many crimes have been committed against passengers on British Rail lines in the past five years. [93825]

Mr. Jamieson: The British Transport Police (BTP) have provided me with the following information.

	2001–02	*2000–01*	*1999–2000*	*1998–99*
Violent Crime	4,737	4,726	4,652	4,084
Sexual Offences	718	647	751	789
Theft of passenger property	16,918	15,194	14,661	12,725
Robbery	2,625	2,109	1,813	1,612
Public Disorder Offences	1,712	1,585	1,691	1,796
Motor vehicle/cycle offences	13,197	13,044	13.460	14,895
Total	39,907	37,305	37,028	35,901

These figures are for offences reported to the BTP for the rail network that they police, less London Underground. The figures for 1997–98 were recorded using different Home Office rules that would not be comparable with the figures for subsequent years.

Road Deaths

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many *(a)* people *(b)* children under 15 and *(c)* cyclists were killed on Britain's roads in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [93096]

Mr. Jamieson: The table shows the number of fatalities in the All, Child (0–14) and Cyclist categories in each year since 1992.

Road accident fatalities: GB 1992–2001

Casualties	*All*	*Child*	*Cyclists*
1992	4,229	268	204
1993	3,814	270	186
1994	3,650	265	172
1995	3,621	230	213
1996	3,598	211	203
1997	3,599	228	183
1998	3,421	179	158
1999	3,423	196	172
2000	3,409	162	127
2001	3,450	185	138

[1] Fatalities aged 0–14.

During the period 1992–2001 there has been a steady downward trend in the number of people killed and seriously injured on our roads. This has been achieved despite an increase in road traffic (including pedal cycles) since 1992 of 15 per cent.

Road Quietening

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the road quietening schemes that are being examined by his Department in Hull and the East Riding. [93821]

Mr. Jamieson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Tim Matthews, to write to the right hon. Member.

Letter from Tim Matthews to Mr. David Davis, dated 29 January 2003:

I have been asked by the Transport Minister, David Jamieson, 10 reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking for a list of road quietening schemes that are being examined by his Department in Hull and the East Riding.

The Highways Agency is working to achieve the Government's commitment to deliver the target of resurfacing 60% of the trunk road and motorway network with low noise surfacing by 2011. This includes resurfacing all concrete roads. Within Hull and the East Riding there are two sections of concrete roads, both on the M62 Motorway, between Gilberdyke and Newport, and Balkholme and Gilberdyke. Some preliminary design work has been undertaken on schemes for these sections of road. There is also a section of concrete carriageway on the M18 Motorway between Junctions 6 and 7, which falls partly within the East Riding. The timing of resurfacing work will depend on when road maintenance is required.

In addition, the Agency regularly reviews the trunk road and motorway network to identify the need for maintenance. At present, we envisage undertaking the following maintenance schemes within the next four years and will be considering the use of quieter surfaces:

M62

Junction 35 to Langham

A63

M62 to South Cave

South Cave to Welton

Western Interchange to Brighton Street

I hope this is helpful. If you would like any further information you may wish to contact the Agency's Area Manager for Hull and the East Riding, Mick Spink, on 0113 283 5397, or you can email him at mick.spink@highwavs.gsi.gov.uk

Thames Valley Multi-modal Study

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the annual capital sums are which are planned within the budget for transport over 10 years announced in the Thames Valley multi-modal study. [93612]

Mr. Spellar: The capital measures recommended by the Thames Valley Multi-Modal Study have been estimated by the consultants to cost £1.1 billion over an implementation period to 2018. Subject to the Government's response to the recommendations, the annual capital costs will depend on decisions about the phasing and construction of recommended schemes.

Train Franchises

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many train franchises were *(a)* renewed and *(b)* let in the last year; and what the average duration of those new franchises is. [93609]

Mr. Spellar: The following franchises were renewed or re-let in 2002. The table shows the type of extension/renewal/re-letting and the duration.

Train operator	*Re-letting etc. (date)*	*Duration*
Chiltern railways	18 February 2002	Until 2012, 2017 or 2022 depending upon the achievement of contractual terms
GNER	16 January 2002	Extension of two years to April 2005
South West Trains	6 November 2002	Extension of one year to February 2004 in order that negotiations about extension of the franchise for a further three years may continue

TREASURY

Flooding

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he plans to introduce an extra tax for property owners whose dwellings are threatened by persistent flooding. [92857]

Mr. Boateng: As stated in the 2002 Spending Review White Paper, the Government are building on the work of the flood and coastal defence funding review to explore options for putting in place new funding mechanisms and simplifying the administration of flood defences. An announcement on any reforms to the administration or funding of flood defence will be made in due course.

Diversity Objectives

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the diversity objectives set by each senior civil servant within his Department for the latest year available; and if he will make a statement. [93443]

John Healey: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Financial Secretary to the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on 13 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 414W.

Health and Safety Accidents (Treasury)

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the health and safety accidents which occurred in HM Treasury in 2001–02, stating the reason for each accident; and if he will make a statement. [93450]

John Healey: There were 27 minor health and safety accidents in the period concerned, of which 11 involved Treasury staff and 16 involved contractors working in HM Treasury.

Information Technology Skills

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received about the credit incentives from learning providers about higher level information technology skills; and what financial incentives his Department is planning to encourage individuals to undertake training. [93368]

John Healey: The Chancellor and other Treasury Ministers have received representations on skills issues from a variety of organisations, including learning providers. The Government are currently reviewing the funding of adult learning, including the role of financial incentives. This review will feed into the National Skills Strategy, which will be published in the summer.

Office of Government Commerce

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what reasons underlie the reduction in expenditure by the Office of Government Commerce between 2001–02 and 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [93441]

Mr. Boateng: The level of resource consumption estimated for 2001 -02 for the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) in the latest H.M. Treasury Departmental Report (Cm5425) was £88 million, reducing to a planned -£5million in 2002–03. The actual level of resource consumption in 2001–02 was £6million. The change between the estimated and actual outturns for 2001–02 is largely accounted for by a revaluation to and change in timing of the run down of some of the provisions the OGC holds in respect of its obligation to dispose of the Government's remaining surplus Residual Civil Estate. The change in the timing will also affect the outturn for 2002–03 where it is now anticipated that the likely outturn will be some £50 million. Such fluctuations in the valuations of and timing for the sale of the remaining surplus Estate, which reflect market conditions and opportunities, can be expected to continue in the future, although on a smaller scale as the size of the remaining Residual Estate continues to reduce. The actual change in resource consumption between years also reflects a reduction in the level of income the OGC generates .

Sickness Absence

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the rate of staff *(a)* absenteeism and *(b)* sickness was in his Department and each of its agencies and non-departmental public bodies in each year from 1990–91 to 2002–03; what the target set is for his Department; and if he will make a statement. [93504]

John Healey: Information on absenteeism is not available. Unauthorised absence is recorded as unpaid leave along with authorised unpaid absence (such as maternity leave or career breaks) and cannot be disaggregated.

Information on sickness absence covering the Treasury, Customs and Excise, the Valuation Office Agency, Inland Revenue, the Department for National Savings, the Government Actuary Department and the Office for National Statistics is published by the Cabinet Office in their annual reports on "Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service".

Information since 1994 from those reports is as follows:

Average working days absence per staff-year

	1994	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Customs and Excise	8.3	9.6	9.1	8.9	9.4	9.6	9.0	8.7
Inland Revenue	9.6	10.8	10.8	11.9	11.0	11.5	10.9	9.5
Valuation Office Agency	—	—	—	9.8	9.0	10.1	9.2	7.0
Office for National Statistics (Central Statistical Office)	9.1	11.5	—	9.1	9.6	8.8	8.0	7.9
Department for National Savings	14.3	16.1	14.3	10.9	9.6	4.7	8.8	2.2
Government Actuary Department	5.8	5.8	10.4	6.2	6.7	6.7	6.6	6.9
HM Treasury	7.0	8.4	5.1	4.9	5.3	5.5	3.9	4.7

Information for the Royal Mint and the Debt Management Office is as follows:

Average working days absence per staff-year

	1994	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Royal Mint	7.5	8.2	8.0	5.8	6.3	6.5	5.4	5.9
Debt Management Office	—	—	—	—	0	0.5	0.3	1.1

Information for 2002 will be announced in due course. Sick absence targets for Customs and Excise, Inland Revenue, Valuation Office Agency, ONS and HM Treasury are reported in the relevant departmental or annual reports. These are available on the relevant websites. Targets for DNS, GAD and the Royal Mint are in the following table. The DMO are reviewing their sick management policies.

	Sick absence target
DNS	4.3 working days by 2003
GAD	7.5 working days by end of March 2003.
Royal Mint	6.3 days for non-industrial staff for 2003

Tax Regime

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will change the Inland Revenue regime for life insurance and tax exempt savings plans; and when he will next meet the Association of Friendly Societies. [93974]

John Healey: The Sandler review of the market for medium and long-term retail savings, which was published last July, recommended two changes to the regime for taxing life insurance products. These changes are the abolition of qualifying policies and the replacement of the so-called 5 per cent. tax-deferral rule which applies to withdrawals.

As we announced in the Pre-Budget Report, the Government are considering these proposals as part of the Budget process and is discussing their implications with the insurance industry and friendly society movement. I understand that the Association of Friendly Societies (AFS) has been in frequent contact with Treasury and Inland Revenue officials. I am not aware of any recent request from the AFS for a meeting with Treasury Ministers.

Unemployment (Fife)

Mr. MacDougall: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the latest figure is for unemployment in the Fife region for *(a)* men, *(b)* women, *(c)* men over 50 and *(d)* women over 50. [93558]

John Healey: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. MacDougall, dated 29 January 2003:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question about unemployment in Fife. (93558)

The local Labour Force Survey for March 2001 to February 2002 (not yet adjusted for the 2001 Census) shows an estimated 15,000 unemployed people resident in the Fife local authority district. No figures by age and sex are available as the sample sizes are too small to provide reliable estimates.

The Office for National Statistics also compiles claimant count statistics for local areas of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance. The following table shows the figures for Fife in December 2002.

Claimant count in Fife local authority district—not seasonally adjusted (December 2002)

	Men	*Women*
Total claimants	6,499	1,931
Age 50 and over	1,229	376

Written Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of written parliamentary questions received by his Department in 2001–02 were not answered substantively within *(a)* two weeks, *(b)* one month and *(c)* three months; and if he will make a statement. [93445]

John Healey: Treasury Ministers attach importance to answering parliamentary questions promptly. In the 2001–02 session, 4,618 of the 5,888 written questions to the Treasury (78.4 per cent.) received substantive replies on or before the due date for answering. 111 (1.9 per cent. of the total) had not been answered within two weeks, 57 (1.0 per cent.) within one month and 43 (0.7 per cent.) within three months. In the 2002[en rule]03 session to date, 76.7 per cent. of all written questions have been answered on time.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Attendance Allowance

Mr. Paul Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will set out for each quarter from September 2000 *(a)* how many applications for attendance allowance have been received, and of those how many were (i) successful, (ii) unsuccessful, (iii) subject to appeal and (iv) successful at appeal, *(b)* what the average processing time has been for attendance allowance for (i) first-time claims and (ii) appeals for claims to be reconsidered, *(c)* how many applications for attendance allowance have (i) been subject to reconsideration and (ii) successful at reconsideration, and what was the average number of days taken to process appeals, and *(d)* how many (i) claims, (ii) reviews, (iii) reconsiderations and (iv) appeals there were on which a decision had not been reached at the end of each quarter of the last three years. [89826]

Maria Eagle: Such information as can reliably be made available is contained in the table. Information is not available on claims, reviews, reconsiderations and appeals on which a decision had not been reached (part *(d)* of the question).

Number of applications for Attendance Allowance received, successful and unsuccessful each quarter from September 2000

	Received	*Successful*	*Unsuccessful*
September-November 2000	101,715	78,680	25,415
December 2000-February 2001	90,745	66,130	21,380
March-May 2001	103,190	77,405	24,720
June-August 2001	102,050	75,870	23,525
September-November 2001	97,470	76,395	23,110
December 2001-February 2002	87,690	68,290	20,470
March-May 2002	107,395	79,740	22,560
June-August 2002	96,870	74,365	21,595
September-November 2002	99,905	80,745	23,185

Source:

Information supplied by MIS Support (FPMT) Norcross

Data from National Management Information Pack

The figures for successful and unsuccessful claims relate to the decisions given during that period and will not necessarily equate to the number of claims received during the period.

Further data regarding appeals is not available at this time.

Actual average clearance times AACT (in working days) for normal rules (NR) claims, reconsiderations and appeals (Attendance Allowance) April 2000 to December 2002

		AACT		
Total quarter	*Date*	*NR claims*	*Reconsiderations*	*Appeals*
2000–01				
1	April-June 2000	36.1	58.7	68.8
2	July-September 2000	31.8	50.0	69.7
3	October-December 2000	26.4	44.6	55.7
4	January-March 2001	26.7	40.1	47.9
2001–02				
1	January-March 2001	26.0	35.0	38.9
2	July-September 2001	27.9	36.8	36.1
3	October-December 2001	28.9	36.9	36.8
4	January-March 2002	25.4	36.5	34.2
2002				
1	April-June 2002	24.6	34.1	33.4
2	April-June 2002	26.6	32.8	32.2
3	October-December 2002	24.1	32.2	31.8

Number of attendance allowance reconsiderations each quarter from September 2000

	Decisions	*Successful*
September-November 2000	7,955	3,465
December 2000-February 2001	6,050	2,480
March-May 2001	5,900	2,435
June-August 2001	5,930	2,425
September-November 2001	5,495	2,140
December 2001-February 2002	5,575	2,390
March-May 2002	5,325	2,265
June-August 2002	5,495	2,420
September-November 2002	6,120	2,710

Source:

IAD Information Centre 100 per cent data taken from 100 per cent extract of monthly management information system and rounded to the nearest 5.

Benefits Agency (Fraud)

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what recent guidelines he has issued in respect of the *(a)* disciplinary measures and *(b)* criminal proceedings to be imposed when staff of the Benefits Agency are found to have committed fraud. [92505]

Malcolm Wicks: In December 2002 the Department issued a revised disciplinary policy to all staff which outlined the guidelines to be issued in all cases of serious and minor misconduct, including internal fraud. The policy is supported by separate guidance produced for individuals and managers and includes categories of disciplinary offences and the range and duration of penalties.

Guidance outlining the circumstances when criminal proceedings should be considered is regularly reviewed and updated as appropriate.

Call Centres

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list the telephone call centres that provide services for his Department and its agencies, indicating in each case *(a)* who is responsible for operating the centre, *(b)* how many staff work in the centre and *(c)* what the cost of the centre was in the last 12 months to his Department and its agencies. [88448]

Mr. McCartney: The available information has been placed in the Library. This information is not routinely collected or validated centrally. Many DWP call centre services are integrated with the Department's core functions to varying degrees and this has made it difficult to disaggregate some staff functions and costs or to provide details on a consistent basis. The figures provided should, therefore, be read with reference to the explanatory notes that it has been necessary to provide for most returns.

Disability Living Allowance

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many recipients of higher level disability living allowance there are in *(a)* England, *(b)* Scotland, *(c)* Wales and *(d)* Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [92795]

Maria Eagle: The information requested is contained in the table. Disability Living Allowance is divided into two components: care, which has three rates; and mobility, which has two.

Number of people receiving the highest rate care component and the higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance at 31 August 2002

Thousands

	Highest care	*Higher mobility*
United Kingdom	531.9	1,587.2
England	396.7	1,193.8
Scotland	56.7	172.1
Wales	40.1	137.5
Northern Ireland	38.3	83.8

Note:

Figures are in thousands and rounded to the nearest hundred.

Recipients of highest-rate care component may also be in receipt of a mobility component.

Recipients of higher-rate mobility component may also be in receipt of a care component

Northern Ireland Figures were provided by the Statistics and Research Branch, Department for Social Development

Source:

IAD Information Centre, data taken from 5 per cent).

Gas Pipes

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what percentage of the gas network has metal mains pipes. [87482]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: I am informed by the Health and Safety Executive that there are approximately 275,000 km of gas main in Transco's network of which approximately 55 per cent. of the total length are metal i.e. 151,000 km.

Government Subsidised Training

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* received into the length of time which individuals on average practise a particular trade or occupation after receiving Government subsidised training in it. [93560]

Mr. Nicholas Brown *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* The objective of our policies is to help jobless people, particularly the most disadvantaged, move into and remain in employment. Initiatives such as the New Deals and Work Based Learning for Adults are helping to achieve this. Some of those helped into work by government programmes may change their jobs or occupations at a later date. However, the skills and confidence they have gained through participation in our programmes will stand them in good stead in the current dynamic labour market. Success, therefore, should be measured by the improvement in the level of employment. This has increased by 1.3 million since 1997 and now stands at 27.8 million.

There has been no specific research into the length of time individuals stay in a particular occupation after receiving Government subsidised training. However, we have commissioned a study into Work Based Learning for Adults that will examine the impact of a subsidised training programme on client outcomes.

Grants

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will list the grants funded by his Department for which individual members of the public and organisations may apply; and if he will make a statement as to *(a)* the total of such funding in the last financial year, *(b)* the total number of awards and *(c)* their administrative costs. [82197]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Our objectives are to fight poverty, create opportunity for all and help people become self sufficient and independent. Jobcentre Plus and The Pension Service administer adiverse range of grant schemes, usually linked to specific life events such as maternity or bereavement, to which individual members of the public can apply for help. Grants are also available to help people lead independent lives in the community.

In addition the Department works in partnership with a number of grant aided organisations. However we do not administer any grant schemes which are open to application by outside organisations.

Information on administration costs is currently not available in the format requested. The Department now accounts for its administration and benefit expenditure by Strategic Objective, as set out in its Public Service Agreements (PSA), and by individual Requests for Resources (RfRs) as set out in the Departmental Estimates and Accounts.

Information relating to the principal grant schemes administered by the Department in 2001–02 is in the table.

	2001–02 Expenditure (£ million)	*Number of awards*
Sure Start Maternity Grant[1]	61.2	201,000
Funeral payments [1]	38.4	42,000
Community Care Grants [1]	102.6	233,000
Job Grant[2]	5.3	530,000
New Deal 50 Plus Training Grant [3]	0.885	2,100
Access to work [2]	40.9	13,000

[1] Social Fund Annual Report 2002

[2] Jobcentre Plus computer system

[3] ND 50 plus evaluation data base.

Notes:

(i) Expenditure rounded to nearest thousand

(ii) Number of awards rounded to nearest thousand.

Incomes (Kendal)

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what percentage of the population of the Kendal travel-to-work-area had an income *(a)* below, *(b)* at and *(c)* above the national average in each of the past five years. [94817]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The information requested is not available.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if the 34-page version of 'Review Claim Form A2' continues to be issued to Minimum Income Guarantee claimants. [88202]

Mr. McCartney: The review claim form A2 continues to be used when reviewing certain Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) claims. It is completed, for example, when the claimant is in receipt of another income such as occupational pension, has capital, or receives Invalid Care Allowance or Attendance Allowance. It was used in around 10 per cent. of MIG claims in 2001–02 and was completed by a member of DWP staff in two thirds of these cases. Help to complete the form is available to everyone.

David Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many pensioners in Telford benefit from the Minimum Income Guarantee. [93283]

Mr. McCartney: As at August 2002 there were 2,900 people benefiting from the Minimum Income Guarantee in the Telford constituency.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, August 2002.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what his estimate is of the total expenditure by his Department on ministerial travel *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* abroad, in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92474]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, Mr. Alexander, on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 334W.

Occupational Pension Schemes

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many companies offered occupational pension schemes on *(a)* 1 May 1997 and *(b)* 1 May 2002. [93002]

Mr. McCartney: The information is not available.

Some information on the proportion of private sector employers that offer occupational pension schemes can be found from the DWP Employers1 Pension Provision survey, which has been conducted in 1994, 1996, 1998 and 2000. Results from these surveys have been published and are available in the Library.

The table is a reproduction of Table 4.2 of 'Employers Pension Provision Survey 2000', by Alison Smith and Stephen McKay, DWP Research Report no. 163.

Pension provision by size of organisation, 1996, 1998 and 2000

Cell percentages

	1996		*1998*		*2000*	
Type of pension provision	*Up to 19 employees*	*20+ employees*	*Up to 19 employees*	*20+ employees*	*Up to 19 employees*	*20+ employees*
Occupational scheme[1][2]	n/a	[2]n/a	[2]n/a	[2]n/a	5	22
Salary-related	3	19	2	13	1	12
Money purchase	2	13	3	10	2	9
COMBS	—	—	0	1	[3]	1
Top Hat	6	8	3	10	3	6
Other	0	0	0	[3]	0	1
Closed scheme	1	6	1	5	2	5
Group personal pension	6					
19	4	26	7	37		
Contributions to personal pensions	20	27	21	30	16	23
Any provision	36	70	32	66	26	64
No provision	64	30	68	34	74	36

[1] Any.

[2] Information not available from published reports.

[3] Less than 0.5 per cent.

Notes:

1. COMBS schemes (contracted-out on a mixed benefit basis) were not available until April 1997. Top Hat schemes are those set up for senior managers or only currently available to senior management.
2. Figures for 1997 are not available. There was no survey in 2002 but a survey for 2003 is currently being undertaken.
3. Methodological improvements to the survey between 1996 and 2000 mean that results are not strictly comparable across years. A detailed explanation of these improvements is given on pages 45–46 of the publication referred to above.
4. Data are only available in the form of proportions, rather than numbers of employers.
5. Results refer to private sector employers only.
6. Companies may offer more than one type of pension scheme.

Pension Credit

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what estimate he has made of the likely take-up of the new pension credit; and how many questions pensioners will be required to answer to assess their eligibility. [93884]

Mr. McCartney: We have committed to a target of paying pension credit to at least three million pensioner households by 2006. We have already shortened the minimum income guarantee claim form from 40 to 10 pages. We are designing the pension credit application process to be even simpler, including use of the telephone for most applications. The number of questions that a pensioner is required to answer in order to assess their eligibility to pension credit will depend on their individual circumstances.

Pensioner Poverty

Mr. Graham Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what recent representations he has received about pensioner poverty. [89715]

Maria Eagle: The Department receives representations about pensioner poverty on an ongoing basis and also meets with Partnership Against Poverty group regularly.

Providing a decent income is the key to tackling pensioner poverty and from April, no pensioner will have to get by on less than £102.10 a week (£155.80 for married couples).

Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on his policy on the annual upgrading of retirement pensions for British citizens living in *(a)* Barbados and *(b)* Canada. [88792]

Mr. McCartney: We uprate State Pensions for British citizens living overseas where there is a legal requirement or a reciprocal social security agreement to do so.

The UK has a reciprocal agreement with Barbados that provides for British pensioners living in that country to be paid the same rate of State Pension as would be paid if they lived in the UK. However, although there is a social security arrangement with the Canadian Government, it does not allow for the payment of UK benefits to persons in Canada and contains no similar provision on the uprating of State Pensions.

The uprating of State Pensions abroad is the subject of a Court of Appeal hearing set for 24–25 March 2003. This is an appeal against the High Court's finding that the UK Government are not in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights by not annually uprating the State Pension in countries where there is no agreement to do so.

Retirement Age

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what discussions he has had with interested groups on plans to make the retirement age for men and women equal. [87364]

Mr. McCartney: The UK has a fixed age for eligibility to State Pension (currently 60 for women and 65 for men, although to be equalised at 65 for both sexes as from 2020). We do not have a national mandatory retirement age. Sex discrimination legislation prohibits employers from setting different retirement ages for men and women.

A variety of representations have been received from a range of organisations and individuals about the equalisation of State Pension Age, the bulk of which would have been dealt with at the time of the previous administration. A discussion document "Options for Equality in State Pension Age" was published in December 1991. A White Paper "Equality in State Pension Age" followed in December 1993.

Plans to equalise the State Pension age progressively over the period 2010 to 2020, were enacted by the 1995 Pensions Act.

We are also committed to implementing the age strand of the European Employment Directive by 2006, when domestic legislation will come into force outlawing age discrimination in employment and training. Under the Directive, employers' compulsory retirement ages are likely to be unlawful unless they are objectively justified.

Transco

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what punitive action was provided for prior to March 2002 by *(a)* statute and *(b)* regulation against Transco for failure to fulfil its statutory obligations to reassess its engineers' qualification to the Approved Competency Standard, and to provide an emergency service to domestic premises. [91403]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: In March 1997, Transco was registered with Corgi and all its emergency service operatives were deemed to hold valid certification under the Health and Safety Commission's Approved Code of Practice (ACOP) scheme, the sole means of demonstrating safety competence then in force. As this certification was valid for five years, no action could have been taken against Transco up to March 2002.

If Transco were to breach legal requirements in this area, there is a range of enforcement action available to HSE under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1994, ranging from the provision of advice to the serving of an enforcement notice and, ultimately, prosecution.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when the Approved Competency Standard ceased to be the qualification required by Transco for its engineers engaged in safety work in domestic premises. [91406]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Since 1998, competency standards have been incorporated in the Nationally Accredited Certification Scheme for Individual Gas Fitting Operatives (ACS). However, a new National Vocational Qualification, developed by the Gas and Water Industries National Training Organisation (GWINTO), was launched in 2002, and includes competence assessments that, with regard to gas safety matters, are aligned with those of the ACS.

Transco has a duty to meet the requirements of the Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations 1998 with regard to gas work downstream of the emergency control valve immediately before the meter. It has to ensure that its operatives who undertake this work are competent to do it safely. The accepted means for determining competence is for operatives to be assessed against recognised national standards on a five-yearly cycle. Standards were originally set under a Health and Safety Commission Approved Code of Practice (ACOP). All Transco engineers engaged in safety work in domestic premises hold valid certificates of competence under one or other of these schemes, and accordingly, meet the registration conditions laid down by the Council for Registered Gas Installers (CORGI).

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what percentage of work under the safety case is performed by non-Transco employees; and who bears statutory responsibility for the quality of that work. [91407]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: The percentage of work performed by non-Transco employees may vary and is not prescribed in Transco's safety case. However, the safety case contains details of Transco's health and safety management system, which includes arrangements for the management of contractors.

Both Transco and their contractors have a statutory responsibility for ensuring work carried out is such that it will not, so far as is reasonably practicable, expose either its own employees or others to risks to their health and safety.

Unemployment

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will make a statement on unemployment in *(a)* Romford, *(b)* the London Borough of Havering and *(c)* Greater London. [90300]

Mr. Nicholas Brown: Our policies have created a strong economy geared to delivering stability, low inflation and have helped deliver a high and stable level of employment benefiting every part of the country. Alongside this, through Jobcentre Plus and programmes such as the New Deal, our labour market policies promote attachment to the job market.

Our success is reflected in the fall in the unemployment figures for London, the London Borough of Havering and for Romford which are in the table:

Claimant unemployment (not seasonally adjusted)

	December 1997	*December 2002*	*Percentage fall*
Romford	1,093	835	24
London borough of Havering	3,295	2,350	29
Greater London	234,000	166,000	29

Source:
ONS

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 30 January 2003

CABINET OFFICE

Government Car Service

Norman Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office whether a Minister's spouse or partner may use a Government car for official engagements when not accompanied by the Minister. [94992]

Mr. Alexander: The rules on the use of an official car by a Minister's spouse or partner are set out in "Travel by Ministers".

Press Releases

Mr. Laws: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many press releases have been issued by his Department in each *(a)* year and *(b)* quarter from 1995–96 to 2002–03; and if he will make a statement. [92427]

Mr. Alexander: The number of press releases issued by the Cabinet Office since 1995 is as follows:

1995—128
1996—135
1997—189
1998—277
1999—343
2000—381
2001—196
2002—106

The figures for 1999 and 2000 include press releases issued by the Year 2000 Media Co-ordination Unit, which was operating from the Cabinet Office. Most of these figures will also include press releases issued on behalf of the Privy Council Office, which have only been separately identifiable since 1 January 2002.

Lists and copies of Cabinet Office press releases issued from 1999 are available at http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk.

Providing quarterly figures since 1995–96 could be supplied only at disproportionate cost.

Public Appointments

Mr. Allen: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans he has to extend the opportunities for members of the public to receive appointments to public bodies, task forces and ad hoc advisory committees. [93388]

Mr. Alexander: As Cabinet Office Minister responsible for public appointments, work is currently under way in my Department on a new website, through which people will be able to get details of current and prospective public appointment vacancies across Departments. This new website will enable people to search on the basis of topic, Government Department, location of the body etc. and will be linked through to the job specification and how to apply. The new website will be complemented by a biannual newsletter so that access to the internet is not a barrier. The website and newsletter will be available in the course of the year.

Individual Departments are responsible for appointments to the public bodies they sponsor, and for setting up and organising the membership of specific task forces and ad hoc advisory committees.

Publicity and Advertising

Mr. Laws: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body sponsored by his Department spent on *(i)* publicity and (ii) advertising in each year from 1995–96 to 2000–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92230]

Mr. Alexander: Details of my Department's spend on (i) publicity and (ii) advertising in each year from 1997–98 to 2001–02 can be found in the table. Information prior to 1997–98 is not held on the Department's accounting system and is therefore available only at disproportionate costs.

£ thousand

Year	*Publicity*	*Advertising*
1997–98	472	144
1998–99	1,634	138
1999–2000	2,551	262
2000–01	1,803	464
2001–02	4,260	2,708

The estimated spend on publicity and advertising in 2002–03 is £2,106,000. This is based on actual expenditure incurred up to and including December and forecast expenditure for the remaining months of the financial year. It is not possible to separate out the publicity costs from the advertising costs without incurring disproportionate cost.

Expenditure incurred by non-departmental public bodies sponsored by my Department are not held on our accounting system and is therefore available only at disproportionate cost.

The increase in publicity expenditure between 1997–98 and 1999–00 is due to expenditure in connection with Year 2000 compliance awareness.

The increase in publicity expenditure from 2000–01 to 2001–02 from £1,803 to £4,260,000 is due to expenditure of £2,670,000 incurred by the Office of the E-Envoy for the UK Online advertising campaign, offering help to people wanting to use the internet.

The increase in advertising expenditure from 1998–99 to 2000–01 from £138,000 to £464,000 is due to expenditure on recruitment advertising for posts within the Department. These posts range from administration and junior management level through to the senior civil service. Also included is recruitment advertising expenditure for specialist placements within the Government Information and Development Centre.

The advertising figure for 2001–02 includes £2,491,000 incurred in by the Office of the E-Envoy for the UK Online advertising campaign, offering help to people wanting to use the internet.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Laws: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what the rate of staff *(a)* absenteeism and *(b)* sickness was in his Department and each of its agencies and non-departmental public bodies in each year from 1990–91 to 2002–03; what the target set is for his Department; and if he will make a statement. [93508]

Mr. Alexander: Absenteeism is defined as unauthorised absence for which pay would be stopped. The Cabinet Office (and agencies) keep records of unpaid absence generally but they also include authorised absence. Separating the records could be achieved only at disproportionate costs.

Sick absence figures for government departments are published annually in the report "Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service" . The most recent report for calendar year 2001 was announced by Ministerial Statement 19 December 2002. Copies are available in the Libraries of the House. Figures for 2002 will be announced later this year.

Cabinet Office figures (including its agencies and non-departmental public bodies) are

	Days per staff year
1993	7.3
1994	6.3
1995	7.7
1996	6.4
1997	6.6
1998	7.3
1999	6.8
2000	4.6
2001	5.7

Figures for 1990–92 are not available.

Our target for reducing sick absence is no more than

6.0 days per staff year by the end of 2003

Previous targets, which were achieved, were no more than

7.4 days per staff year in 1998

6.4 days per staff year by 2001

The Cabinet Office is committed to achieving its targets and has in place sick absence management procedures recommended by the 1998 report "Working Well Together—Managing Attendance in the Public Sector".

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Lottery

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what level of funds unallocated to good causes has been held by each of the Lottery fund distributors in each of the past five years; what percentage of their total balance this represented in each year; and if she will make a statement. [94138]

Mr. Caborn: All funds held in the National Lottery Distribution Fund (NLDF) are allocated to one of the Good Causes. Information regarding funds not yet committed to projects by each distributing body is only readily available in the form requested for the past three years. The figures in the following table show the position at the end of each of the last three completed financial years.

£

Distributor	*NLDF balance at 16 March 2000*	*Uncommitted funds*	*NLDF balance at 31 March 2001*	*Uncommitted fund*	*NLDF balance 31 March 2002*	*Uncommitted funds*
Arts Council of England	282,798,703	-98,044,005	256,789,149	-16,113,171	246,267,032	531,576 (0.2 per cent.)
Film Council	12,798,154	12,798,154 (100 per cent.)	41,761,184	9,796,283 (23.5 per cent.)	67,640,454	7,774,074 (11.5 per cent.)
Arts Council of NI	26,969,427	9,773,570 (36.2 per cent.)	30,372,890	17,292,726 (56.9 per cent.)	33,555,930	15,443,320 (46.0 per cent.)
Scottish Arts Council	52,442,351	1,771,859 (3.38 per cent.)	46,450,319	10,747,608 (23.1 per cent.)	44,642,966	9,076,600 (20.3 per cent.)
Scottish Screen	n/a	n/a	4,290,609	1,042,978 (24.3 per cent.)	3,637,995	-1,306,175
Arts Council of Wales	24,055,796	-7,977,347	28,108,522	-9,889,513	32,542,530	-5,296,685
Community Fund	601,000,000	-26,000,000	489,771,011	-159,413,432	401,424,347	-148,132,113
Heritage Lottery Fund	903,000,000	-27,200,000	935,605,679	-48,603,065	933,667,077	-125,269,349
Millennium Commission	591,711,691	-148,888,309	466,483,244	91,383,244 (19.6 per cent.)	386,384,792	157,384,792 (40 per cent.)
New Opportunities Fund	463,999,683	142,949,683 (30.8 per cent.)	571,897,073	11,541,590 (2.0 per cent.)	826,417,473	-55,387,421
Sport England	458,717,575	-196,745,718	451,912,589	-186,232,411	382,438,490	-465,214,510
Sports Council of NI	14,746,090	778,787 (5.3 per cent.)	16,748,325	1,952,654 (11.67 per cent.)	19,539,173	5,178,473 (26.5 per cent.)
Sport Scotland	75,106,991	9,919,219 (13.2 per cent.)	70,326,344	32,375,718 (46.0 per cent.)	72,899,224	19,599,086 (26.9 per cent.)

£

Distributor	*NLDF balance at 16 March 2000*	*Uncommitted funds*	*NLDF balance at 31 March 2001*	*Uncommitted fund*	*NLDF balance 31 March 2002*	*Uncommitted funds*
UK Sports Council	4,165,842	-19,832,014	5,433,038	-66,179,747	8,011,662	-42,902,309
Sports Council of Wales	29,308,659	20,141,848 (68.7 per cent.)	35,912,106	13,989,556 (39.0 per cent.)	39,765,549	330,132 (0.8 per cent.)
Total	3,540,820,963	198,133,120 (5.6 per cent.)	3,451,862,081	190,122,358 (5.5 per cent.)	3,558,834,694	215,318,053 (6.1 per cent.)

Note:

A negative figure in the table appears where a distributing body's commitments exceed its balance. The figure in the 'Total' row for uncommitted funds is the sum of the positive amounts only. Negative figures have been treated as zero in these calculations.

Although some distributing bodies have funds in their NLDF balances which are not yet assigned to projects, the collective allocation of the 15 bodies is more than the total NLDF balance. The total level of commitment at September 2002, the latest date for which figures are available, stood at £3.99 billion, £470 million more than the balance of the NLDF at that time.

The question of how best to deliver Lottery money most effectively was a part of the recent consultation exercise on Lottery Distribution Policy carried out by my Department. Proposals arising from this exercise will be published later this year.

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment she has made of the variation in expenditure relative to revenue received of the Lottery income distributing bodies; and if she will make a statement. [94139]

Mr. Caborn: There are significant differences between the 15 Lottery Distributing Bodies in terms of the nature of their activities and the type and timescale of the projects that they support.

There are therefore good reasons why different bodies will draw down funds raised for them at different rates. DCMS is working with the distributors to encourage and facilitate greater commitment of Lottery funds and the faster expenditure of committed money. This must however be consistent with the principles of good financial management and accountability.

At 30 September 2002, the distributors collectively had made commitments, with varying degrees of firmness, totalling 3.99 billion while the amount held in the National Lottery Distribution Fund (NLDF) at this time was 3.52 billion.

Nick Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations she has received concerning the accountability of the Lottery Fund distributing bodies and their application processes to *(a)* applicants, *(b)* the public and *(c)* her Department; what assessment she has made of them; and if she will make a statement. [94140]

Mr. Caborn: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has from time to time received representations about the accountability of the Lottery distributors and their application processes. The Accounting Officer of a Lottery distributor is accountable to both the Department's Permanent Secretary and to Parliament for the proper and prudent expenditure of funds, and distributors' activities are subject to external audit by the National Audit Office. As Lottery proceeds allocated to distributors are public money, the general principles of Government Accounting must be applied in the design and implementation of systems for the distribution of that money. Each Lottery distributing body must, under the terms of its financial directions, publish and make available guidance on how to apply for funds.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the rate of staff *(a)* absenteeism and *(b)* sickness was in her Department and each of its agencies and non-departmental public bodies in each year from 1990–91 to 2002–03; what the target set is for her Department; and if she will make a statement. [93509]

Dr. Howells: Cabinet Office publishes an annual report "Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service". The most recently published figures for the calendar year 2001 were announced by Ministerial Statement on 19 December 2002, and copies placed in the Libraries of the House.

For DCMS and the Royal Parks Agency the 2001 average working days sickness absence per staff year figures were:

	Certified sickness	*Self-certification*	*Total*	*Staff years*
DCMS	3.8	2.1	5.9	420
Royal Parks Agency	2.5	11.0	13.5	229

The 1999, 2000 and 2001 reports are available on the Cabinet Office website www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/civilservice/publications/sickness/index.htm The sickness absence figures for 2002 will be announced in due course.

DCMS and its Agency have no recorded cases of any unauthorised absenteeism.

The targets set for DCMS and its Agency were:

	2001–02	*2002–03*
DCMS	7 days	6 days
Royal Parks Agency	10 days	9 days

DCMS, its Agency and each of its non-departmental public body (NDPB) are committed to managing sickness absence effectively, and in meeting the 2003 target for reduced sickness absence as set out in the Service Delivery Agreements (SDA) and NDPB Funding Agreements.

DCMS does not hold central absenteeism and sickness records for NDPBs. To provide this information could be undertaken only at disproportionate cost.

Tote

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans the Government have to sell the Tote *(a)* to a racing trust to allow it to compete commercially with all long-term profits invested in the sport and *(b)* to a profit-making company with interests in the gambling sector. [93794]

Mr. Caborn: The Government's policy in this area is well established. The intention remains to sell the Tote to a consortium of racing interests and that is the basis we are working on. We would only consider other alternatives if that model proved to be unviable.

DEFENCE

Helicopters

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many helicopters are in service with *(a)* 847 NAS, *(b)* 846 NAS and *(c)* 845 NAS, and what the serviceability rate is of the aircraft of each squadron. [93648]

Mr. Ingram: The numbers of aircraft and overall serviceability rate for 847 NAS, 846 NAS and 845 NAS are as follows:

Aircraft

	Number
847 Naval Air Squadron	
Lynx Attack Helicopter Mark 7	Six Aircraft; 100 per cent. overall serviceability rate
Gazelle Attack Helicopter mark 1	Eight aircraft; 83 per cent. overall serviceability rate
846 Naval Air Squadron	
Sea King Helicopter Mark 4	10 aircraft; 60 per cent. overall serviceability rate
845 Naval Air Squadron	
Sea King Helicopter Mark 4	10 aircraft; 90 per cent. overall serviceability rate

Serviceability is defined as the number of aircraft within the Actual Operating Fleet (AOF—the actual aircraft allocated to the Operating Commander to complete the mandated task) that are fit to fly at the time of reporting expressed as a percentage of the AOF. The figures provided are accurate as of 27 January 2003.

Iraq

Mr. Wood: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on British involvement in military strikes on targets in the Iraqi no-fly zones since 11 September 2001; what the cost of this involvement has been to Britain; and what *(a)* military and *(b)* civilian casualties have resulted. [93217]

Mr. Ingram: Our records do not separately identify expenditure incurred in maintaining the no-fly zones, nor can they be broken down from specific dates. However, the table sets out the overall estimated additional expenditure incurred as a direct result of operations in the Gulf during financial year 2001–02 and 2002–03.

	£ million
2001–02	22[1]
2002–03	26[1]

[1] Denotes figure calculated on a resource basis.

I will write to the hon. Member with further details concerning expenditure in 2001–02 and 2002–03.

We are not aware of any civilian casualties resulting from responses made in self-defence by coalition aircraft patrolling the no-fly zones since 11 September 2001. It is not possible to confirm whether military casualties have occurred.

Minimum Wage

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will estimate the impact of increasing the minimum wage *(a)* in line with average earnings, *(b)* to £4.17 per hour, *(c)* to £4.87 per hour, *(d)* to £5.00 per hour and *(e)* to £5.30 per hour, on the cost of salaries of departmental employees *(i)* in total and (ii) for each nation of the United Kingdom in the next financial year. [90609]

Dr. Moonie: Based on the net working hours of Ministry of Defence staff, increasing the minimum wage by any of the rates at *(a)* to *(e)* will have no impact on the cost of salaries for the MOD.

Rifles

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many rifles have been supplied for use by *(a)* front-line troops and *(b)* support forces. [94103]

Mr. Ingram: The information to distinguish between the number of rifles of all types held by front line troops and support forces is not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. Troops being deployed as part of Operation Telic are to be equipped with the modified SA80 rifle. To date, 50,000 modified SA80 rifles have been issued to United Kingdom Armed Forces personnel.

SA-80 A2 Rifle

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many troops being deployed in the Gulf as part of Operation Telic are to be equipped with unmodified SA-80 A2 rifles. [93991]

Mr. Ingram: None. Arrangements are in place to ensure that all troops deployed on Operation Telic will be equipped with the modified SA-80 A2 rifle.

Service Personnel (Cancelled Holidays)

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much compensation has been paid to service personnel for cancelled holidays in the past six months; and how many service personnel have been compensated. [93652]

Dr. Moonie: During the period June—December 2002, approximately 46 Service personnel claimed a total of about £11K in refunds under the Nugatory Holiday Expenditure scheme. This scheme reimburses Service personnel for otherwise irrecoverable expenses incurred through having to cancel or curtail holidays at short notice due to unplanned and unforeseen military commitments.

Services' Protective Clothing

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* gas masks and *(b)* protective suits have been issued to service personnel. [93568]

Mr. Ingram: All service personnel receive a personal issue of one respirator, to be retained at all times, and protective suits are made available for operational requirements. Protective suits are bulky items so whilst one suit is given as a personal issue, the others would normally be held by Quartermasters and issued as required. Thereare sufficient stocks of gas masks and protective suits to meet our contingency plans.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

EU Food Production

6. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the change in the amount of food which will be produced in the EU after the expansion of the organisation. [94163]

Margaret Beckett: Accession to the EU will promote restructuring and improved productivity in the new member states. We welcome that. But it makes the need for reform of the common agricultural policy all the more critical in order to avoid stimulating artificial and uneconomic production in both the new and the existing member states.

Sugar Production

16. **Mr. Bellingham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she next expects to meet British Sugar to discuss the development of new technology in sugar beet refining. [94173]

Mr. Meacher: Defra maintains regular contact with British Sugar at all levels. My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, (the Lord Whitty), visited the Wissington Sugar Factory as recently as 17 January.

Horticulture

17. **Hugh Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on Government policy towards horticulture. [94174]

Alun Michael: As my right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Environment, stated at Oral Questions on 19 December last, the Government welcome the contribution of horticulture to the UK economy. It is worth some £2 billion at the farm gate and supports substantial downstream activity in packhouses, processing and the garden industry. We will continue to work with the industry through the Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy published on 12 December, by funding research and development and through the England Rural Development Programme.

Brown Trout

18. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what strategy has been in place during the past five years to combat the effects of water acidity upon stocks of native brown trout; and if she will make a statement. [94175]

Mr. Morley: The Government have lobbied for, and implements controls both on atmospheric emissions (to tackle the impacts at source) and on forestry practices (to help minimise the impacts). Alongside these controls we use catchment liming (if feasible and appropriate) as a method of remediation.

Sewer Flooding

19. **Mrs. Helen Clark:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action she is taking to tackle sewer flooding. [94176]

Mr. Morley: The Department has been working closely with the Office of Water Services to look at ways of tackling the serious problem of sewer flooding. The Government appreciate this can cause a great deal of stress and anxiety for those affected.

Following a consultation on flooding from sewers, Ofwat announced that they will consider proposals from sewerage undertakers for additional schemes to alleviate the most serious problems in the period up to 2005.

Fishing Fleet

21. **Sir Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the effect of the forthcoming expansion of the European Union on the economic viability of the United Kingdom's fishing fleet. [94178]

Mr. Morley: We do not expect the forthcoming accession of new member states to affect the economic viability of the UK fishing fleet.

Flooding (Insurance)

22. **Sir Michael Spicer**: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to use money allocated to flood defence for self-help schemes aimed at securing insurance at reasonable rates against flooding. [94179]

Mr. Morley: The Government currently have no plans to draw on flood defence budgets to award money to individual householders to install flood protection measures at their homes. Individuals are, however, encouraged to consider with their insurers whether investment in such devices will enable them to secure a reduction in their premiums. The development of standards for these devices has been supported by the Government.

Hunting

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what discussions she has had with the International Fund for Animal Welfare regarding hunting; and if she will make a statement. [92998]

Alun Michael: The International Fund for Animal welfare is one of three organisations which comprise the organisation Campaign for the Protection of Hunted Animals (the other two being the League Against Cruel Sports and RSPCA). I met representatives of IFAW and the other campaigning organisations on a number of occasions, particularly in connection with the public hearings held in Portcullis House in September. I was meeting the Countryside Alliance and the Middle Way Group in parallel or at the same meetings. A representative of IFAW was present at the hearings examining the evidence put by expert witnesses.

Advertising

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much her Department has spent on advertising since its creation; and if she will make a statement. [93677]

Alun Michael: Defra was formed as a Department in June 2001.

The Department does not maintain records of its expenditure on advertising separately. Our expenditure for publicity, which includes advertising, publications, events, shows and direct information literature mailings, in financial year 2001–02 was £6.64 million. The allocation for publicity in 2002–03 is £4.1 million.

Alternative Fuels

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what research has been carried out on the replacement of diesel with fuels based on sunflower or rapeseed; and what plans the Government have to encourage the recycling of cooking oil as fuel for motor engines. [93476]

Mr. Meacher: This Department has funded a small number of projects evaluating the environmental and socio-economic impacts of using oilseed rape for biodiesel. DEFRA does not fund research and development work on liquid biofuels which is largely covered by the programmes of the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department for Transport. The Chancellor introduced a duty cut of 20 pence per litre for biodiesel compared to Ultra Low Sulphur Diesel in 2002. This has stimulated the recycling of used vegetable oil to produce biodiesel, which is now available to the public as a blend with fossil diesel. Over 60 filling stations are currently retailing high quality biofuels made from recovered vegetable oil.

Animal Welfare Research

Mr. Tynan: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the priorities are of her Department's research into animal welfare issues; and if she will make a statement. [94171]

Mr. Morley: The Government are committed to promoting the welfare of all animals kept by man and to eliminate cruelty. The animal welfare research portfolio is wide-ranging and has projects covering important areas concerning welfare on farm, during transport, at markets and slaughter.

Early Retirement

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much she expects her Department to spend on early retirement packages over the next five years; and how much her Department has spent on retirement packages since its creation. [93675]

Alun Michael: The expected costs of early retirement over the next five years are as follows:

£ million

	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06	2006–07	2007–08
Core DEFRA	3	7	7	—	—
Rural Payments Agency	12.3	16.5	1.3	1.2	1
Total	15.3	23.5	8.3	1.2	1

Historic information on the expenditure since DEFRA was created is not immediately available. I will write to the hon. Member with the information as soon as possible.

Farm Incomes

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the current levels of farming incomes. [94177]

Alun Michael: As reported to the House this morning, revised estimates of farm income, output and productivity of agriculture during 2002 were published today. These confirm the increase in farm incomes forecast last November, and indicate a rise of 15 per cent. (14 in real terms) compared to 2001. Details have been placed in the Library of the House.

Leadership Review

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will list the tests being applied to civil servants to evaluate them in the leadership review in her Department. [93674]

Alun Michael: The assessments made on participants in the Senior Managers' Development Programme will be based on DEFRA's Leadership Profile, which describes the skills and behaviour required to be an effective leader. We are awaiting detailed proposals from the consultants recently appointed to design and deliver the Programme, which will include how the assessments will be made. A copy of the Leadership Profile has been placed in the Library of the House.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what cost savings she expects to make from the leadership review of her Department; and if she will make a statement. [93679]

Alun Michael: The purpose of the Senior Managers' Development Programme is to achieve a qualitative improvement in the performance of the participants and to strengthen the leadership capability of the Department. We plan to evaluate the impact of the Programme through the performance management systems within which DEFRA staff work, and through customer and staff surveys, rather than through the attainment of targeted cost savings.

Network Rail

Mrs Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what discussions she has had with the Chief Executive of Network Rail about the environmental and health hazards posed by the deposit of litter and human excrement on railway lines; and if she will make a statement. [88718]

Mr. Meacher: We have had no meetings with the Chief Executive of Network Rail regarding the environmental health hazards posed by litter and human excrement on railway lines.

However, I understand that Network Rail continues to work closely with its maintenance contractors to ensure the lineside is clear from surplus litter, excrement and to prevent the future build-up of such material.

The discharge onto a railway track from a sanitary convenience or sink forming part of a vehicle used for carrying passengers on a railway, where the discharge is less than 25 litres, is exempt from waste management licensing. These exemptions are specific activities and are defined in Schedule 3 of the Waste Management Licensing Regualtions 1994. Exemptions are prescribed so as to meet the terms set out in Article 11 of the Waste Framework Directive. Under the terms of Article 11, exemptions must ensure protection of the environment and human health.

Since 1995 all newly-constructed trains are required to be fitted with retention tanks which obviate the need for such discharge. There is no finance available to make the alterations to pre-1995 carriages.

Publicity and Advertising

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much *(a)* her Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body sponsored by her Department spent on (i) publicity and (ii) advertising in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if she will make a statement. [92249]

Alun Michael: DEFRA as a Department did not exist prior to June 2001.

The Department's centralised publicity expenditure is not recorded in the format requested. Our expenditure for publicity, which includes advertising, publications, events, shows and direct information literature mailings, in financial year 2001–02 was £6.64 million. The allocation for publicity in 2002–03 is £4.1 million.

A breakdown of the expenditure for each agency and non-departmental body sponsored by the Department could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Sewage Treatment Works

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she expects conclusions to be reached following the consultation on the control of odour nuisance from sewage treatment works. [94161]

Alun Michael: I expect to be able to make a decision on the way forward in the coming months following consideration of the responses.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the rate of staff *(a)* absenteeism and *(b)* sickness was for her Department, its predecessors and each of its agencies and non-departmental public bodies in each year from 1990–91 to 2002–03; what the target set is for her Department; and if she will make a statement. [93497]

Alun Michael: The information requested in respect of absenteeism is not available, and may be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Records are not yet available for the number of days lost due to sickness absence in 2002, but these will be announced in due course. Sickness absence figures for previous calendar years are published in the Cabinet Office annual report "Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service", copies of which are placed in House Libraries.

Figures for the most recently available years for the former Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the former DETR are shown as an average per staff year. These are:

Days

	MAFF	*DETR*
1990	7.5	9.4
1991	8.7	10.3
1992	8.0	10.2
1993	8.4	10.7
1994	7.4	9.4
1995	9.1	11.2
1996	7.8	10.4
1997	7.8	9.7
1998	8.7	8.7
1999	9.3	8.7
2000	9	9
2001	7.2	10.5

Figures for sickness absence in the Department's non-departmental public bodies are not held centrally, and may be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

The Department is committed to the effective management of sickness absence, and to meeting its Service Delivery Agreement of reducing sickness absence to 6.9 days for 2003.

Staff Numbers

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment she has made of the need to change the staffing complement in her Department working on *(a)* climate change, *(b)* energy efficiency, *(c)* renewable energy and *(d)* radioactive waste policy. [93901]

Alun Michael: Defra is currently discussing its budget for the coming financial year, and decisions on this annual process will be taken by the end of February. No decisions have yet been taken. Public spending is constrained and it is inevitable that choices and options are aired.

We have set out our clear objectives, in "Working for the Essentials of Life". Like other Government Departments, we continually look for efficiency and effectiveness in delivery and to ensure that taxpayers' funding is allocated to support priority areas.

Transport (Environmental Impacts)

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent discussions she has had with the Department for Transport with regard to environmental impacts from transport. [94180]

Mr. Meacher: Ministers and officials from the Department have frequent discussions with the Department for Transport about issues which might have environmental impacts. Recent discussions have covered consultation on airports capacity in the South East, the development of policy on aviation, the 10-year Transport Plan progress report, the Government's public service agreement targets for reducing carbon dioxide emissions and to improve air quality, and the Multi Modal Studies.

Water Framework Directive

Diana Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps she is taking to ensure that the water framework directive is implemented to meet its deadlines. [94160]

Mr. Morley: The Government published detailed proposals last October in a second consultation paper.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH

Human Trafficking

Mr. Wood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps the Government are taking to address human trafficking in *(a)* Europe and *(b)* throughout the world. [93145]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Organised immigration crime is on of the Government's highest priorities in the fight against organised and international crime. A multi-agency task force, known as 'Reflex', co-ordinates UK action against organised immigration crime. Since April 2002, 17 organised crime groups have been disrupted and a further 69 investigations are on-going. In addition to contributing to the work of the UN, OSCE, IOM and others on this issue, the UK has contributed over £600,000 in the last three years to assist partners worldwide in tackling this criminal trade.

Iraq

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which countries have indicated that they will make a military contribution to the UN to enforce Resolution 1441, should the UN require military force. [93597]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We are not aware that the UN has made any such request. Nor would we expect it to in advance of a Security Council decision. No decision has been taken to launch military action against Iraq and military action is not inevitable. We hope that the Iraqi regime will choose to resolve this conflict peacefully, by complying fully with UN resolutions.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which countries have been invited to join a military coalition to deal with the problem of Iraq. [93614]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No decision has been taken to launch military action against Iraq and military action is not inevitable. We hope that the Iraqi regime will choose to resolve this conflict peacefully, by complying fully with UN resolutions.

Kosovo

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what evidence he has received of *(a)* drug trafficking and *(b)* white slavery in Kosovo; and if he will make a statement. [93618]

Mr. MacShane *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* Her Majesty's Government estimate that about 80 per cent. of the heroin received in the United Kingdom is trafficked through the Balkans from Afghanistan. The available information on trafficking routes suggests that a large majority of this heroin transits other Balkan and central European countries (for example, Bulgaria, over 2,000 kilograms seized in 2000) rather than Kosovo.

We remain concerned at the trafficking of women and children through the region, including Kosovo. The United Kingdom's law enforcement agencies work closely with regional partners, including in Kosovo, to identify, disrupt and dismantle criminal networks targeting the UK. In 2002, the Trafficking and Prostitution Investigation Unit of the UNMIK Police conducted 353 raids on premises where people trafficking was suspected of taking place. 61 premises were closed down, 234 arrests were made and 92 persons were charged with trafficking offences. 89 victims were repatriated and 1,727 people were added to a database used to help target efforts to tackle trafficking from major source countries.

The United Kingdom has supported a number of counter-narcotics and anti-organised crime projects in the Balkans and central Europe (over £700,000 this financial year).

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his estimate is of the number of Serbs who have fled Kosovo since KFOR forces entered the province; and what his estimate is of the numbers who have returned. [93619]

Mr. MacShane *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 159,000 Serbs have left Kosovo and, according to the United Nations Office for Returns and Communities, nearly 3,500 Serbs have chosen to return to the province since KFOR forces entered Kosovo.

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many Orthodox churches in Kosovo have been destroyed since KFOR forces have been present in the Serbian province; and what steps are being taken to bring the perpetrators to justice. [93620]

Mr. MacShane *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* Figures for the number of churches destroyed in Kosovo vary. Following extensive inquiries, UNMIK, KFOR, OSCE and UNHCR believe that 110 churches have been destroyed since KFOR entered Kosovo in June 1999.

I told Kosovo Albanian leaders during my visits to the province that the destruction of churches and all religious sites were acts of barbarism which bring shame and dishonour to all concerned. KFOR and UNMIK continue to take action against extremists. In support of combating extremism, UNMIK also conduct programmes promoting multi-ethnicity.

Pakistan

Adam Price: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the risk to the security of the UK posed by terrorist organisations based in Pakistan. [93434]

Mr. Blunkett: I have been asked to reply.

Advice on any terrorist threat to the UK is the responsibility of the Security Service. Strategic assessments about terrorist threats to the UK are provided to the Government by the Joint Intelligence Committee. All threats are a matter that the Government continue to take seriously and are kept under constant review.

Roma People

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Governments of *(a)* the Czech Republic, *(b)* Hungary, *(c)* Romania and *(d)* Slovakia, on the living standards of their Roma citizens. [93467]

Mr. MacShane *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met the Foreign Ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania in 2002. He raised the question of Roma minorities with all three. He also plans to meet the Slovak Foreign Minister in February 2003. The UK's programmes of pre-accession support for candidate countries puts a high priority on improving the quality of life of Roma minorities.

All four states have been found to meet the Copenhagen criteria, which require a state to uphold the basic human rights of all its citizens.

Saudi Arabia

Dr. Pugh: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures are being taken to secure the release of the detainees: Sandy Mitchell, Les Walker, James Lee and James Cottel, arrested in Saudi Arabia. [93703]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend, the Foreign Secretary, and ministerial colleagues have raised the cases of the British men detained in Saudi Arabia at the highest levels with the Saudi authorities. We remain deeply concerned about these cases. The men's welfare is a key concern. We continue to work to resolve the cases. We are in close contact with the Saudi authorities and the men's lawyers. We also continue to make consular visits to the men.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Afghanistan

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, pursuant to her answer of 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 14–15W, on Afghanistan, what consideration has been given to the use of security forces to assist in the dispersal of humanitarian aid; and what steps are being taken to address the security situation in Zabul province. [93909]

Clare Short: Since my last answer of 20 January 2003, the UN in Kabul have spoken to the Governor of Zabul province and have agreed improvements in security for those aid agencies operating in Zabul. Most of the hijacked cars, together with the equipment on board, have also been recovered.

It is not the primary role of the security forces in Afghanistan to assist with the distribution of humanitarian aid, although they have been involved in a limited number of successful small projects in and around Kabul. The main purpose of security forces is to improve the security conditions to allow humanitarian and development organisations to provide assistance themselves.

New joint civil-military provincial reconstruction teams are being deployed over the next few months to help provide greater security outside Kabul.

Africa

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of the effectiveness of *(a)* the New Partnership for African Development and *(b)* the Africa Union in promoting democracy in Zimbabwe. [93858]

Clare Short: The New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) commits African leaders to the promotion of good governance, human rights and democracy. It is a new process and obviously cannot overnight correct all governance problems in Africa such as those in Zimbabwe. The African Union has to reflect the views of all African states. It has traditionally been reluctant to comment on the internal affairs of a member state, although there are encouraging indications that this attitude is changing. The UK government continues to work with African governments and regional initiatives and institutions to promote good governance, human rights and democracy. We should not of course punish all of Africa for the situation in Zimbabwe.

Angola

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress is being made with collection of data on the state of health in Angola. [93801]

Clare Short: The need for more effective information management systems in the health and education systems in Angola, including improved collection and analysis of data, has been identified as a key issue for future progress in the 2002 UN Common Country Assessment. This need is likely to be highlighted in the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, on which the Government are presently working, which will provide the framework for future donor support to Angola.

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of people in Angola are suffering from *(a)* HIV/Aids and *(b)* malaria; and if she will make a statement. [93802]

Clare Short: According to the UNAIDS office in Angola, very few accurate statistics are available on HIV/AIDS outside the capital Luanda, where HIV infection rose sharply from 3.4 per cent. in 1999 to 8.6 per cent. in 2001. Overall, it is estimated that over 520,000 adults in Angola (out of an adult population of just over six million) were living with HIV in 2001. With regard to malaria, the UNDP Human Development Report 2002 states that there were 8,796 cases per 100,000 in 2000.

The Government of Angola is currently drafting an Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (I-PRSP) which includes an assessment of the country's health needs. This will state how donors can support work on HIV/AIDS and malaria. My Department will consider the implications for our development support to Angola, once the I-PRSP strategy becomes available.

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking in the development of local government in Angola; and if she will make a statement. [93803]

Clare Short: Local government in Angola is relatively weak due to a lack of consistent funding from the centre and because it is appointed rather than elected. This has created a distance between local government and Angola's citizens.

My Department has been providing some £7.5 million of support to the Luanda Urban Poverty Programme (LUPP). One of the main objectives of the programme is to build local government capacity so that it can provide improved services to the communities for which it is responsible. Using participatory methods, the programme is assisting local government to work in partnership with community associations to achieve tangible outcomes such as clean water, sanitation and waste disposal. This process will contribute to strengthening local democracy as government and communities learn to work together. We are presently considering a second phase of support to LUPP.

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of children in Angola are being educated to primary school standard; and if she will make a statement. [93804]

Clare Short: UNICEF has estimated that 51.2 per cent. of Angolan children attended primary school in 2001. However, the 2003 UN Inter-Agency Consolidated Appeal (CAP) estimates that at least 80 per cent. of all Angolan children do not have access to adequate education and more than one million children are outside the formal school system. In newly accessible areas, seven out of ten children do not attend school.

Primary education is only one of several key tasks that confront the Government of Angola. The Ministry of Education recognises the need to address this situation and has set itself a target of achieving two thirds enrolment by 2005.

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps are being taken to retrain former military personnel in Angola. [93805]

Clare Short: The proposed Angolan demobilisation and reintegration programme is currently being negotiated between the Government of Angola and the World bank. The programme will include sub-projects to provide ex-combatants with a wide range of educational opportunities from basic literacy to apprenticeships and professional qualifications. Agricultural extension services and support for the self-employed and micro enterprise are also envisaged.

Over 5,000 ex-UNITA fighters are being integrated into the Angolan armed forces, as part of the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process in Angola. They are receiving up to three months training depending on their rank and existing skills.

John Barrett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action is being taken to ensure that revenue raised from the exploitation of natural resources in Angola is used for the development of the country. [93806]

Clare Short: Since the end of the civil war, we and other donors have been impressing on the Government of Angola the need for transparency over the collection and allocation of resources, and the need to increase levels of spending in the social sectors and for national reconstruction. Last year, the United Nations, in partnership with the Angolan Government, carried out an assessment of public financing of the social sectors in Angola. The objective of the study was to make practical recommendations regarding the distribution of resources and budget management mechanisms. More recently, my Department has provided consultancy support toward the preparation of Angola's Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (I-PRSP), specifically in clarifying details of the Government budget including a breakdown of revenues.

Child Soldiers

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what *(a)* European, *(b)* British and *(c)* UN regulations prohibit the use of child soldiers in military forces. [93492]

Clare Short: International humanitarian law, as embodied in the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols, prohibits the recruitment or use of children under 15 in armed conflict and provides for the protection of children, particularly those separated from their families. The Statute of the International Criminal Court, to which the UK is a state party and which has been incorporated into national law, makes the recruitment and/or use of children under 15 a war crime.

The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, now enshrined in the Human Rights Act 1998, forbids the use of torture, inhuman or degrading treatment which may include the forcing of children to take part in hostilities.

The UK is a Party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which makes particular provision for the protection of all children under 18 years. It prescribes that the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration, severely restricts the circumstances in which children may be removed from their parents and protects children against arbitrary interference with their privacy and liberty. This Convention, along with International Labour Organisation Convention 182 (which the UK has ratified), prohibits the use of children in the worst forms of labour; and Convention 182 specifically prohibits the forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict.

The UK expects to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict later this year. This provides that states parties must take all feasible measures to ensure that members of their armed forces who have not attained the age of 18 years do not take a direct part in hostilities, and that children under 18 years are not compulsorily recruited into their armed forces. Non-state actors, such as insurgent groups, are prohibited from ever recruiting or using in hostilities children under 18. We take the Protocol seriously. That is why before we ratify, we need to be clear that the detailed procedures and administrative guidelines for the armed forces are finalised. These will give concrete form to our commitment. MOD officials, in consultation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, are in the final stages of drafting an Explanatory Memorandum which will explain the steps being taken to meet that commitment. As part of the ratification process, we will lay the Explanatory Memorandum (EM) before Parliament. This does not require any changes to UK legislation.

The UK has many laws that prohibit the activities usually associated with the use of child soldiers, such as assault, forcing a child to perform illegal acts, deprivation of their liberty and making children take harmful drugs and alcohol.

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what *(a)* discussions she has held and *(b)* action she has taken jointly with her counterparts in other countries to combat *(i)* the use of children as soldiers in conflicts and (ii) their recruitment into the armed forces of (A) governments, (B) paramilitary groups, (C) civil militia and (D) non-state armed groups. [93493]

Clare Short: The most effective way of tackling the use of child soldiers is to prevent, reduce and resolve armed conflicts. This is part of the wider issue of the impact of armed conflict on children generally, their families and communities. In addressing this, my Department is working with other UK Government Departments and other governments through appropriate regional mechanisms, the non-governmental community and the multilateral system to this end. UNICEF, with the support of my Department and other governments, works to effect the disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation of child soldiers, particularly back into the community and prevent their re-recruitment. Through a multi-year capacity building programme supported by my Department, UNICEF are collecting data on the situation of children affected by armed conflict globally, to better inform policy, guidance and programming on the wide range of issues involved.

My Department has also been supporting the work of the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict, whose work (primarily of advocacy and raising awareness of the issues at all levels) features prominently in the Secretary-General's report of 26 November 2002 to the Security Council on this issue.

Through its representation on the Security Council, the Government have been closely involved in the passing of eight resolutions since August 1999 addressing the issue of child soldiers and other children affected by armed conflict, and are currently involved in negotiations for a further resolution to strengthen the ability of the international community to take action to prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts. Along with the vast majority of other states, the Government have also ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and is taking steps to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention preventing the use of children in armed conflict.

Europe Development Council

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the abolition of the Europe Development Council. [94563]

Clare Short: I was not in favour of the abolition of the Development Council, which had been useful in promoting reforms of EC development co-operation, in adopting a more coherent development policy framework and in pressing the case for an increase in the poverty focus of EC aid. The June 2002 Seville European Council decided to streamline the functioning of the Council in the run-up to enlargement and reduced Council groupings from 16 to 9 and thus abolished the development Council. There are opportunities with the new General Affairs and External Relations Council (GAERC) for more discussions on development at monthly meetings.

I have been working to maintain a strategic approach to development issues as established by the Development Council. In particular, I have been pushing for at least two strategic GAERC meetings per year focusing on development—one forward looking and one to assess progress. I will continue to press hard to ensure development is given due weight in the new configuration and will seek to ensure appropriate UK ministerial attendance to debate development issues.

Grants

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the grants funded by her Department for which individual members of the public and organisations may apply; and if she will make a statement as to *(a)* the total of such funding in the last financial year, *(b)* the total number of awards and *(c)* their administrative costs. [82185]

Clare Short: The numbers and values of grants made in FY 2001–02 by the various DFID funds open to members of the public and organisations in UK are listed as follows. Information on the administrative costs of these funds is not held centrally and could not be gathered without incurring disproportionate cost. The number and value of grants refers to new grants made in the period.

Fund	*Number of grants*	*Value (£ million)*
Civil Society Challenge Fund	62	30.2
Renewable Natural Resources Knowledge Strategy	43	22.6
Engineering Knowledge and Research Programme	54	13.4
Business Linkages Challenge Fund	9	13.3
Social Science Research	42	8.1
Financial Deepening Challenge Fund	7	6.0
Development Awareness Fund	38	5.5
Education Research Programme	46	1.9
Asia Regional Poverty Fund	22	1.9
Tourism Challenge Fund	6	1.3
Enterprise Development Innovation Fund	6	1.0
Total	335	105.2

In addition, the UK Small Grants Scheme allows UK Heads of Mission to provide funding for small-scale development projects in the countries where they work—up to a value of £100,000 per year. As responsibility for their administration is delegated to Heads of Mission, data on the number and value of new grants made in FY 2001–02 are not held centrally and could not be collected without incurring disproportionate cost.

Total expenditure through UK non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in FY 2001–02 was £190.5 million. This included Partnership Programme Agreements with 11 NGOs, which provided funding in support of jointly agreed strategic programmes with NGOs with proven experience and impact, and contracts with NGOs to carry out specific development projects and humanitarian interventions on DFID's behalf.

HIV/AIDS

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures her Department is taking to ensure child participation in the development of policies and programmes on HIV/AIDS is in line with the recent UNICEF report; and if she will make a statement. [93599]

Clare Short: Over half of all new HIV/AIDS infections are in young people (15–24 age group). We believe, therefore, that HIV prevention programmes must give a high priority to informing young people about the risk of HIV/AIDS, and that young people are encouraged to participate in the development of programmes to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. We support young people's HIV/AIDS prevention through our bilateral programmes and in partnership with UNICEF.

In South Africa, for example, young people have been actively engaged in the review and monitoring of our adolescent sexual health programmes. In Mozambique we have committed £2.6 million over five years to support UNICEF's HIV/AIDS programme for young people. In China, we are currently developing an HIV/AIDS prevention and care programme that includes young people in a range of design activities. In Kenya, we have supported various focus group discussions with young people and trained peer HIV/AIDS educators.

Maternal Mortality

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the main causes of maternal mortality in developing countries. [93862]

Clare Short: 99 per cent. of the 510,000 maternal deaths and most of the widespread disability caused by complications in childbirth worldwide are in developing countries. Up to 80 per cent. of these deaths result from five relatively common obstetric complications: haemorrhage, infection, complications of abortion, eclampsia and obstructed labour. Almost all of these deaths could be avoided by timely, effective interventions by skilled attendants at delivery, backed up by a functioning referral system and access to emergency obstetric care. This requires effective care and functioning health systems. To this end my Department have committed over £1 billion since 1997 to health systems strengthening. We are also working to improve access to quality reproductive and sexual health services in order to avoid unwanted pregnancies.

Mozambique

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, pursuant to her answer of 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 313W, on Mozambique, what the response has been to the Mozambiquan Government's request for help from UN agencies; and what the nature has been of her Department's support. [93644]

Clare Short: The World Food Programme (WFP) has responded to the Government's request for assistance by implementing a food distribution programme focusing on six provinces and 38 districts considered worst affected by the drought. Between July and December WFP distributed some 14,301 metric tonnes of food aid. As the operation gradually expanded over the six-month period, WFP's beneficiary caseload gradually increased. In December food rations were distributed to 247,130 people.

The programme is carried out through implementing partners representing a mix of international and national non-governmental organisations, and the Mozambique Red Cross. In 11 areas of operation the programme is implemented directly through local authorities. Implementing partners help to identify vulnerable households eligible to receive food aid, and organise physical distribution of food at the community level. The main focus of the programme to date has been on implementing food-for-work schemes. Given that Mozambique is now entering the hungry period, a programme shift, with greater emphasis on meeting the needs of vulnerable people who cannot work is planned.

UNICEF has extended its regular country programme to include the implementation of drought response projects in areas that are considered to be particularly vulnerable. With support from DFID (£973, 000), UNICEF is implementing a blanket supplementary feeding programme for children aged 6–59 months and for pregnant and lactating mothers. The project will focus on the six provinces considered most vulnerable and aims to reach 141,000 children and 71,000 women. The programme also includes follow-up treatment and care for severely malnourished children through support to the existing therapeutic feeding centre network. UNICEF will implement activities through a network of partners comprising local and international NGOs and the Mozambique Red Cross.

In addition, UNICEF has also responded to the Government's request for assistance by supporting the creation of thirty sentinel sites for nutritional surveillance in order to measure acute malnutrition trends. This programme focuses on three drought-affected provinces. Planning work is under way to expand the programme and increase geographical coverage of the sites. UNICEF has also been working on strengthening epidemiological preparedness and providing additional support to measles vaccination campaigns. Furthermore, UNICEF has increased its focus on the provision of clean water at health centres in the districts worst affected by the drought. UNICEF is also pre-positioning school kits as an incentive for children to attend school, given indications that both the drought and the HIV/AIDS pandemic is resulting in increased drop-out rates.

DFID has provided £1 million for a cash for work programme, providing an income source in the short term and increasing access to markets in the longer term. DFID is providing £973,000 in support of UNICEF's supplementary feeding programme. DFID is looking at providing up to £500,000 to support agricultural input fairs given poor crop forecasts in many areas of southern Mozambique.

Mugabe

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with the French Government regarding the renewal of the EU travel ban on *(a)* Robert Mugabe and *(b)* other Zimbabwean Government officials. [93971]

Clare Short *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* I have not discussed the renewal of the EU travel ban with the French Government. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary has had regular discussions with his French and other counterparts on this issue, including at the General Affairs and External Relations Council in Brussels on 27 January. I have discussed the urgent humanitarian needs in Zimbabwe with the French and other Development Ministers, and reiterated the importance for the Zimbabwean people, especially the poor, of reversing the disastrous policies of the present Zimbabwean government.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what discussions she has had with the Foreign Office regarding the renewal of the EU travel ban on *(a)* Robert Mugabe and *(b)* other Zimbabwean Government officials; [93972]

(2) what discussions she has had with the Foreign Office regarding the attendance of President Mugabe at a Franco-African Summit in February. [93970]

Clare Short *[holding answer 29 January 2003]*: The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and I have not discussed the renewal of the EU travel ban on Robert Mugabe and other Zimbabwean Government officials nor the Franco-African Summit. We have regular and extensive discussions on the urgent humanitarian needs in Zimbabwe and the importance for the Zimbabwean people, especially the poor, of reversing the disastrous policies of the present Zimbabwean government.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the rate of staff *(a)* absenteeism and *(b)* sickness was in her Department and each of its agencies and non-departmental public bodies in each year from 1990–91 to 2002–03; what the target set is for her Department; and if she will make a statement. [93510]

Clare Short: We are unable to provide details of rates of staff absenteeism as unauthorised absence is recorded as unpaid leave along with properly authorised absence (such as additional maternity leave or career breaks) and cannot be disaggregated.

My Department will announce the rates of sick absence recorded in 2002 in due course. The rates of sick absence recorded in DFID per calendar year from 1997 to 2001 are as follows:

Year	*Number of absences*	*Average number of days per staff year*
1997	9,250	8.1
1998	8,643	7.3
1999	9,263	7.3
2000	8,426	6.2
2001	11,545	8.3

Staff numbers on which these are based have risen from 1,142 in 1997 to 1,391 in 2001.

Figures on rates of sick absence before 1997 are not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

DFID is working towards reducing its sickness absence rate.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department has taken in response to the UN Secretary General's report to the Security Council on the UN mission in Sierra Leone, with particular reference to the transfer of responsibilities to the Government of Sierra Leone. [93407]

Clare Short: We are playing a key role in assisting the Government of Sierra Leone to prepare for the withdrawal of UNAMSIL. Through joint action between my Department, the Ministry of Defence and the FCO, and using funds from the Africa Conflict Prevention Pool, the UK is leading the international military assistance training team; we are providing technical assistance for capacity-building in the Ministry of Defence, including the working relationship between civilian and military staff; we have funded the renovation and equipping of a new headquarters for the Ministry of Defence; and we are providing technical assistance to help the Office of National Security to operate effective, non-political, intelligence services. We are also providing a major programme to support the reform and strengthening of the Sierra Leone police.

The Secretary-General has emphasised that the timing and phasing of UNAMSIL drawdown will be carried out with close regard to the rate of development of the capacity of the Sierra Leone security sector. We are closely in touch with the UN on this issue.

Uganda

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of reports by UNICEF of the number of children unaccounted for in Northern Uganda. [83980]

Clare Short: The LRA have for many years made a practice of making children a main target of their war. Until security improves in northern Uganda, however, UNICEF will not be able to collect precise data on the number of unaccounted children. Renewed LRA activity last year led to a dramatic increase, and it is estimated that 4,500 children were abducted in 2002 (compared to 100 in 2001). It is unclear how many of these children have returned home and how many are still being held by the LRA inside Uganda or Sudan. Unfortunately, many of these children will have been killed. DFID is supporting Save the Children's efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate those fortunate enough to escape, and will continue to do so as long as it is required.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the humanitarian situation in Northern Uganda; and if she will make a statement. [93848]

Clare Short: The circumstances faced by people in Northern Uganda are of grave concern. Humanitarian consequences of the continuing conflict are high, with an estimated 600,000 internally displaced persons and declining levels of food security due to disruption of harvesting and planting seasons. DFID has made available £1.6 million for food supplies to be distributed by the World Food Programme. The total support from the UK government for humanitarian needs in northern Uganda is £2.5 million this financial year.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what discussions she had with President Museveni on her recent trip to Uganda concerning Northern Uganda; [93981]

(2) if she will make a statement on *(a)* the nature of her recent trip to Uganda, *(b)* who she met; and what discussions she had. [93982]

Clare Short: I met with President Museveni briefly on transit through Uganda. We discussed his request for increased military spending focused on the need to defeat the Lords Resistance Army. I fully support the need to end the suffering inflicted by the Lords Resistance Army, however our assessment is that this objective does not justify all the additional defence expenditure. In response to the Government of Uganda's breaching of the agreed process for government resource allocations and the consequent increase of defence spending, the UK is to withhold £5 million of its general budget support this financial year.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with President Museveni concerning possible peace talks with the Lord's Resistance Army. [93983]

Clare Short: I am in close contact with President Museveni on the possible responses to the conflict in northern Uganda. This was one of the subjects of our meeting last week at Entebbe airport. The levels of violence perpetrated by the Lord's Resistance Army are terrible, and I support the efforts of the Ugandan government to protect the lives and property of its citizens. The complex nature of the conflict means that dialogue is crucial if a sustainable end to the suffering faced by the Acholi people is to be realised. I have been encouraged by the passing of the Amnesty Act, the appointment of the Government Peace team and the work of the Acholi religious leaders as offering real potential for dialogue.

Zimbabwe

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions her Department has had with the Government of South Africa regarding food imports to Zimbabwe. [93859]

Clare Short: My Department has regular discussions with South African officials on the humanitarian crisis in Zimbabwe. We have also been monitoring the progress of negotiations between the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Government of South Africa. WFP is at an advanced stage of negotiation with the Government of South Africa regarding a gift of £100,000 metric tons of maize from South Africa to countries in the region suffering food shortages. The amount for distribution to individual countries is still to be determined, but WFP would wish to distribute over 50 per cent. of the total to Zimbabwe.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she is having with the Government of South Africa regarding the political situation in Zimbabwe. [93861]

Clare Short: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave her on 22 January 2003, *Official Report,* column 317W).

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her latest assessment is of the number of people facing food shortages in Zimbabwe. [93973]

Clare Short *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* The SADC Vulnerability Assessment Committee report of December 2002 estimated that the total number of people in need of food assistance in Zimbabwe had risen to 7.2 million. Of these, the World Food Programme (WFP) aims to reach 5.8 million. Other humanitarian assistance is provided through the Government of Zimbabwe, and bilateral support direct to non-governmental organisations in addition to donor help through the WFP. The UK bilateral programme alone is reaching 1.5 million people; 1 million of these are children receiving supplementary feeling in schools, with the remainder comprising particularly vulnerable adults (for example people in the district of Binga), pregnant women, and the elderly.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Departmental Expenditure (Newsprint)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Solicitor General what the total expenditure of her Department was on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in 2002. [90526]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 16 January 2003]:* The Departments for which I hold ministerial responsibility account for expenditure on these items differently. In particular, accounting for periodicals in Treasury Solicitor's Department include subscriptions to legal journals and updates on loose-leaf specialist legal publications.

The expenditure of my own Department, the Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers, for the financial year 2001–02 was £3,335.30.

The total expenditure for the Crown Prosecution Service on newspapers, magazines and periodicals from January to December 2002 was £148,582.

The expenditure by the Serious Fraud Office for the financial year 2001–02 was £10,143.85.

The expenditure by the Treasury Solicitor's Department for the period April to December 2002 was £2,200 on newspapers and magazines and £112,175 on subscriptions—making a total of £114,375.

HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate for the same period was £3,350. This was on periodicals and professional journals; there was no expenditure on newspapers.

Eurobank

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Solicitor-General what costs have been incurred by her Department during and arising from the collapse of the Eurobank case; and if she will make a statement. [94407]

The Solicitor-General: None. I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

R v. McKay

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Solicitor-General when she will provide a substantive reply to the hon. Member for the Isle of Wight concerning R *v.* McKay. [93705]

The Solicitor-General: The Attorney General provided a substantive reply to the hon. Member for the Isle of Wight concerning R *v.* McKay, on 29 January 2003.

Theft/Fraud

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Solicitor-General what her estimate is of the cost of theft and fraud to *(a)* her Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies in 2002. [89863]

The Solicitor-General *[holding answer 13 January 2003]:* The figures for the Departments for which I hold ministerial responsibility account are as follows:

The Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers—nil;

HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate—£516;

Treasury Solicitor's Department—nil;

Crown Prosecution Service—£3,217; and

Serious Fraud Office—£85.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Agency Workers Directive

Mr. Bellingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions she has had with her European counterparts concerning the agency workers directive; and if she will make a statement on her Department's policy on the proposed legislation in its present form. [93395]

Alan Johnson: The proposed directive was recently discussed in the European Union Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council on 3 December 2002, where I represented the United Kingdom. The Department of Trade and Industry has published an explanatory memorandum about the European Commission's revised proposal which sets out the Government's policy on the proposed directive. I have placed a copy of this in the Libraries of the House.

Alenia Marconi Systems

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what export control licence applications were received from Alenia Marconi Systems in the last five years; and what was the outcome of each of these applications. [93459]

Nigel Griffiths *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* Details of all relevant export licences issued and refused since 2 May 1997 are published by destination in the Government's Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls, copies of which are placed in the Libraries of the House.

Call Centre Scripts

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry pursuant to her answer to the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), of 16 January, *Official Report*, column 806, if she will list the call centre scripts that she has gone through. [93857]

Ms Hewitt: The Minister of State for E-Commerce and Competitiveness and I have seen the original DWP and Inland Revenue call centre scripts.

Construction Industry

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations she has received about the practice of retentions in the construction industry; and if she will make a statement. [94221]

Mr. Wilson: The hon. Member may be aware that the Trade and Industry Select Committee has recently published the findings of its inquiry into the use of retentions in the construction industry.

I welcome these and I am pleased that the committee has broadly supported the Government's approach to improving UK construction performance through "Rethinking Construction" and "Accelerating Change". Issues of fair payment and quality, defect-free work are fundamental to the continued success of the UK construction industry.

The Department of Trade and Industry intends to respond to the Select Committee's recommendations on behalf of the Government by Tuesday 4 February. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the Select Committee's recommendations before the Committee has had the opportunity to consider my response.

Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation)

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proposals there are to extend anti-discrimination law to cover discrimination in employment and training on grounds of sexual orientation. [93485]

Alan Johnson: The Government are committed to introduce new legislation (implementing the Article 13 Employment Directive) to outlaw unfair discrimination at work and in training on grounds of sexual orientation by December 2003.

Our plans were published on 23 October 2002 in the consultation document 'Equality and Diversity: The Way Ahead'. Consultation ended on 24 January. We will consider responses before laying regulations before Parliament later in the year.

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proposals she has under the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003 to allow unmarried partners to leave their pensions to their surviving partner of either sex when they die. [93484]

Alan Johnson: We consulted on proposals to implement the employment directive in the document 'Equality and Diversity: The Way Ahead'. In our view, rules which restrict benefits to opposite sex partners—whether or not they are married to the pension holder—are likely to constitute unlawful discrimination.

Because the directive is 'without prejudice to national laws on marital status and the benefits dependent thereon' however, we proposed that benefits aimed exclusively at married couples would continue to be allowable.

The consultation ended on 24 January. We will consider responses before laying the regulations before Parliament later in the year.

Job Sharing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on the extent of job sharing in her Department. [90874]

Ms Hewitt: Currently in DTI, there are around 28 job shares, including three job shares at senior civil service level; two people work school term times only and the staff survey shows that 78 per cent. of staff state that their managers allow working patterns to help them balance work and home life.

The Department launched a new flexible working policy including guidance for managers and staff in April 2002, to ensure that new ways of working are available to all individuals and the benefits to stakeholders, customers, managers and staff are fully maximised. Emerging results reflect great success with an increase in take up of flexible patterns, including compressed hours. Further evaluation will be carried out in April this year. In February this year, we will be launching a more comprehensive toolkit for managers and staff to provide on-going support and advice.

North Sea Oil

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate she has made of the *(a)* size and *(b)* lifespan of the North Sea oil reserves. [94126]

Mr. Wilson: The Department publishes annually estimates of oil reserves on the UK Continental Shelf. The latest estimates are that, as at the end of 2001, remaining proven and probable discovered recoverable reserves amounted to 955 million tonnes. A further 475 million tonnes are classified as possible reserves. It is also estimated that, as of that date, additional reserves of between 205 and 1,930 million tonnes existed in fields that had not yet been discovered. How long these reserves will last will depend on whether the additional and possible reserves are brought into production and the rate at which they are extracted, but production is expected to continue beyond 2020.

Nurse Co-ordinators

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what guidance will be given to the proposed nurse co-ordinators on seeking consent from potential embryo donors under the new MRC initiative. [93392]

Ms Hewitt: The regulatory agencies have agreed that there should be standard donor information and consent forms for the donation of embryos. These have been developed by a committee comprising the Medical Research Council (MRC), Department of Health, Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), and Medicines Control Agency and chaired by Professor Richardson (a lawyer and member of the MRC Council). The documentation is being reviewed by the MRC Stem Cell Steering Committee, chaired by Lord Patel. It will then be reviewed by HFEA committees, and once the final draft has been approved, it will be piloted in a selection of IVF clinics. It will then be finalised and distributed to all IVF clinics.

Post Office Closures

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* urban and *(b)* rural post offices have closed in Hull and the East Riding since 1 May 1997. [93822]

Mr. Timms: I am informed by Post Office Ltd. that historic data on the post office network are not available in the form requested as the company does not require these data for operational reasons. I further understand from the company that it compiled a list of post offices by parliamentary constituency as of 20 April 2002, showing their classification as urban or rural offices. A copy of this list is held in the Libraries of the House.

Postage Costs

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on recent consultations by Postcomm of a possible rise in the cost of postage. [94097]

Mr. Timms: Postcomm is responsible for setting the price control for Royal Mail services. It issued a consultation on the future price control on 3 October 2002. My Department responded with a written submission, now publicly available on the Postcomm website, so that Postcomm could, in reaching a decision, take into account the context and rationale for the commercially based financial package for Royal Mail, the details of which I announced to the House on 16 January 2003. Postcomm has not yet announced its final decision.

Renewable Energy Exporters

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many applications have been received by potential renewable energy exporters for the £50 million in ECGD cover to be available from April 2003; and what extra resources have been allocated within the DTI to encourage applications from the renewable energy sector in the UK. [94149]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* ECGD has received three applications and one preliminary inquiry for renewable energy projects that could qualify for support under the renewable energy initiative. Contracts for these projects have still to be agreed, and no guarantees have yet been issued.

The DTI's Renewables UK team, with two Renewable Energy Trade Promoters, are now encouraging applications from the UK renewable energy sector as part of their on-going trade promotion activities.

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry whether the £50 million of ECGD cover to be allocated to renewable energy exporters from April 2003 will be available to exporters of energy from waste technology to the developing world, including municipal mass burn incineration. [94150]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* Waste to power projects are generally considered to be a source of renewable energy. Such projects will be eligible for support, provided all other environmental impacts, such as air emissions and impacts on local populations etc, are acceptable.

UK Economy

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry pursuant to the answer of the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Nigel Griffiths) to the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink), of 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 809, by which method the Department determines that the United Kingdom is the fastest growing economy in the world. [93851]

Ms Hewitt: The best measures of economic activity is GDP. In 2001, the latest year for which data are available, the UK economy grew by 2.0 per cent. This growth rate was higher than that for the other major economies (G7 countries), according to the latest data published by the OECD.

TRANSPORT

Jones Act

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the effects on *(a)* UK and *(b)* EU shipping of the United States Jones Act] [93946]

Mr. Jamieson: The US Merchant Marine Act of 1920, otherwise known as the "Jones Act", restricts the carriage of sea borne cargo between ports in the United States to vessels constructed and registered in the United States, owned by a United States citizen and manned by United States seafarers. The Act has the effect of denying the opportunity to foreign shipping, including ships registered in the UK and other EU Member States, to compete for coastal trade in the United States. It also affects adversely the ability of foreign shipping companies to move their international cargoes and empty containers more efficiently between US ports using their own vessels on existing international services.

A14

Mr. Djanogly: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) when the major A14 improvements included in the preferred plan of the Cambridge to Huntingdon multi-modal study will be entered into the trunk road targeted programme of improvements; [94565]

(2) whether the funding required for the major A14 improvements included in the preferred plan of the Cambridge to Huntingdon multi-modal study has been reserved within the 10-Year Plan; [94564] s

(3) what stage the preparatory work on the major A14 improvements included in the preferred plan of the Cambridge to Huntingdon multi-modal study has reached; and when the preparatory work is expected to be completed; [94567]

(4) for what reasons a timetable to carry out the major A14 improvements was not included in the Department for Transport, "Delivering Better Transport: Progress Report" of December 2002. [94566]

Mr. Jamieson: Preparatory work on the major improvements to the A14 between Huntingdon and Cambridge, which came out of the Cambridge to Huntingdon multi-modal study, are at an advanced stage. The Secretary of State will shortly be receiving the Highways Agency's recommendations after which he will announce his decision. Sufficient funds are available from those set aside for strategic roads in the Government's 10-Year Plan for Transport to pay for this scheme.

A timetable for this scheme was not included in our progress report on the 10-Year Plan entitled "Delivering Better Transport: Progress Report" published in December as it has yet to be added to the TPI. Such information will be made available when the Secretary of State announces his decision.

External Consultants

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much his Department has spent on external consultants since its creation; what percentage this sum represents of *(a)* his Department's total expenditure and *(b)* the cost of running the Department; and if he will make a statement. [93955]

Mr. Jamieson *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* My Department came into being in May 2002. Expenditure on external consultants by my Department up to the end of December 2002 was £93.1 million. This represents 1 per cent. of my departmental expenditure limit. Of this £93.1 million, £1.7 million relates to the cost of running my Department and this represents 0.4 per cent. of my Department's administration costs limit.

London Underground PPP

Mr. Bellingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much the *(a)* Tube Lines and *(b)* Metronet consortia have spent on bid costs as part of their PPP bids for London Underground projects. [93397]

Mr. Jamieson: The total costs of all of the bidders, successful and unsuccessful, are estimated to be around £270 million. As my reply of 13 January 2003 *Official Report*, column 398 W to the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne) explained, the PPP amounts to modernisation of the entire underground network over the next 30-years. The level of bid costs reflects this and also the lengthy duration of the bidding process, which commenced in October 1999. Nonetheless, the level of bid costs represents only an extremely small proportion of the value of investment that will be delivered over the life of the contracts.

Motorway Tolls

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the likely impact of the introduction of motorway tolls, other than on the M6, on *(a)* reduction of congestion and *(b)* encouragement of use of public transport. [93103]

Mr. Jamieson *holding answer 23 January 2003*: The 'Background Analysis' published in July 2000 as part of the Ten Year Plan For Transport contained an illustrative scenario for charges on the trunk road network by 2010 at times and places where congestion was highest. That indicated an overall reduction of 9 per cent. in congestion compared with levels in 2000, though with variations between areas, including increases of congestion in some places. The effect on public transport was not calculated.

The Government's report on 'Modernising the Taxation of the Haulage Industry: Progress Report One' published in April 2002 reported analysis of a distance-based lorry road-user charge applying only to motorways, which suggested a reduction of lorry traffic of 25 per cent. on motorways but increases in congestion elsewhere.

Network Rail

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much Network Rail has lost since its establishment. [93607]

Mr. Spellar: As with any other private company, Network Rail will publish accounts in accordance with the requirements of the Companies Acts. These will show the profit or loss for the relevant reporting period.

Publicity and Advertising

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body sponsored by his Department spent on *(i)* publicity and (ii) advertising in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92247]

Mr. Jamieson: For details of how much my department has spent on publicity and advertising in each year since 1995/96 to 2002/03,1 refer the hon. Member to replies to the hon.Members for:-

1. Isle Of Wight (Mr. Turner) on 21March 2002, *Official Report*, column 484 W which gives annual expenditure from 1997/98 to 2001/02,

2. Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on 28 February 2002 *Official Report*, column 1516–1517W, which requested details of publicity and advertising campaigns and

3. Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on 9 November 2001 *Official Report*, column 453–454W, which details the advertising spend from 1995/96 to 2000/2001.

Figures provided in these replies refer to expenditure by the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) and the Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR). Breaking out the transport element for the years 1995/96 to 2000/01 could only be done at disproportionate cost.

In 2001/02, the Department for Transport spent £15 million on publicity of which £9.85 million was spent on advertising.

For the current year, 2002/2003 the Department for Transport's estimated spend for publicity and advertising is £17.9 million of which approximately £10.6 million is currently allocated to advertising.

My Department's main publicity relates to Think! which promotes road safety messages to adults and children and is a vital part of the Government's strategy to reduce road deaths and injuries.

Figures for Department Agencies and NDPDs are not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Publicity Campaigns

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what promotional and public information campaigns his Department is *(a)* running and *(b)* planning to run during the next six months; and for each campaign, *(i)* how much it will cost, (A) in total and (B) to his Department, (ii) what agencies or bodies are undertaking the work and (iii) what is its planned duration. [93807]

Mr. Jamieson: My Department is currently running three publicity campaigns:

Think! road safety:

My Department's main publicity campaign, where we intend over the next six/12 months to concentrate on messages covering child road safety, child restraints, teenage road safety, speed, seatbelts, fatigue, mobile phones, drink drive and motorcycle safety. Details of the Think! campaign calendar are regularly updated and can be viewed at www.thinkroadsafetv.gov.uk. The Think! advertising and publicity budget for 2003–04 should be just over £14 million, £6 million of which should be spent in the next six months.

Traveline:

Promotion of a public transport information service where expenditure of £570k is anticipated between December 2002 and July 2003 covering advertising in directories, merchandising material and posters/leaflets.

Airports Consultation:

Publicity to raise awareness of the current national consultation on the future development of air transport in the United Kingdom. The latest consultation will run from February to May at an estimated cost of £260,000.

In developing these campaigns we use a range of external agencies to help take our campaign strategies forward. The creative work for the Think! campaign is currently provided by two advertising agencies—Leo Burnett and AMV with media planning/buying arranged through Carat. Two external agencies—QBO and Fishburn Hedges are also employed to extend campaign messages to lifestyle magazines and other media; while on traveline, Grasshopper have been employed to secure wider promotional opportunities.

In addition the Department uses a range of companies on frameworks covering research, design, typesetting, paper and print, and storage/distribution. Details of fees paid to each company are commercial in confidence.

Railtrack (Administration)

Mr. Redwood:: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) how much the Administration for Railtrack claimed in fees and expenses. [93605]

(2) what the total cost was of administration for Railtrack. [93608]

Mr. Spellar: To date, total costs incurred are £49.5 million. Under the Railway Administration Order Rules 2001, the administrators intend to apply the High Court to seek approval for their fees and expenses. Network Rail will then reimburse the Department for Transport for those costs that were properly an expense of the administration. Only when the High Court has made a decision on the application will the total costs of administration be known.

Regional Air Services

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport from which organisations and corporate entities he has received representations on the South East and East of England Regional Air Services study and future airport policy in the South East, since 30 November 2002. [94447]

Mr. Jamieson: The following information lists responses to "The Future Development of Air Transport in the United Kingdom (South East)" received from the main organisations and corporate entities dated 30 November 2002 or later. It includes responses submitted both in hard and electronic copy, but does not include responses to the NOP questionnaire.

Air Transport Greener by Design
Ashford Borough Council
Air Transport Action Group
Babergh District Council
Bexley Council
Bluebase
British Airline Pilots Association
Business Focus
Chartered Institute of Purchasing And Supply
Colchester Borough Council
Council for Travel and Tourism
Crawley Borough Council
East of England Local Government Conference
East of England Development Agency
English Heritage
English, Welsh and Scottish Railway
Essex County Council
Freedom to Fly Coalition
Friends of the Earth—West London
Guildford Borough
Hillingdon London Borough
Institute of Logistics and Transport
Kent Thameside Association
Levett-Therivel Sustain Ability Consultants
Local Authorities Aircraft Noise Council
London City Airport
London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies
National Air Traffic Service
Norwich City Council
Oneworld Global Airline Alliance
Redhill Aerodrome Ltd.
Royal Borough of Chelsea and Kensington
Stop Stansted Expansion
The Sevenoaks Society
Thames Gateway—South Essex
Thurrock Council
Tring Town Council
Wildlife and Countryside Link
Woodland Trust

The consultation period throughout the UK remains open until we have consulted on Gatwick runway options. We hope to issue a revised South East consultation paper next month. The consultation period will then run for four months after the date of publication of the new material. Those who have already responded to the consultation will be able to amend, add to, or replace their response having considered the new material, if they wish to do so.

All responses to the consultation will be considered and analysed carefully before final decisions are taken. These will be set out in an air transport White Paper, which we aim to publish towards the end of the year.

Road Building (Stonehenge)

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he intends to publish the draft orders relating to road construction at Stonehenge. [94084]

Mr Jamieson: The current programme is for draft orders to be published in May 2003.

Rolling Stock

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the estimated cost is of upgrading the power supply in Railtrack's southern zones to enable the comprehensive overhaul of current trains and rolling stock. [93817]

Mr. Jamieson: The scope, scale and cost of the power supply upgrade is still emerging but the current estimate is £915 million including a contingency.

Strategic Rail Authority (Consultants)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to his answer of 7 January, *Official Report*, column 108W, on Strategic Rail Authority (Consultants), (1) if he will make a statement on the work conducted for the Strategic Rail Authority *(a)* by Booz Allen and Hamilton on the Virgin trains franchise negotiation, *(b)* by KPMG on financial advisers for Virgin Rail Group Negotiations and *(c)* by KPMG on the Virgin Rail Ltd scope review and the financial advisers for Virgin Rail Group Negotiations. [93234]

(2) if he will make a statement on *(a)* the PLANET models, *(b)* the work by Nichols on Mark 1 rolling-stock, *(c)* the work by MDS Transmodal on innovation competition, *(d)* Project Tide, *(e)* the WARM(E) project and *(f)* Project Radar. [93233]

(3) if he will place in the Library copies of the *(a)* review of international rail services conducted by Steer Davies and Gleave, *(b)* study into why operational performance has failed to revert to pre-Hatfield levels, conducted by AEA Technology, *(c)* studies of Project Ariel, SPVs and enhancements, conducted by Lazards, *(d)* study of the financial adviser to Scottish passenger rail franchise relet conducted by KPMG, *(e)* study of Mark 1, strategic reserve vehicles conducted by Jacobs Gibb, *(f)* studies on due diligence of Railtrack and CLG bus plan, conducted by Booz Allen and Hamilton and *(g)* ELL provision of timetable validation study conducted by AEA Technology. [93232]

Mr. Jamieson: These are matters for the Strategic Rail Authority. I have asked the Authority to contact the hon. Member directly about the information he seeks.

Terrorism

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many incidents of *(a)* terrorist activity and *(b)* suspected terrorist activity were recorded by *(i)* the Marine Accident Investigation Branch Transport

Police and (ii) other organisations relating to marine and port activities, in each year since 1997; and if he will make a statement. [93243]

Mr. Jamieson: No incidents of terrorist activity targeted against ports in the UK have been recorded since 1997. Similarly, in the same period, we have no record of any incidents of suspected terrorist activity targeted against UK ports or the ships serving them. However, the hon.Member will recall the successful boarding of the MV Nisha on 21December 2001 in response to a potential terrorist threat. Our suspicions proved on that occasion to be unfounded, as the ship was wholly innocent.

Wapping Tube Station

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the future of Wapping tube station. [93730]

Mr. Jamieson: Preparatory work to enable a northern extension to London Underground's East London Line is under way. It is clearly crucial that stations on any extended line comply with modern safety standards, given the increased number of passengers expected. I understand that Wapping presents particular challenges in ensuring safety compliance, given its age and restricted space. Studies are under way to explore the options for addressing these issues and no final decision has been taken on the station's future.

TREASURY

Euro

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent discussions he has had with the governments of *(a)* Gibraltar, *(b)* Jersey, *(c)* Guernsey and *(d)* the Isle of Man regarding the Single European Currency. [94200]

Ruth Kelly: Government officials meet often with representatives of Gibraltar, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man to discuss a range of issues.

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what target he has for the proportion of businesses which will be prepared for euro entry at the time of his Department's assessment on whether Britain meets the five economic tests for euro entry. [94344]

Ruth Kelly: The Government are committed to completing an assessment of the five tests within two years of the start of this Parliament. While the Treasury has not set any targets for the proportion of businesses to make preparations it has published two outline National Changeover Plans and regular euro preparation updates containing practical information. Copies of these publications are available in the Library of the House. It is up to individual businesses to decide whether to make preparations for possible UK entry.

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when his Department next intends to conduct a survey of the proportion of businesses prepared for membership of the euro. [94345]

Ruth Kelly: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answers I gave to the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor) on 13 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 414W-15W, and 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 54W.

Savings and Pensions

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what incentives he is putting in place to encourage young people to invest in *(a)* individual pension schemes and *(b)* individual savings accounts; and if he will make a statement. [94250]

Ruth Kelly: The Government recognise the value of saving and asset-ownership in providing people with security, comfort in retirement and long-term independence and security. To address the problems that may have discouraged people of all ages from saving in the past the Government are implementing a strategy designed to:

create the right environment for saving;

provide incentives to save through favourable tax treatment; and

ensure everyone has access to the financial information they need to make informed savings decisions.

Young people will, in particular, benefit from pension rules allowing annual contributions of £3,600 irrespective of earnings and already benefit from the ISA rules which allow 16 and 17-year-olds to open a cash ISA. These measures provide the opportunity to begin saving tax-free at an early stage.

Textile Industry

Keith Vaz: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of staff made redundant in the textile industry between 1990 and 2000 found new employment; and in what sectors. [92099]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from L. Cook to Mr. Keith Vaz, dated 30 January 2003:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question on redundancies in the textile industry. (92099)

The available information from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) of households is that a total of 151,000 people were made redundant from the textiles and textile products industry (Standard Industrial Classification 1992 subsection DB) between March 1997 and November 2002. Of these, 32 per cent had found new employment by the time they were interviewed in the LFS up to three months after being made redundant. Of the 151,000 people made redundant, 13 per cent found new employment in the textiles and textile products industry, 19 per cent found new employment in the manufacturing sector as a whole and 13 per cent in the services sector.

Unemployment (Haltemprice and Howden)

David Davis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people were unemployed in Haltemprice and Howden in the last 13 months for which figures are available. [93783]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from L. Cook to Mr. David Davis, dated 30 January 2003:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question regarding the number of people who were unemployed in Haltemprice and Howden in *(a)* the last month for which figures are available and *(b)* the preceding 12 months.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) compiles statistics of unemployment from surveys following the international standard International Labour Organisation definition. However the survey sample size is too small to provide estimates for the Haltemprice and Howden Parliamentary Constituency. ONS also compiles claimant count statistics of those claiming Jobseeker's Allowance.

Information on the level of claimants for the Haltemprice and Howden Parliamentary Constituency between December 2001 and December 2002 can be obtained from the Nomis(r) database at the House of Commons Library.

Working Tax Credit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many claim forms for *(a)* child tax credit and *(b)* working tax credit have so far (i) been issued and (ii) been returned. [94023]

Dawn Primarolo: There is a single claim form for these tax credits.

By 29 December 2002 about 4.7 million claim forms had been-issuedand just over 2 million claims received (including 165,000 on-line).

Accounting Practices

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to increase the powers and resources of the Financial Services Authority to investigate the accounting practices of companies. [94520]

Ruth Kelly: The powers of the Financial Services Authority are set out in the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 and the secondary legislation under it. In respect of the accounting practices of companies, my RHF the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced yesterday, in response to the recommendation of the Co-ordinating Group on Audit and Accounting Issues, that the FSA will play a greater role, in partnership with the Financial Reporting Review Panel, in the enforcement of accounting standards, particularly in identifying the risks to be investigated and the selection of company accounts for investigation.

Annuities

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether the Financial Services Authority will add income drawdown schemes to the comparative tables that it plans to publish on annuities. [93878]

Ruth Kelly: The Financial Services Authority (FSA) tell me that they do not propose to include income drawdown arrangements in their comparative tables.

The FSA annuity Comparative Tables will provide annuity rates for what are generally referred to as 'standards annuities' joint and single life, escalating and non-escalating, smoker and non-smoker rates. These are the annuities purchased by over 80 per cent. of annuitants.

Baby Expenses

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what provision is available for poorer families to assist with expenses incurred in the arrival of a new baby, with particular reference to the purchase of new mattresses. [93475]

Ruth Kelly: The sure start maternity grant, worth £500, is available to people receiving income support, income-based jobseekers allowance, working families tax credit or disabled person's tax credit, to help cover the costs of a new baby. Claims can be made at any time from 11 weeks before a baby is due until three months after birth, or up to three months after the date of adoption or parental order. Those claiming must submit a certificate signed by a health professional confirming that health and welfare advice has been received.

From April 2003, the child tax credit will create a seamless system of income-related support for families with children. Paid on top of child benefit, the child tax credit will provide a family element of £545 a year for all families with incomes of less than £50,000, plus a child element of £1,445 for each child or young person in families with incomes of up to around £13,000 a year. In the first year of a child's birth the family element is doubled, to £1,090.

From April 2003, the sure start maternity grant will be available to all parents who receive more than the family element of child tax credit.

Budget Changes

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the principal components of the changes in the budget of HM Treasury from 2002–03 to 2005–06; and if he will make a statement. [92791]

Ruth Kelly: The largest components are a £34 million anticipated decrease in the utilisation of accounting provisions by the Office of Government Commerce relating to the vacant civil estate; and a £15 million reduction in expected OGC income from other Departments.

Business Investment

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the level of business investment was in each quarter since 1997. [94396]

Ruth Kelly: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Stephen O'Brien, dated 30 January 2003:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question concerning what the level of business investment was in each quarter since 1997. (94396)

The information is available in the January 2003 edition of Economic Trends (No. 590). This is a National Statistics publication and is available in the House of Commons Library. The data required are contained in "Table 2.7 Gross fixed capital formation" on page T10. The series identifier for seasonally adjusted constant price business investment is NPEL.

The most recent business investment data are also available from the business investment First Release which is available in the Library or from the National Statistics website "www.statistics.gov.uk" under "more releases".

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what research he has commissioned into the long-term effect of a drop in business investment on the *(a)* competitiveness, *(b)* productivity and *(c)* purchasing power parity of the UK economy. [94399]

Ruth Kelly: There is ample evidence that business investment is one of the essential drivers rising productivity and living standards. The Government's approach to raising competitiveness and productivity centres: on maintaining a stable macroeconomic environment conducive to individuals and firms investing for the long term; and implementing microeconomic reforms to remove any barriers that prevent markets from functioning effectively.

Business Property Refit

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will estimate the change in Government revenues from the abolition of Business Property Refit and Agricultural Property Refit; and if he will make a statement. [93718]

(2) if he will estimate the change in Government revenues from imposing a ceiling of £250,000 on assets that receive relief under Business Property Refit and Agricultural Property Refit; and if he will make a statement. [93719]

Dawn Primarolo: The costs of inheritance tax business property and agricultural property relief in 2002–2003 are forecast to be £110 million and £130 million respectively.

Capping each relief at £250,000 would reduce these costs to £50 million and £70 million respectively.

Capital Gains Tax

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the change in Government revenues from changing the capital gains tax regime simultaneously to abolish taper relief, reintroduce retirement relief and abolish the exemption of capital gains accrued but unrealised at death. [93717]

Dawn Primarolo: The full year yield, including the effect of likely taxpayer reaction, from simultaneously abolishing taper relief and reintroducing retirement relief is estimated to be £200 million in 2002–03 and £400 million in 2003–04.

The latest available estimate of the current cost of Capital Gains Tax relief for gains accrued but unrealised at death is £500 million for 2002–03. However this takes no account of taxpayers reaction to such a major change. The yield from abolition of this relief may be significantly different due to changes in taxpayers' behaviour.

A reliable estimate of the total yield from all measures is only available at disproportionate cost.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when he last met the Chief Executive of the Child Support Agency to discuss progress on county court judgments, committal proceedings and the withdrawal of driving licences for non-payment of maintenance; and if he will make a statement. [89764]

Malcolm Wicks: Ministers have regular meetings with the Chief Executive of the Child Support Agency to discuss, among other topics, the current performance of the Agency.

Civil Servants (Bonus Payments)

Mr. Lyons: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much was paid in bonus payments to civil servants in 2001–02 related to performance in his Department. [92950]

Ruth Kelly: During the financial year 2001–02 a total of £274,980 in performance bonus payments was paid to staff.

Clearing Banks

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to open *(a)* the banking money transmission service and *(b)* central clearing to all major clearing banks. [94380]

Ruth Kelly: The Government are closely monitoring developments in money transmission systems—otherwise known as payment systems—and will introduce legislation to give the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) new powers to promote effective competition in payment systems as soon as parliamentary time allows. It is envisaged that these new powers will include provisions designed to tackle potential restrictions on access to payment systems.

Progress has already been made through, for example, reforms to the governance structures of the main UK payment systems. The Government welcome these moves by payment system participants to address the competition issues identified by the Cruickshank report and urges the industry to continue with these reforms.

To promote its understanding of how payment systems operate, and to help pave the way for its prospective powers, the OFT announced on 27 November that it will conduct an empirical study into recent payment system developments, starting early in 2003.

Climate Change Levy

Sue Doughty: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what receipts he received during the fiscal year 2001–02 from companies subject to negotiated agreements under the Climate Change Levy. [94144]

John Healey: Information is not available on the levy receipts the Exchequer received during 2001–02 from those companies covered by negotiated climate change agreements.

Construction Industry

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimates the Inland Revenue has made of the costs of administering the Construction Industry Scheme *(a)* for the construction industry and *(b)* for the Inland Revenue in the last financial year. [91953]

Dawn Primarolo: The information is as follows:

(a) Construction businesses are not required to report the costs they incur in administering CIS and consequently information on compliance costs is limited. Any estimates are therefore tentative but for the year 2001–02 the Inland Revenue estimate that they could have been in the region of £75 million.

(b) The annual cost to the Inland Revenue of administering the IT system that supports CIS is in the order of £8 million. This figure does not include the costs of people working in our Network Offices and who support the system through processing work, customer support, and tax compliance activity. Generally speaking, these people carry out a wider range of activities and it would not be practical to apportion their costs between the time spent on CIS and on other activities.

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when a decision will be taken on the future of the Construction Industry Scheme. [94849]

Dawn Primarolo: A decision on the future of the Scheme will be taken following analysis of the responses to the consultation document, "The Inland Revenue and the Construction Industry: Working Together for a New Scheme".

Contingent Liabilities

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the [illegible]hequer (1) if he will list the Government's contingent liabilities; [94342]

(2) if he intends to list the Government's contingent liabilities in his forthcoming Budget statement; [9434[illegible]]

(3) if he will list the criteria which Government liabilities must meet if they are not to be included in estimates of public borrowing. [94341]

Mr. Boateng: Under UK accounting standards, a liability is treated as contingent if it is dependent on uncertain future events, cannot be estimated with sufficient reliability, or is not likely to be called. By definition, contingent liabilities may never result in actual expenditure. Therefore they are not included in estimates of public expenditure or borrowing unless or until there is a reasonable expectation that expenditure will be incurred.

The Government does not need to publish separate details of contingent liabilities in the forthcoming Budget statement because these are published in the Supplementary Statement to the Consolidated Fund and National Loans Fund Accounts. This lists all outstanding contingent liabilities during the financial year where they are reportable to Parliament using the criteria set out in Government Accounting. The Supplementary Statement for 2001–02 was published on 19 December 2002 (HC 381). In addition, departments must follow accounting standards when disclosing contingent liabilities by way of notes to their accounts.

Cooking Oil Fuels

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is on paying duty on fuels made from cooking oil. [93474]

John Healey: Any substance, whether or not it is a mineral oil, is subject to excise duty where it is used as a road fuel. This duty is normally charged at the rate of the fuel for which that substance is substituting. Where cooking oil is used in diesel-engined cars, it will normally be liable at the rate set for ultra-low sulphur diesel, which is 45.82p per litre. Some cooking oil, however, may meet the specification for biodiesel for duty purposes. The duty rate for biodiesel used as a road fuel is 25.82p per litre.

Currency Instability

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effect on the UK economy of the current relative instability of major international currencies. [94851]

Ruth Kelly: The Paper for the Treasury Committee on the Treasury's approach to the preliminary and technical work, published on 6 September 2002, set out a number of supporting studies that will be published alongside the assessment of the five economic tests. Further detail can be found in the 6 September Paper. Analysis of international currency movements and their effects will form part of this work.

Earnings

Andrew George: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the house price to earnings ratio was for each year since 1978 in *(a)* England, *(b)* local authorities defined as rural and *(c)* by region. [90830]

Mr. McNulty: I have been asked to reply.

Only some of the data requested are available because earnings data at local authority level cannot easily be obtained within a reasonable time period.

The house price to earnings ratio has been determined from 1990 to 2001 *(a)* for England and *(b)* for each of the Government office regions. It is important to note that the average earnings used to produce this table are based on the region where the individual worked—which is not necessarily the region in which they lived. Comparisons with house prices within the same region may therefore be inappropriate.

	North east	*North west*	*Yorkshire & Humber*	*East Midlands*	*West Midlands*	*East*	*London*	*South east*	*South west*	*England*
1990	3.38	3.96	4.29	4.66	5.00	5.18	5.58	5.73	5.47	5.31
1991	3.41	3.80	4.14	4.20	4.60	4.70	4.99	5.25	4.92	4.80
1992	3.23	3.79	3.79	3.89	4.17	4.12	4.20	4.65	4.35	4.27
1993	3.45	3.63	3.69	3.66	3.93	4.14	3.90	4.53	3.96	3.96
1994	3.45	3.62	3.51	3.65	3.85	4.06	3.98	4.58	3.97	3.94
1995	3.24	3.44	3.44	3.51	3.83	4.08	3.87	4.54	3.97	3.87
1996	3.19	3.38	3.47	3.58	3.83	4.12	3.89	4.60	4.04	3.89
1997	3.31	3.49	3.53	3.61	3.95	4.46	4.31	4.93	4.20	4.11
1998	3.34	3.56	3.52	3.77	4.04	4.81	4.71	6.28	4.50	4.39
1999	3.50	3.70	3.59	3.78	4.15	4.94	5.51	5.63	4.83	4.71
2000	3.47	3.84	3.64	4.11	4.55	5.47	6.00	6.37	5.35	5.15
2001	3.55	4.10	3.85	4.40	4.62	5.74	6.17	6.62	5.65	5.31

Sources:
New Earnings Survey, ONS
Survey of Mortgage Lenders, ODPM

EU (Economic Reform)

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 23 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 428W, on EU (economic reform), what discussions his Department has had with its European counterparts regarding *(a)* the steps for economic reform in the EU, detailed in the Government's White Paper on European economic reform, "Realising Europe's Potential: Economic Reform in Europe", February 2002 and *(b)* general economic reform in the EU. [94429]

Ruth Kelly: The Department has had numerous discussions with its European counterparts on the economic reform issues detailed in the Government's White Paper, and on European economic reform in general, within ECOFIN (and its associated committees), and in the context of the annual spring European Council on economic reform.

EU Financial Market Liberalisation

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether his Department's plans for liberalisation of financial markets in the European Union, as set out in the Government's White Paper on European economic reform, "Realising Europe's Potential: Economic Reform in Europe", February 2002, depend on *(a)* wider membership of European economic and monetary union among all EU states and *(b)* British membership of EMU. [94394]

Ruth Kelly: Liberalisation of financial markets does not depend on membership of European economic and monetary union.

Exempt Transfers

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of *(a)* the number and *(b)* the value of potentially exempt transfers in the last year for which data is available; and if he will make a statement. [93710]

Dawn Primarolo: Insufficient data is available on which to base such estimates.

HIPC Initiative

John Barrett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 54–55W, on the HIPC initiative, for what reasons figures for 2001 and 2002 on external debt outstanding for countries between decision point and completion point are not available. [93912]

John Healey: There are various sources of data for the external debt of developing countries. However, the most authoritative and complete source is "Global Development Finance" published by the World Bank. The last edition published in March 2002 provides figures on external debt for all these countries up until 2000, figures for 2001 will be published in the 2003 edition.

HM Customs

Mr. Kilfoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) whether it is the policy of HM Customs to withhold from the media details of seizures, arrests, and subsequent charges. [92997]

(2) what gun and other ordnance seizures were made by HM Customs in *(a)* 2000, *(b)* 2001 and *(c)* 2002, identifying *(i)* the weaponry seized, (ii) where it was seized, (iii) where the weaponry was hidden and (iv) subsequent arrests and charges; and what estimate he has made of the number of seizures where the weaponry was destined for organised crime gangs. [93006]

(3) how many gun seizures there were at British ports by HM Customs between April 2002 and November 2002; how many arrests were made; and how many people were charged in connection with these seizures. [92979]

John Healey: Up to 31 March 2002, the period for which information is available, most seizures of firearms were regulatory breaches with little to suggest they were being imported for criminal purposes. Number of illegal firearms seized by Customs and Excise

Number of illegal firearms seized by Customs and Excise

Year ended 31 March	*Hand guns*	*Rifles*	*Shotguns*	*Self defence sprays*	*Stun guns*	*Total*
2000	417	95	129	1,169	101	1,911
2001	163	48	44	2,428	114	2,697
2002	304	111	219	1,237	144	2,015

The majority of seizures were made in various ports, airports and international parcel postal depots. No centrally held and readily accessible information is available on where the weapons were hidden or whether any detection involved criminal proceedings being instituted.

Figures for illegal firearms seized are not yet available for the period between April and November 2002, but within the overall totals since April 2002 Customs have made four significant seizures of consignments of guns believed to be destined for criminal use. Firearms seized total some 20 hand guns and 35 sub machine guns plus a quantity of ammunition and explosive. The cases are subject to continuing investigation by Police and Customs. Customs do not release information if there is a risk of prejudicing ongoing or future enquiries, as provided for by Exemptions 4 (Law enforcement and legal proceedings) and 7 (Effective management and operations of the public service) of the Code of Practice on Access toGovernment Information.

House Prices

Andrew George: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the average price of a house was in real terms in *(a)* England and *(b)* local authorities defined as rural, by region, in each year since 1978. [90834]

Mr. McNulty: I have been asked to reply.

Although the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's Survey of Mortgage Lenders has been a valuable source of information on house prices back to 1968, data from the survey are reliable only down to regional level. Reliable house price information at local authority level has only been available since 1996 when the Land Registry constructed its database of all property transactions in England and Wales. Consequently the data presented in the following tables cover only the period 1996 to 2002 (Ql to Q3).

Average house prices in rural local authorities by region, 1996–2002—at current prices

(£) *Region*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*[1]
East	68,789	75,031	81,929	90,250	104,986	118,988	139,817
East Midlands	64,383	68,442	74,321	80,404	89,915	99,631	115,919
North East	53,655	57,563	58,448	63,614	65,776	68,825	76,113
North West	59,356	63,177	65,935	70,950	75,636	82,354	91,781
South East	84,847	92,392	103,120	115,551	135,758	149,571	168,999
South West	71,674	77,565	84,515	94,136	108,854	122,187	144,183
West Midlands	71,383	77,854	84,089	91,416	100,481	114,167	131,626
Yorkshire and Humber	66,011	69,164	70,886	75,979	81,359	89,006	105,069
All England[2]	73,929	80,669	88,427	98,513	110,724	121,916	138,296

[1] Ql to Q3

[2] Urban and Rural

Average house prices in rural local authorities by region, 1996–2002—at constant 1996 prices

(£) *Region*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*[1]
East	68,789	72,744	76,799	83,321	94,136	104,783	121,652
East Midlands	64,383	66,356	69,667	74,230	80,623	87,737	100,859
North East	53,655	55,809	54,789	58,730	58,978	60,609	66,225
North West	59,356	61,252	61,806	65,502	67,819	72,523	79,857
South East	84,847	89,577	96,663	106,679	121,727	131,716	147,044
South West	71,674	75,201	79,223	86,908	97,605	107,600	125,451
West Midlands	71,383	75,481	78,824	84,397	90,096	100,538	114,526

Average house prices in rural local authorities by region, 1996–2002— at constant 1996 prices

(£) Region	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002[1]
Yorkshire and Humber	66,011	67,056	66,447	70,145	72,951	78,381	91,419
All England[2]	73,929	78,211	82,890	90,949	99,281	107,362	120,329

[1] Q1 to Q3

[2] Urban and Rural

Note:

The rural local authorities included in the above figures are those that are classified by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister as "mixed rural" or "deeply rural".

Source:

Land Registry

Income Drawdown Policies

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many investors have taken out income drawdown policies in each year since their inception in 1995; [93877]

(2) how many people in each of the last five years who previously had an income drawdown scheme bought an annuity before they were 75-years-old. [93876]

Ruth Kelly: Available estimates of the number of new income drawdown plans purchased are contained in the following table .

New Income Drawdown Plans[1]

Year	Number of new policies (thousand)
1996	10
1997	14
1998	19
1999	18
2000	14
2001	15

Source:

Association of British Insurers (ABI). Note that figures are only available from 1996.

No estimates are available of the number who have purchased an annuity before aged 75 after having been in income drawdown.

Income Tax

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the revenue gain from an income tax rate of *(a)* 42 per cent., *(b)* 44 per cent., *(c)* 45 per cent., *(d)* 48 per cent., *(e)* 50 per cent., *(f)* 52 per cent., *(g)* 54 per cent. and *(h)* 55 per cent. on taxable incomes exceeding (i) £60,000 pa, (ii) £70,000 pa, (iii) £80,000 pa, (iv) £90,000 pa, (v) £100,000 pa, (vi) £120,000 pa, (vii) £140,000 pa, (viii) £150,000 pa, (ix) £175,000 pa, (x) £200,000 pa, (xi) £220,000 pa and (xii) £250,000 pa. [93478]

Dawn Primarolo: The full year revenue gain in 2003–04 from making the changes is set out in the table.

£ billion

Taxable income exceeding	Income tax rates (percentage) 42	44	45	48	50	52	54	55
60k	1.8	3.2	3.9	5.9	7.2	8.6	9.9	10.6
70k	1.6	2.8	3.4	5.2	6.4	7.6	8.8	9.4
80k	1.5	2.6	3.1	4.7	5.8	6.9	8.0	8.5
90k	1.4	2.4	2.8	4.3	5.3	6.3	7.3	7.8
100k	1.3	2.2	2.6	4.0	4.9	5.8	6.7	7.2
120k	1.1	1.9	2.3	3.5	4.3	5.1	5.9	6.3
140k	1.0	1.7	2.1	3.1	3.9	4.6	5.3	5.6
150k	1.0	1.6	2.0	3.0	3.7	4.4	5.0	5.4
175k	0.9	1.5	1.8	2.7	3.3	3.9	4.5	4.8
200k	0.8	1.3	1.6	2.4	3.0	3.5	4.1	4.4
220k	0.7	1.3	1.5	2.3	2.8	3.3	3.8	4.1
250k	0.7	1.1	1.4	2.1	2.5	3.0	3.5	3.7

The estimates are based on the Survey of Personal Incomes and are consistent with the November 2002 pre-Budget report. These estimates exclude any behavioural response to the tax change.

Income Tax/National Insurance

Richard Burden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the average lifetime contributions in *(a)* Income Tax and *(b)* National Insurance of *(i)* university graduates and (ii) non-graduates. [94125]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue does not hold information about the qualifications of taxpayers or people paying National Insurance Contributions,

Industrial Action/Illness

Mr. Roger Williams: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many working days have been lost in his Department and its predecessors due to *(a)* industrial action and *(b)* illness in each year since 1997. [93166]

Ruth Kelly *(holding answer 27 January 2003):* No working days have been lost due to industrial action since 1997. On sick absence I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Nigel Evans) on 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 753W.

Landfill Tax Credit Scheme

Mr. Flook: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of unpaid volunteers involved in schemes funded by the landfill tax credit scheme. [94085]

John Healey: No estimate has been made of the number of unpaid volunteers involved in projects funded by the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme. However, the Government are conscious of the good work they do, and is committed to promoting volunteering, as outlined in the discussion document "Next Steps on Volunteering and Giving in the UK", a copy of which is in the Library of the House. Volunteers can make an enormous contribution to our society, in helping to meet social and environmental challenges.

Mr. Flook: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the amount of private funds attracted by the public funds provided by the landfill tax credit scheme in each year since its inception. [94086]

John Healey: No precise figures are held on the quantity of match funding obtained by projects funded through the landfill tax credit scheme. However, a study by Glasgow Caledonian University for Entrust, the scheme's regulator, has estimated that on average waste management and recycling projects have levered in approximately 34 per cent. additional funding in addition to landfill tax credit scheme funding.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the *(a)* international and *(b)* domestic travel costs were of each Treasury Minister in each year since 2000. [94377]

Ruth Kelly: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer given by the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, on 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 334W.

Mortgage Equity

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the level of mortgage equity withdrawal was in each quarter since 1997. [94395]

Ruth Kelly: Figures on mortgage equity withdrawal are produced by the Bank of England and can be found on their website at www.bankofengland.co.uk/mew.xls.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what research he has commissioned into the effect mortgage equity withdrawal has on the UK economy; and if he will make a statement. [94410]

Ruth Kelly: Full consideration is given to such effects in the assessments of economic developments and prospects published by the Treasury in Pre-Budget and Budget Reports.

Public-Private Partnerships

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 21 November 2002, *Official Report*, column 280W, on PPP and PFI, what plans he has to review the system of assessing whether a PFI deal is on or off balance sheet. [94423]

Mr. Boateng: None. The Government's policy when accounting for PFI contracts is to follow Generally Accepted Accounting Practice (GAAP). In particular, Application Note F to Financial Reporting Standard 5—Private Finance Initiatives and Similar Contract complemented by the Treasury Taskforce Technical Note No. 1 (Revised) 'How to Account for PFI Transactions'.

The balance sheet treatment of particular assets procured through PFI is audited by the National Audit Office or, where applicable, the Audit Commission, not the Government.

Rebated Gas Oil

John Barrett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 16 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 752W, on rebated gas oil, what criteria are used in determining whether red diesel can be used by a vehicle. [94028]

John Healey: The Hydrocarbon Oil Duties Act 1979 sets out the circumstances in which rebated (or "red") diesel can be used in vehicles.

HM Customs and Excise Notice 75—"Fuel for road vehicles"—explains this and is available from either the Customs National Advice Service (tel: 0845 010900) or from the Customs website (www.hmce.gov.uk).

Stock Market

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent discussions his Department has had with representatives of *(a)* business, *(b)* the insurance sector and *(c)* the pension fund sector on the value of the FTSE 100 share index. [94390]

Ruth Kelly: Ministers and officials regularly meet representatives from business and the financial sector and discuss a range of issues.

Tax Harmonisation

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he *(a)* has had and *(b)* intends to have with his European counterparts concerning harmonisation of VAT and corporation tax levels as a result of Franco-German agreement concerning the future of the European Union. [92768]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government have made it quite clear that the harmonisation of VAT and corporation tax levels is not the way forward for Europe.

Tobacco Smuggling

Norman Lamb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 48W, on tobacco smuggling, when the Government expect to publish their response to the Committee of Public Accounts' report on tobacco smuggling. [94018]

John Healey: The Government will publish their response to the Committee of Public Accounts' report on tobacco smuggling in the normal way by Treasury Minute.

Diversity Programme

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the cost of the HM Treasury *(a)* diversity action plan and *(b)* diversity programme in each year since 1997–98. [93447]

Ruth Kelly: The Treasury's diversity awareness programme was introduced in spring 2001. The cost of the awareness programme is met from within the Treasury's existing DEL.

Feedback Programme

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the cost was of the HM Treasury 360 degree feedback programme in each of the last three years; how many HM Treasury staff went on this programme; what its purpose is; and if he will make a statement. [93446]

Ruth Kelly: The Treasury has in place a 360 feedback programme as part of its drive to improve leadership skills and in response to the Cabinet Office target that all of the Senior Civil Service should go through a 360 feedback and personal development programme. To date, 115 people have taken part in the programme, including 42 people below the Senior Civil Service. The cost of the programme was met from within the Treasury's existing DEL.

Staff (Pay)

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the highest percentage pay rises were among HM Treasury staff in each year from 1997; which staff received these pay rises; and if he will make a statement. [93442]

Ruth Kelly: The information is as follows:

Year	*Percentage increase*	*Reason*
1999–2000	7.4	Increase due to exceptional performance and relatively low existing salary
2000–01	15.1	Increase due to exceptional performance and relatively low existing salary
2001–02	15.0	Increase in the range minimum
2002–03	7.6	Increase due to exceptional performance and relatively low existing salary

To provide the percentage pay rises for the years 1997 and 1998 the cost would be disproportionate.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of the average percentage pay rise in *(a)* 2001–02 and *(b)* 2002–03 for HM Treasury staff, broken down to show *(i)* all staff and (ii) Senior Civil Service staff; and if he will make a statement. [93444]

Ruth Kelly: The information is as follows:

	2001–02	*2002–03*
Below Senior Civil Service (%)	4.4	4.2
Senior Civil Service (%)	5.0	8.4

WORK AND PENSIONS

Family Incomes

Mr. Keith Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many families had an income below £10,000 a year in each of the last five years. [94439]

Malcolm Wicks: The information is in the table:

Proportion of families with children with total income below £10,000 a year at 2001–02 prices

	Percentage
1997–98	16
1998–99	15
1999–2000	13
2000–01	12
2001–02	11

Notes:

1. Figures are based on a total income of £10,000 at 2001–02 prices. Constant prices are worked out on the basis of survey year, for instance, April 2001 to March 2002.
2. The estimates are based on sample counts that have been adjusted for non-response using multi-purpose grossing factors that control for tenure type, council tax band and a number of demographic variables. Estimates are subject to sampling error and remaining response bias.
3. Total income is income from all sources for all adults and children, including tax credits.
4. Total income has not been adjusted for family size.

Source:

Family Resources Survey (Great Britain).

Family Incomes (Warrington, North)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what estimate he has made of the number of families in Warrington, North whose family income is *(a)* less than £10,000, *(b)* between £10,000 and £20,000 and *(c)* between £20,000 and £30,000 per annum. [94374]

Malcolm Wicks: The information requested is not available.

Child Benefit Claims

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many child benefit claims have been received in *(a)* total and *(b)* via the electronic claim process since the launch of the child benefit electronic claim form; and how many claims proved to be successful. [93054]

Malcolm Wicks: The Child Benefit electronic claims process was introduced on 28 October 2002. The total number of Child Benefit claims received in the Child Benefit Centre during the period 28 October 2002 to 13 January 2003 was 156,852. Of these, 1,797 claims were received electronically, 1.1 per cent. of overall total. During the same period around 11,000 claims were disallowed in total, although this will include some claims made before 28 October. No information is available on the proportion of disallowed claims that were received electronically.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what changes he plans to make to the operation of the Child Support Agency; when those changes will come into effect; and if he will make a statement. [94010]

Malcolm Wicks: I refer the hon. Member to the oral statement given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to the House on 27 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 567–68.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what evaluation has been undertaken of the changes in the single room rent regulations of housing benefit; what the conclusion of that evaluation were; and if he will make a statement. [89410]

Malcolm Wicks: To help promote work incentives, we broadened the definition of the Single Room Rent (SRR) from 2 July 2001 to reflect better the type of accommodation available in the market to young single people. Our aim is both to ease the problems faced by young people in getting and maintaining accommodation, and encourage landlords to rent to young adults.

This year we will be testing out the Standard Local Housing Allowances (SLHA) in around 10 pathfinder local authorities. Private sector tenants will be paid according to average local rents rather than rents charged. This will allow people to know in advance what housing benefit support they will receive, promote choice and personal responsibility and bridge the gap between benefit and work by allowing tenants to budget for their own rent. The evaluation of the pathfinders will include tracking the effects of the SLHA on people under 25 years of age, and the results will inform consideration of whether any changes to the younger person rent restrictions are necessary.

As part of a wider project examining the options for simplification of housing benefit in the private rent sector, "Housing Benefit Simplification in the Private Rented Sector" by Pettigrew N and Thomas A (DWP in-house research report No.107), looked at the SRR. This report was published in December 2002 and a copy is available in the Library.

Income Support

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what assessment he has made of the impact of reducing or withdrawing income support from lone parent students prior to receipt of student loans at the start of term. [92103]

Malcolm Wicks: The Government are encouraging everyone with the necessary qualifications, including lone parents, to enter further and higher education. For further education institutions in England[1], we have increased the ring-fenced budget for child care funds by 20 per cent. to £36 million in 2002–03. In higher education in England and Wales[1], lone parents already pay no tuition fees if their income is less than £20,480, and have access to a range of support including grants for child care, school meals and travel, books and equipment. These grants are being simplified from next September, as all lone parents (including students) will now be eligible for the new child tax credit being introduced from April 2003. This will make it even easier for lone parents to make the transition from benefits to higher education.

Student loans are paid in three instalments and are taken into account in income-related benefits for the period they are intended to cover i.e. September to June. The Department for Education and Skills has made arrangements to ensure that students who need financial help in the period before their first loan instalment arrives, can receive a payment from the Access and Hardship Funds held by their university to tide them over. This payment is disregarded in assessing entitlement to income-related benefits.

[1] Further and higher education arrangements in Scotland may differ from those in England.

Minimum Wage

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) if he will estimate the impact on the level of benefit payments of setting the minimum wage for young people at *(a)* £4.17 per hour and *(b)* £4.87 per hour; [90640]

(2) if he will estimate the impact on each benefit payable to those in paid employment of a national minimum wage of *(a)* £4.17 and *(b)* £4.87 for the next financial year; [90641]

(3) what estimate he has made of benefit savings which would result from an increase in the national minimum wage from *(a)* £4.20 to £4.87 and *(b)* £3.60 to £4.17 in *(i)* Scotland, (ii) England, (iii) Wales, and (iv) Northern Ireland; [90651]

(4) if he will estimate the impact on benefit payments in the next financial year of a single minimum wage for all age groups of *(a)* £4.17 per hour, *(b)* £4.20 per hour, *(c)* £4.87, *(d)* £5 per hour and *(e)* £5.30 per hour. [90652]

Malcolm Wicks: The information requested is in the table:

£

Change to minimum wage	*Estimated reduction in benefit payments for 2003–04*[1,2,3]
Set at £4.17 per hour for young people	3,700,000
Set at £4.87 per hour for young people	20,000,000
Set at £4.17 per hour for all age groups	3,700,000
Set at £4.87 per hour for all age groups	68,800,000
Increase from £4.20 to £4.87 for adults (aged 22+) and £3.60 to £4.17 for young people(aged 19–21)4,5	
In Scotland	11,400,000
In England	78,000,000
In Wales	4,300,000

Change to minimum wage	£ Estimated reduction in benefit payments for 2003–04[1,2,3]
Set at £4.20 per hour for all age groups	3,900,000
Set at £5.00 per hour for all age groups	82,000,000
Set at £5.30 per hour for all age groups	117,600,000

[1] The benefits included in the savings estimates are Pensioners Credit, Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Rebate. Tax Credits administered by Inland Revenue have not been included.

[2] The model does not estimate changes in employment and therefore the results do not account for any changes that may occur in the supply and demand of labour as a result of changing the national minimum wage.

[3] Estimates cannot be broken down by benefit due to small sample sizes. Estimates are rounded to the nearest £100,000.

[4] The results show the impact of raising the adult minimum wage and the young persons minimum wage simultaneously.

[5] Social Security matters for Northern Ireland are dealt with by the Northern Ireland Office.

Source:

Figures are estimated using the DWP's Policy Simulation Model for 2003–04 based on the Family Resources Survey 2000–01

Prisoners

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what steps are being taken to ensure that prisoners have immediate access to benefits and services provided by the Department on the point of release. [91369]

Malcolm Wicks: Ex-offenders have particular difficulties in returning to the labour market. We also know that those without accommodation or employment are twice as likely to re-offend. In recognition of this we are introducing a number of initiatives to help ex-offenders move into work.

£3 million has been allocated over three years to the development of Freshstart, launched in October 2001. Freshstart aims to improve the transition from custody to work through improving the links between prisons and jobcentres. It also provides prisoners who have not already secured a job with an appointment for a new jobseeker interview on release, providing direct access to jobs and the new deal, as well as speeding up their claim for jobseeker's allowance. By the end of November 2002, over 23,000 new jobseeker interviews had been booked.

In July 2002 we launched a pilot scheme to place touch-screen jobpoints in prisons. There are two trials currently running; computer access to the Department's Worktrain site in Durham, Onley, Askham Grange and Moorland prisons; and jobpoints in Lewes, Swansea, Hollesley Bay and Featherstone prisons.

We are also currently developing an Employment and Benefit Surgeries in Prisons project to meet the recommendations made in the Home Office Social Exclusion Unit report "Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners". We aim to start national roll out later in 2003. The project will offer all prisoners aged 18 and over one-to-one guidance on access to the full range of benefits and services offered by the Department.Typically this will cover:

Job search activity

Training and education opportunities

Support programmes such as new deal and progress2workLinkUp

Procedures to follow and steps to take in making a claim to benefit

This new work will build upon and complement existing provision for ex-offenders.

We have also developed a number of pilot programmes called Progress2work-LinkUP which focus on providing support for those at greatest disadvantage within the labour market, including ex-offenders. This initiative extends existing provision to tackle the issues that represent significant barriers to employment. The pilots support people by:

providing specialist advice away from the normal New Deal and other mainstream measures and

offering access and referral to appropriate specialists

Nine pilots were launched in autumn 2002 in Avon and Somerset, Merseyside and Metropolitan and West Yorkshire. Up to 10 further pilots are planned for 2003–04 focusing on the Greater Manchester, Lancashire, Nottinghamshire, West Midlands and Thames Valley areas.

Private Pension Annuities

Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what representations he has received about allowing people with an occupational pension as well as a private pension not to have to purchase an annuity for their private pension; and if he will make a statement. [94051]

Ruth Kelly: I have been asked to reply.

I am not aware of any such representations.

On 17 December 2002, the Government published, for consultation, simplification proposals for the pensions tax rules. The consultation paper, "Simplifying the Taxation of Pensions: Increasing Choice and Flexibility", is available in the House of Commons Library. The consultation is to allow people the opportunity to put forward their views before final decisions are taken.

HEALTH

Ambulance Service (East Riding)

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many fully operational ambulances were stationed at each of the ambulance stations in the East Riding of Yorkshire in each year since 1997. [92904]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is shown in the table.

Ambulance cover in the East Riding 1997–2002

Station	*Number of vehicles*	*Day cover*	*Night cover*
Withernsea	1	1 crew	1 crew
Hornsea	1	1 crew	1 crew
Bridlington	3	3 crews	1 crew
Driffield	1	1 crew	1 crew
Pocklington	2	2 crews	1 crew
Brough	2	2 crews	1 crew
Beverley	2	2 crews	1 crew
Goole	3	3 crews	2 crews
Total number of vehicles	15		

Source:

Tees, East and North Yorkshire Ambulance Service National Health Service Trust.

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list by postcode area in Haltemprice and Howden the response times for ambulances reacting to *(a)* Category A and *(b)* Category B calls, excluding the response times of first responder vehicles, in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [92905]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Population Statistics (East Riding)

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate how many children whose third birthday fell between 1 September 2002 and 31 December 2002 migrated into the East Riding of Yorkshire authority in each month since 1 April 2001. [93840]

Ruth Kelly: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from L. Cook to Mr. David Davis, dated 30 January 2003:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your question on the migration of children to the East Riding of Yorkshire authority whose third birthday fell between 1 September 2002 and 31 December 2002. (93840)

The attached table shows the number of children born between 1 September 1999 and 31 December 1999 who moved into the East Riding Health Authority from other areas of the UK. The figures are shown by month from April 2001 to March 2002 and exclude any children who migrated from countries outside the UK. It should be noted that these statistics are subject to revision in light of the 2001 Census results.

Information for April 2002 onwards is not yet available; data for April to June 2002 will be available in March 2003, with data for the third and fourth quarters of 2002 becoming available in June and September 2003 respectively.

These estimates of internal migration have been taken from data provided to the Migration Statistics Unit at the Office for National Statistics by the National Health Service Central Register (NHSCR). The NHSCR is notified when a patient in England and Wales transfers to a new NHS doctor in a different health authority, or health board in Scotland or Northern Ireland.

Migrant moves of children born between 1 September and 31 December, 1999 into the East Riding Health Authority—moves taking place by month since 1st April, 2001

numbers

Year	*Month*	*Number of Migrants*
2001	April	8
	May	11
	June	9
	July	8
	August	18
	September	8
	October	4
	November	5
	December	8
2002	January	2
	February	4
	March	8
	Total:	93

These statistics are subject to revision in light of the 2001 Census results.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when he intends to reply to the letter to him dated 11 December 2002 from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mr. and Mrs. A Wild; [92525]

(2) why he has not replied to the letter to him dated 11 December 2002 from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Mr. A. Wild. [94693]

Mr. Milburn: A reply was sent to the right hon. Member on 29 January 2003.

CT Scanner (Blackpool)

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the steps that need to be taken before an additional CT scanner can be installed at the Blackpool Victoria Hospital. [93374]

Jacqui Smith: Before any computed tomography (CT) scanner can be installed in the national health service, European Union legislation requires that a formal procurement process must be undertaken. This consists of an advert in the Official Journal of the European Community, followed by an evaluation of interested suppliers and an invitation to offer via tender. Once contracts have been signed, the successful supplier will agree a suitable delivery date with the NHS trust concerned.

Blackpool, Fylde and Wyre NHS trust has made a bid for central funding from the Department of Health to allow the capital purchase of an additional CT scanner, as part of the NHS Cancer Plan programme. The final stages of a consultation process with strategic health authorities, cancer networks and local commissioners will shortly confirm whether the trust has been successful in securing such funding.

Dental Services (East Lincolnshire)

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many dental practices are taking on new NHS patients in the constituencies of *(a)* Cleethorpes, *(b)* Grimsby, *(c)* Scunthorpe, *(d)* Brigg and Goole, *(e)* Hull West and Hessle, *(f)* Hull East, *(g)* Hull North, *(h)* Haltemprice and Howden, *(i)* Gainsborough and *(j)* Louth and Horncastle. [93311]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is shown in the table.

Constituency	*Practices accepting new patients*
Cleethorpes	8
Grimsby	7
Scunthorpe	7
Brigg and Goole	4
Hull West and Hessle	9
Hull East	5
Hull North	4
Haltemprice and Howden	3
Gainsborough	3
Louth and Horncastle	4

Notes:

1. General Dental Service: dental practices accepting new patients, November 2002.

2. These numbers are estimated using information from expenditure claims made to the Dental Practice Board (DPB).

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many dentists have retired in the past year in the constituencies of *(a)* Cleethorpes and *(b)* Grimsby. [93312]

Jacqui Smith: No dentists from the constituencies of Cleethorpes and Grimsby retired during 2002.

Source:

Dental Practice Board

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many new dental practices taking NHS patients have opened in the constituencies of *(a)* Cleethorpes and *(b)* Grimsby since 1 January 2002. [93313]

Jacqui Smith: Since 1 January 2002, no new dental practices have opened in the Cleethorpes or Grimsby constituencies.

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with North East Lincolnshire Primary Care Trust about the provision of NHS dental treatment in *(a)* Grimsby and *(b)* Cleethorpes constituencies. [93340]

Jacqui Smith: Responsibility for National Health Service dental care in Grimsby and Cleethorpes is the responsibility of North East Lincolnshire Primary Care Trust. The consultant in dental public health at the North East Primary Care Trust has been discussing access to NHS dentistry in North East Lincolnshire with officials at the Department of Health.

Public Health Laboratory Service

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the reference to 'key staff meltdown', experienced in PHLS in the report to the Steering Group of the HPA. [90056]

Ms Blears: Records of staff turnover are not held centrally. However, information from each of the component organisations indicate that there have been no dramatic increases in the overall number of staff resignations.

The Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) has indicated that there are above average resignations in a small number of management posts, potentially directly affected by the proposed changes. The Department will be working with the PHLS board to address any business continuity issues that may arise as a consequence.

Hull and East Riding Hospitals

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money has been allocated to each of the Hull and East Riding hospitals for ward environment budgets each year since 1 October 2000; how much was spent in each year; and for what other purposes was the money used. [89316]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 9 January 2003]:* Ward environment budgets are provided to be spent at the discretion of the charge nurse or ward sister. The purpose of these funds are to cater for items such as decoration, furniture and carpets to help improve the facilities for patients. Expenditure relating to ward environment budgets for the Hull and East Yorkshire National Health Service Hospitals Trust is summarised as follows:

In 2000–01, the trust received £185,000 from the Department. This amount was allocated to ward staff and £177,000 was spent by them.

In 2001–02, no specific allocation was received by local primary care trusts or hospitals. However the trust allocated an additional £59,000 to its ward environment budget.

In 2002–03, no specific allocation was received by local primary care trusts or hospitals. However the trust allocated an additional £227,000 to its ward environment budget.

Neurological Services

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the transitional issues between child and adult and adult and older people's neurological services will be handled within the national service framework for long-term medical conditions. [93481]

Jacqui Smith: The national service framework (NSF) for long-term medical conditions will focus on services and support for adults, but will consider the handling of transitional issues with children's and older people's services in its working groups.

This could include building on existing NSF standards, National Institute for Clinical Excellence clinical guidance and making links with other strategies and policies both within the Department and across Government.

Congenital Anomalies

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what the incidence of osteoglophonic dysplasia per thousand live births was *(a)* nationally, *(b)* in Solihull and *(c)* in the south of Solihull in each of the last three decades; [93856]

(2) how many cases of osteoglophonic dysplasia were recorded *(a)* in the United Kingdom, *(b)* in Solihull and *(c)* in the south of Solihull in each of the last three decades. [93855]

Ruth Kelly: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from L. Cook to Mrs. Caroline Spelman, dated 30 January 2003:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent questions asking for the incidence number and rate for osteoglophonic dysplasia reported nationally, in Solihull and in the south of Solihull in each of the last three decades. (93855, 93856)

The National Congenital Anomaly System (NCAS), based at the Office for National Statistics (ONS), codes all anomalies using the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). Between 1968 and 1988, using the 8th and 9th revisions of ICD, osteoglophonic dysplasia was assigned to a code that also included a number of other anomalies of the skull and face bones. Therefore it is not possible to identify number of babies born with osteoglophonic dysplasia prior to 1988. However from 1989, notifications held on NCAS contained descriptive text of the anomalies present. It is therefore possible to identify cases of osteoglophonic dysplasia from 1989. With the introduction of the 10th revision of ICD in 1995, osteoglophonic dysplasia has been separately coded.

Prior to 1995, ONS collected all notifications of congenital anomalies that were identified within ten days of birth. From 1995, ONS has collected all notifications of congenital anomalies whenever they are identified.

The attached table shows the number of babies in England and Wales notified to the National Congenital Anomaly System with osteoglophonic dysplasia and rate per 10,000 live births for the years 1989 to 2001. During this period there was only one case of osteoglophonic dysplasia reported to the NCAS in Solihull health authority in 1994. Figures from NCAS are not routinely published below health authority level.

Live born babies notified to the National Congenital Anomaly System with osteoglophonic dysplasia[1]*. England and Wales, numbers and rates per 10000 live births*

Live born babies notified to the National Congenital Anomaly System with osteoglophonic dysplasia[1]*. England and Wales, numbers and rates per 10000 live births*

	Numbers	*Rate per 10000 live births*
1989	2	0.03
1990	3	0.04
1991	1	0.01
1992	2	0.03
1993	0	—
1994	0	—
1995	2	0.03
1996	1	0.02
1997	1	0.02
1998	2	0.03
1999	0	—
2000	1	0.02
2001	0	—

[1] During 1989–1994, under the 9th revision of the International Classification of Diseases, cases coded as 756.0 were searched for the term osteoglophonic dysplasia or its synonyms craniofacial dysostosis and Crouzon's disease.

During 1995–2001, under the 10th revision of the International Classification of Diseases, any cases with code Q75.1 were selected.

Source:

National Congenital Anomaly System @ 28 January 2003

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what the incidence of severe hypoplastic left heart syndrome per thousand live births was *(a)* in the United Kingdom, *(b)* in Solihull and *(c)* in the south of Solihull in each of the last three decades; [93854]

(2) how many cases of severe hypoplastic left heart syndrome were recorded *(a)* in the United Kingdom, *(b)* in Solihull and *(c)* in the south of Solihull in each of the last three decades. [93853]

Ruth Kelly: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from L. Cook to Mrs. Caroline Spelman, dated 30 January 2003:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent questions asking for the incidence number and rate (per thousand live births) of severe hypoplastic left heart syndrome reported nationally, in Solihull and in the south of Solihull in each of the last three decades. (93854, 93853)

The National Congenital Anomaly System (NCAS), based at Office for National Statistics (ONS), codes all anomalies using the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). Between 1968 and 1978, when the 8th revision of ICD was used, hypoplastic left heart syndrome was assigned to a code that also includes a number of other specific anomalies of the heart. Therefore it is not possible to identify number of babies born with hypoplastic left heart syndrome prior to 1979.

Since the introduction of the 9th revision of ICD in 1979, hypoplastic left heart syndrome has been separately coded. It is therefore possible to provide the information requested from 1979 onwards. Prior to 1995, ONS collected all notifications of congenital anomalies that were identified within ten days of birth. From 1995, ONS has collected all notifications of congenital anomalies whenever they are identified.

The attached table shows the number of babies in England and Wales notified to the National Congenital Anomaly System with hypoplastic left heart syndrome and rate per 1,000 live births for the years 1979 to 2001. During this period there was only one case of hypoplastic left heart syndrome reported to NCAS in Solihull health authority in 1999. Figures from NCAS are not routinely published below health authority level.

Live born babies notified to the National Congenital Anomaly System with hypoplastic left heart syndrome[1], England and Wales, numbers and rates per 1000 live births

	Numbers	*Rate per 1000 live births*
1979	6	0.01
1980	10	0.02
1981	8	0.01
1982	13	0.02
1983	18	0.03
1984	20	0.03
1985	24	0.04
1986	16	0.02
1987	18	0.03
1988	9	0.01
1989	24	0.03
1990	13	0.02
1991	10	0.01
1992	13	0.02
1993	8	0.01
1994	26	0.04
1995	16	0.02
1996	28	0.04
1997	32	0.05
1998	18	0.03
1999	33	0.05
2000	39	0.06
2001	33	0.06

[1] Hypoplastic left heart syndrome is coded as:

1979–199 9th revision of the International Classification of Diseases—code 746.7

1995–200 10th revision of the International Classification of Diseases—code Q23.4

Source:

National Congenital Anomaly System @ 28 January 2003

Parkinson's Disease

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with the Scottish Executive about reducing waiting times to see a consultant about Parkinson's Disease. [94019]

Jacqui Smith: Ministers have had no discussions with the Scottish Executive on this subject.

The national service framework (NSF) for long-term conditions will have a particular focus on the needs of people with neurological disease, brain and spinal injury, as well as some of the common issues faced by people with a long-term condition. It will include services for people with epilepsy, Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson's Disease, Motor Neurone Disease and other similar conditions.

Publication of the NSF is currently planned for 2004, with implementation starting in 2005.

Protection of Children Act

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what actions he has taken to inform voluntary organisations of the scope of the Protection of Children Act 1999. [93394]

Jacqui Smith: Guidance on the Protection of Children Act 1999 was published in September 2000 and distributed to a large range of statutory and voluntary child care organisations. The guidance continues to be made available and is published on the Department of Health website for easy access.

Hospital Waiting Lists/Times

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people in the Lancashire Teaching Hospitals Trust area were waiting for in-patient treatment on the latest available date. [92067]

Jacqui Smith: As at 10 January 2003, the number of patients waiting for in-patient and day case treatment at the Lancashire Teaching Hospitals National Health Service Trust was 9,322.

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people waited 13 weeks or more for an out-patient appointment in Hull and the East Riding in each of the last three quarters for which figures are available. [92912]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is shown in the table.

Waiting times for first out-patient appointment, NHS trusts and PCTs within North and East Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire StHA area—provider based—number of GP written referral requests seen during the quarter who waited 13 weeks or more

Code	*Name*	*March 2002*	*June 2002*	*Sept 2002*
RWA	Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust	5,727	3,950	4,634

PRIVY COUNCIL

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Allen: To ask the President of the Council what representations he has received about bringing forward proposals for making the rise of the House the time for the shuffle for oral questions; and if he will make a statement. [94583]

Mr. Robin Cook: I have only received one such representation, and that was from my hon. Friend. I have no plans to change the time for the shuffle.

Service Delivery Agreement

Tony Wright: To ask the President of the Council when the Privy Council Office's service delivery agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94209]

Mr. Robin Cook: The Privy Council Office is not required to have a service delivery agreement.

A new business plan is, however, being prepared, and will be published on the Privy Council Office website (www.privycouncil.gov.uk) later this year. The plan will include our main performance targets, and when it is published, I will write to my hon. Friend to let him know.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Local Authority Housing

Mr. Betts: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what plans he has to expand the use of Arms Length Management Organisations. [93831]

Mr. McNulty: Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) for local authority housing are one of the Government's key options for improving service delivery for tenants and achieving the decent homes target. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's commitment to ALMOs is set to continue and we will be announcing the level of resources available for the next three years of the programme shortly.

Business Co-ordination Unit

Tim Loughton: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many staff work for the Business Co-ordination Unit; how many worked for the unit in each year since it was formed; and what the running costs of the unit are in 2002–03. [92576]

Mr. Leslie: There are currently three staff employed in the Business Co-ordination Unit, with two vacant posts. In 2000 when the unit was set up there were four members of staff, this increased to five in April 2002. The running costs budget for the unit in 2002–03 is £300,000.

Deprivation Indices

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what plans he has to ensure that the calculation of deprivation indices take account of local crime rates. [94521]

Mrs. Roche: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is currently engaged in a project to consider options for updating the Indices of Deprivation 2000 (ID 2000). As part of this project, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is investigating the potential for constructing a Crime and Social Order domain, which would measure the deprivation people face as a result of crime or as a result of living in an area with high rates of crime and social disorder. Discussions are currently taking place with officials in the Home Office over the scope, availability and quality of data.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has always recognised that it would be important to include a crime/social order domain in [illegible] ID 2000 but were previously prevented from doing so because of a lack of robust data.

Development Grants

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the projected total sum is in the United Kingdom of the *(a)* approved development programme and *(b)* Challenge Fund for (i) 2002–03, (ii) 2003–04 and (iii) 2004–05. [94414]

Mr. McNulty: In 2002–03 the Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme (ADP) in England is £921 million. There is no Challenge Fund for this year. The funding for 2003–04, announced on 18 September, is £1,286 million of which £200 million is for the Challenge Fund.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will be making a statement shortly about how the additional funding in the 2002 Spending Review will be used; it will include figures for 2004–05.

The ADP and Challenge Fund operate in England only.

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the proposed allocation within the regions of the UK is of the *(a)* Challenge Fund and *(b)* approved development programme for (i) 2002–03, (ii) 2003–04 and (iii) 2004–05. [94415]

Mr. McNulty: The published allocation between regions of the Housing Corporation's approved development programme in England for 2002–03 and 2003–04 is tabled as follows:

£ million

Region	*2002–03 Actual*	*2003–04 Indicative*
London	420.4	482.0
South East	113.9	134.1
South West	61.8	74.3
East Midlands	40.5	48.3
East of England	63.8	74.1
West Midlands	64.6	79.3
Yorks and Humberside	49.3	59.7
North East	22.9	33.8
North West	57.7	69.0
Merseyside	25.4	30.4
HQ	1.0	1.0
Challenge Fund	n/a	200.0
Total	921.2	1,286.2

The ADP and Challenge Fund operate in England only.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will be making a statement shortly about how the additional funding in the 2002 Spending Review will be used; it will include figures for 2004–05.

The allocation of Challenge Fund bids between regions is tabled as follows:

	£ million
London	109.6
South East	84.0
East of England	6.4

These allocations by the Housing Corporation are provisional and subject to confirmation of costs and timing.

Electronic Government

Margaret Moran: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister whether he intends to introduce an e-participation component as a requirement of Implementing Electronic Government statements. [93865]

Mr. Leslie: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is currently considering the format of the third round of Implementing Electronic Government (IEG3) Statements. It is probable that we will be asking councils to provide information on specific components of the local e-government programme. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is also in the process of developing a proposal for a National Project on e-participation. If this project is approved a return in this area in the IEG3 statements could be included.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister hopes to publish draft guidelines on IEG3 before Easter and the final guidance in June.

House Condition Survey

Mr. Betts: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he will publish the results of the 2001 English House Condition Survey. [93830]

Mr. McNulty: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) on 20 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 165W.

Affordable Housing (South-West)

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the aims are of the long-term housing allocation resource plans; what he estimates the effect will be on the division of resources for low-cost affordable housing within the South West Region; and if he will make a statement. [94413]

Mr. McNulty: In his statement to the house about sustainable communities on 18 July 2002, *Official Report*, column 438, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister promised to return to the house with a comprehensive long term programme of action to achieve a step change in the Government's policies for building successful, thriving and inclusive communities in all regions. The statement, which will be made shortly, will set out how the additional funding announced in the 2002 spending review will be used. It will cover the provision of affordable housing in areas of shortage.

Right to Buy

Mr. Chope: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what consultations have been carried out in determining the objective data from which the Government has derived the high demand indicator for the purposes of reducing maximum right to buy discounts. [93993]

Mr. McNulty: None. Two measures were used: homelessness and house prices. The sources of the homelessness data were statistical surveys of local authority housing departments, routinely conducted by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister:

2001–02 Housing Investment Programme Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix

Quarterly Housing Activity Return (PIE).

House prices were obtained from the Land Registry and can reasonably be assumed to reflect market prices since sales below market value were excluded.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will place in the Library the evidence he has collated that the Right to Buy has been abused in the borough of Christchurch. [93994]

Mr. McNulty: The report of the research by Heriot-Watt University into the scale, nature and impact of exploitation of the Right to Buy policy will be published shortly. It did not find any exploitation in the borough of Christchurch, but the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is minded to reduce the maximum Right to Buy discount in this area because it is under great housing pressure as evidenced by a high local incidence of homelessness and high local house prices.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will extend beyond 5 February the deadline for responses from Christchurch Borough Council [illegible] his letter about right to buy discounts. [illegible]4441]

Mr. McNulty: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister wrote on 22 January 2003 to all the local authorities affected by our announcement that day on Right to Buy discounts, giving them the opportunity to present a case for their areas to be excluded. All views and comments on the announcement received on or before 5 February 2003 will be given careful consideration.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when the letters about reduction of right to buy discounts were despatched to *(a)* Christchurch Borough Council and *(b)* Twynham Housing Association. [94442]

Mr. McNulty: Letters informing Christchurch Borough Council and Twynham Housing Association of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister's announcement about reducing right to buy discounts, and seeking their views, were despatched during the afternoon of Wednesday 22 January 2003.

Housing Stock Transfers

Mr. Austin Mitchell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he expects to receive the National Audit Office report on council stock transfers; and whether his review of council housing finances will be published before he has received the report. [93327]

Mr. McNulty: The timetable for the National Audit Office's report has yet to be finalised. However it is scheduled for consideration by the Public Accounts Committee of this House on 31 March.

The statement by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on the Government's comprehensive long term programme for sustainable communities, including housing, will be made shortly.

Housing Corporation

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what the annual Government funding to the Housing Corporation was in each year since 1991–92; what the projected annual Government funding for the Housing Corporation is for *(a)* 2002–03, *(b)* 200[illegible]–04 and *(c)* 2004–05; and what has been and will be the allocation of these moneys for these years for the South West Region. [94416]

Mr. McNulty: The Housing Corporation's total approved development programme (ADP) outturn for each year since 1991–92 is tabled as follows:

£ million

	ADP	*Of which South West ADP*
Outturn		
1991–92	1,586	—
1992–93	2,350	—
1993–94	1,809	—
1994–95	1,483	—
1995–96	1,142	81.4
1996–97	1,044	76.9
1997–98	684	48.4
1998–99	606	40.8

	ADP	Of which South West ADP
		£ million
1999–2000	638	42.3
2000–01	717	48.3
2001–02	775	51.1
Forecast		
2002–03	921	61.8
Planned		
2003–04	1,286	74.3

Notes:

1. These figures exclude expenditure on all Housing Corporation revenue programme and administration and other capital programmes including Rough Sleepers Initiative, Major Repairs Initiative, Estate Renewal Challenge Fund.

2. Figures for South West Region prior to 1995–96 are not available. Prior to this date the South West region was not a separate entity within the Housing Corporation regional structure.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will be making a statement shortly about how the additional funding in the 2002 Spending Review will be used; it will include figures for 2004–05.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Beith: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will *(a)* list and *(b)* quantify those factors in the local government finance formula which determined the increase proposed for (i) Berwick-on-Tweed Borough and (ii) Teesdale District. [93263]

Mr. Raynsford: Berwick-on-Tweed received an increase of 5.6 per cent. in Formula Spending Share (FSS) in the provisional settlement compared to 2002–03, to £135 per head. For Teesdale, these figures were 15.6 per cent. and £136 respectively. After their ability to raise council tax is taken into account, this gives grant increases for Berwick of 3 per cent. (the floor) and Teesdale 12.5 per cent. (the ceiling).

Many indicators have been removed, replaced, or updated in the EPCS Formula Review, and it is difficult to quantify every impact of the formula changes on each district.

Teesdale gains significantly and Berwick loses from the formula no longer taking account of overnight visitors. Both districts lose FSS from the removal of the old housing deprivation indictors (less so for Teesdale) and the lower sparsity weighting. Teesdale gains from the lower weighting for numbers on income support, but loses slightly due to an estimated population decline after the 2001 Census.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many representations he has received from *(a)* individuals and *(b)* organisations in (i) East Sussex and (ii) Eastbourne relating to changes to grant distribution. [93495]

Mr. Leslie: The number of representations we have received since the Government published the consultation paper on the Formula Grant Review on 8 July 2002, is tabled as follows.

	Formal response to the Formula Grant Review	Formal response to the provisional local government finance settlement 2003–04	Other
Organisation			
East Sussex County Council	2	2	—
Eastbourne Borough Council	1	—	—
Hastings Borough Council	1	1	—
Lewes District Council	1	—	—
Rother Borough Council	—	1	—
Wealden Borough Council	1	—	—
East Sussex Fire Brigade	1	2	—
Sussex Police Authority	1	1	—
Individual			
From MPs on behalf of East Sussex	24	4	14
From MPs on behalf of Eastbourne	—	—	2
From members of public in East Sussex	—	—	76
From members of public in Eastbourne	—	—	9

In addition a number of letters were received from schools in the above area concerning the funding of education which were passed to the Department for Education and Skills for reply.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will list by local authority the funding per head of population for social services departments under the terms of the provisional settlement for 2003–04. [93975]

Mr. Raynsford: A table showing the Personal Social Services Formula Spending Share (PSS FSS), the mid-2001 population estimate and the PSS FSS per head by local authority has been placed in the Library of the House.

The FSS amounts are not cash. Instead they are used in the distribution of formula grant to local authorities. Formula grant is unhypothecated. FSSs are not spending targets, authorities are free to set their own budgets subject to local spending priorities.

Public Toilets

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will issue guidelines to local authorities on the closure of public lavatories; and if he will commission research into the change in the number of public lavatories over the last five years. [93695]

Mr. Leslie: Local authorities are free to determine the provision of public toilets according to local circumstances. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has no plans to introduce guidelines on the closure of public toilets or commission research on their provision.

Ordnance Survey

Tony Wright: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when the Ordnance Survey's service delivery agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94111]

Mr. McNulty: Ordnance Survey is a small non-ministerial Department and Executive Agency which operates as a Trading Fund. As such a service delivery agreement is no longer considered appropriate and there is no plan to publish another one. Agency Performance Targets are set by Ministers for each financial year and achievement against these targets is monitored regularly.

Travellers (Permanent Sites)

Bob Russell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what financial assistance will be given to local authorities for the remaining two months of the current financial year to establish permanent sites for travellers; what plans he has to continue such financial provision in the next financial year; and if he will make a statement. [93108]

Mr. McNulty: The gipsy sites refurbishment grant is a three-year programme announced in July 2000 by my right hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford) (the then Minister of Housing). As part of the Spending Review 2000, that £17 million grant was to be made available to local authorities for the refurbishment of authorised gipsy sites over the three year period 2001 to 2004.

The grant funding is approved and allocated annually for works to be carried out throughout the financial year. A total of £8.112 million was approved for the 2002–03 round of the gipsy site refurbishment grant. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will pay a maximum of 75 per cent. of the total approved costs.

Applications for the 2003–04 round of the have were submitted on the 13 January 2003 and is now being assessed. Results are expected in mid March 2003.

EDUCATION

Access Regulator

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the *(a)* annual budget and *(b)* powers of the proposed Access Regulator for higher education institutions will be; and if he will make a statement. [93747]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* The Access Regulator will work within the Higher Education Funding Council, as set out in "The Future of Higher Education" (Cm 5734), and will have the power to withdraw approval for variable fees, or impose financial penalties, where Access Agreements are not fulfilled.

Arts and Humanities Research Council

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what his estimate is of the *(a)* cost and *(b)* annual budget of the Arts and Humanities Research Council; and if he will make a statement. [93746]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* We announced in "The Future of Higher Education" that our aim is for the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) to become a full Research Council by 2005. Our estimate for AHRB expenditure on running costs in the current financial year is £3.4 million. Total support for the AHRB from the Government and the Devolved Administrations in 2002–03 will be £63.2 million.

School Bullying

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what requirement schools are under to record reported incidents of bullying. [93589]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: There is no statutory requirement to keep record of such incidents, although this is good practice.

Rather than set new legal requirements, we want to help schools stop bullying. We have made available on request our free pack and video for schools entitled "Bullying: Don't Suffer in Silence". In addition, Ofsted inspectors ask about the incidence of bullying in the schools they inspect, and the school's response to the bullying.

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what plans he has to collect centrally statistics on the rate of bullying in schools. [93590]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: We have no such plans.

However, we take bullying very seriously, and I would urge schools that do not have it to obtain a copy of the Department's free anti-bullying pack, "Bullying: Don't Suffer in Silence".

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how much Government expenditure was directed towards reducing the rate of bullying in schools in each of the last three years. [93591]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The information is not available in the form requested.

In England, we provided over £600 million to schools and local education authorities between 1999–2000 and 2001–02 to raise behaviour standards. It is not known how much was used for anti-bullying work, as expenditure decisions were taken locally. We have also funded the Department's anti-bullying pack, published in December 2000. In addition, we are providing around £190,000 a year towards the Parentline Plus helpline for parents of pupils who have been bullied, and we are also funding anti-bullying research by ChildLine—£120,000 in total, including a conference—and an external evaluation of the usefulness of our anti-bullying pack to schools that have ordered it. The evaluation will enable us to review, and where appropriate, enhance the effectiveness of our support to schools in reducing bullying. The cost of the evaluation is £20,000.

Local Government Association

Mr. Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills when *(a)* he and *(b)* his predecessor last met representatives of the Local Government Association's Education Executive; and when he next expects to meet them. [89368]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I regularly meet with members of the LGA.

Schools (Counselling)

Mr. Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what guidance is provided for head teachers and governors on counselling in schools. [93120]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The Department provides guidance to schools and LEAs on the subject of counselling in the event of sudden death, serious incidents, or emergencies during educational visits. Our pack for schools, "Bullying: Don't Suffer in Silence", also deals with counselling as an anti-bullying strategy.

Schools (Formula-funded Allocations)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if he will list for each local education authority in England the amount of formula-funded allocations per pupil for *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary education in the provisional settlement for 2003–04. [93976]

Mr. Miliband: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) on 8 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 231–33W.

Technical Craft Skills

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what action he is taking to increase the provision of technical craft skills training for *(a)* plumbing, *(b)* mechanics, *(c)* construction and *(d)* joinery. [92780]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: We are already doing much to improve the quality and availability of provision and the direct partnership between employers and the education and training system. By June we will have set out our national skills strategy and delivery plan setting out how we will further boost numbers of young people acquiring technical and craft skills across the economy and how we can get more adults to acquire vocational skills and qualifications.

I have set out as follows some examples of the important work already in train:

We have begun to make a start through our Success for All Strategy in bringing employers and training providers closer together to ensure that skills priorities and shortages are addressed. From August, colleges will be expected to agree three year development plans with their local Learning and Skills Council (LSC). This will ensure that funding is allocated on the basis of each college meeting headline targets, including targets for employer engagement. The targets will be specific to the role each college will play in responding to local skill needs and for many, these will clearly link to reducing skills shortages and gaps in their area.

The Learning and Skills Council is engaged in substantial adult skills pilots in each of the occupational areas mentioned. These pilots are nationally managed and locally delivered through a consortium of local LSCs, the development-phase Sector Skills Councils, employers and providers. The pilots are proving highly successful in identifying and overcoming barriers to employer-led training programmes, and when mainstreamed will enable large numbers of adults to train or re-train for technician skills which are currently in very high demand. The Council offers substantial support for adult trainees through its heavy subsidies (of between 50 per cent. and 75 per cent. of full cost) towards college and other provider fees. In all the Council provides several hundred million pounds of subsidy towards the training of technicians every year, and provides progression routes to high level skills and HE.

A new Standards Unit has also been established within my Department to focus specifically on improving the quality of teaching and learning. The Unit will concentrate on developing best practice materials in up to four curriculum areas in the spring and summer terms of 2002–03. Construction, which includes plumbing and joinery, has been identified as one of these priority areas.

We are currently setting up, through the new Sector Skills Development Agency, a network of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) that will bring together employers, trade unions and professional bodies to work with government to meet the skills needs of their sector. SSCs covering plumbing, mechanics and construction (which includes joinery) sectors are in development phase.

We are wholly committed to Modern Apprenticeships (MA) as a quality work-based learning route for young people, increasing the supply of skills at craft, supervisory and technician level across industry. We have adopted a challenging target for MA entrants by 2004—28 per cent. of young people to begin an MA by the age of 22—and are working with the LSC to ensure all MAs meet the highest standards and to encourage take-up among employers and young people. A new Modern Apprenticeship Task Force will take a key role in promoting MA to employers and thereby contributing to increased take-up. Provisional figures for 2002–03 show that the number of young people engaged in Foundation Modern Apprenticeships in construction (which includes joinery) and plumbing has increased dramatically.

Our national skills strategy and delivery plan will set out how Government Departments, the Learning and Skills Council, Sector Skills Councils, Regional Development Agencies and other agencies will work even further together to deliver the economy's skill needs.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Justice Administration (Kent)

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department(1) if she will make a statement on the proposals to create three benches of nearly 300 magistrates in Kent; [93456]

(2) what consultations took place prior to the proposals to reorganise the administration of justice in Kent; and if she will make a statement; [93455]

(3) what assessment she has made of *(a)* travel distances and *(b)* costs for court users of the proposals to reorganise the administration of justice in Kent. [93457]

Yvette Cooper: The information is as follows.

1. By statute, the organisation of magistrates courts is a matter for the local magistrates courts committee, in this case, the Kent magistrates courts committee

2. The Kent magistrates courts committee issued consultation documents on their proposals to reorganise the administration of justice, in February 2001, April 2002, and December 2002. If any proposals are pursued, a further period of consultation will take place.

3. It is for the Kent magistrates courts committee to assess the travelling distances and costs for court users of their proposals. The Lord Chancellor is not required to make any such assessment on the proposals at this stage, but will take into account any objections to these proposals before making a decision on whether to approve the draft order for reorganisation.

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment she has made of the financial implications of the recent proposals to reorganise the administration of justice in Kent. [93458]

Yvette Cooper: By statute, the organisation of magistrates courts is a matter for the local magistrates courts committee. The Lord Chancellor is not required to make any such assessment. Kent magistrates courts committee has addressed the financial implications of their proposals in their consultation document entitled "2004 and Beyond" which was published to stakeholders in February 2001. The purpose of the reorganisation is to achieve more efficient utilisation of courtrooms in Kent.

PRIME MINISTER

Asylum Induction Centre

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Prime Minister pursuant to his answer of 22 January 2003 to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), *Official Report*, column 294, what the correct consultation procedures are for the establishment of an asylum induction centre; and where they are published. [94508]

The Prime Minister: Procurement exercises undertaken by NASS are carried out in accordance with standard procurement procedures, which should include consultation with local authorities. However, we are undertaking a full, independent review of NASS operations and business procedures, including procurement processes, in order to ensure that full consultation with local communities takes place consistent with the need to preserve commercial confidences.

Gun Crime

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Prime Minister pursuant to his answer of 22 January 2003 to the hon. Member for Fareham (Mr. Hoban), *Official Report*, column 299, if he will make a statement on the reasons for the increase in gun crime since 1997; and in which areas there is a culture of gun crime. [94510]

The Prime Minister: Armed crime accounts for a very small proportion of overall crime offences. However, the Government are determined to tackle the problem of gun crime. We have therefore announced our intention to bring forward a mandatory minimum sentence of five years for illegal possession of a firearm. New measures to tighten up the law on airguns and replica firearms will be included in the Anti-Social Behaviour Bill. Individual police forces have also introduced targeted initiatives for tackling gun crime, such as operations Trident in London and Ventara in Birmingham.

Port Controls

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Prime Minister pursuant to his answer of 22 January 2003 to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), *Official Report*, column 295, what the evidential basis is for his statement that the Government has put juxtaposed controls across all ports; and what kind of controls are in place for ports on the Isle of Wight. [94507]

The Prime Minister: This Government introduced three formal juxtaposed frontier controls in France, to cover Eurostar services at Paris Gare du Nord, Lille Europe and Calais Frethun stations, in June 2001. These controls have had a dramatic impact on the number of inadequately documented arrivals at Waterloo and Ashford International stations. There had previously been a juxtaposed immigration control at the Eurotunnel site at Coquelles.

The establishment of juxtaposed controls in Calais and Dover is a priority and was agreed in principle by the Home Secretary and his French counterpart in July 2002. UK Immigration Officers have been working with their French counterparts in an advisory capacity at Calais since August 2002. We will sign a treaty soon to set the legal framework to provide for full immigration controls at Calais and subsequently at other channel ports. We will deploy immigration service resources on a targeted and flexible, intelligence led basis to ports other than Calais to counteract any displacement that may occur.

UK Immigration Officers operate in a similar capacity in Brussels. We are negotiating with the Belgian Government to introduce a formal juxtaposed immigration control at Gare du Midi in Brussels for Eurostar services to the UK.

The Immigration Office in Portsmouth deal with all arrivals at the Isle of Wight that require the attention of the Immigration Service.

Publicity and Advertising

Mr. Laws: To ask the Prime Minister how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body sponsored by his Department spent on (i) publicity and (ii) advertising in each year from 1995–96 to 2000–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92223]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office today.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Laws: To ask the Prime Minister what the rate of staff *(a)* absenteeism and *(b)* sickness was in his Office in each year from 1990–91 to 2002–03; what the target set is for his Department; and if he will make a statement. [93486]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office today.

Terrorist Suspects

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to [illegible]s answer of 22 January 2003 to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), *Official Report*, column 294, what the evidential basis is for his statement that members of the official opposition had said that the measures to detain without trial people suspected of terrorism were illegal and contrary to civil liberties. [94511]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the statements made by the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) on 19 November, 2001, *Official Report*.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Antisocial Behaviour Orders

Mrs Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the guidelines with regard to the protocols for attaching antisocial behaviour orders to criminal proceedings will be made available. [92173]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* The Crown Prosecution Service is currently preparing guidelines, to be published next month, on the role of prosecutors in prompting orders on conviction. The Home Office and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) are working with them on this.

Arrests

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance he gives to the police about the publication of the names of persons arrested but not charged with criminal offences. [93033]

Mr. Denham: The Home Office does not issue guidance to the police about the publication of the names of persons arrested but not charged with criminal offences. The Media Advisory Group of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) of England, Wales and Northern Ireland issued guidance in December 2000 on individuals under police investigation which is available on the ACPO website.

The guidance recommends that generally people under investigation should not be named but can with certain exceptions be identified once they have been charged. The guidance clearly advises that people who are under arrest should not be named, although general details may be given provided they do not identify the suspect.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether persons who fought against British and US troops in Afghanistan have *(a)* applied for and *(b)* been granted asylum; and if he will make a statement. [92877]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* Between 1 January and 30 September 2002 6,910 initial decisions were made on applications made by Afghan nationals. Of these 80 were grants of asylum.

All applications for asylum are considered on their merits in accordance with our obligations under the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The UK is under no obligation whatsoever to give asylum to those who pose a threat to our security and national interest. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary requested a full examination of grants of asylum to Afghans as a result of recent press speculation. This process is on-going, but absolutely no evidence has so far been uncovered that anybody with a credible claim to have supported and fought for the Taliban has been granted asylum. All claims of links to the Taliban are investigated and security checks are made on those that give cause for concern.

Mr. Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he has introduced in order to improve the effectiveness of vetting asylum seekers for terrorist links. [92840]

Beverley Hughes: All asylum seekers are screened, in a three-tier process:

> The details of all asylum seekers are checked against the Warnings Index system.
>
> Their fingerprints are taken and checked against existing Home Office record and EURODAC and they are photographed. New asylum seekers are being issued with an Application Registration Card and we have established reporting centres to improve the contact management arrangements.
>
> The last step, the interview, has different levels of screening which allow for those with acceptable evidence of identity and nationality to be fed into the system while allowing for more in-depth screening interviews for those with little or no credible evidence. Should there be any indication given during any of the process that someone might be of security interest then the information is quickly passed onto the appropriate agencies.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in what counties a search is being conducted by his Department or its agencies for *(a)* accommodation centres and *(b)* induction centres for asylum seekers; how many premises have been identified as suitable for such purposes; how many offers have been made; how many contracts have been exchanged; how many contracts have been completed of the purchase of such properties; and if he will list the last. [93091]

Beverley Hughes: We have submitted planning notifications for accommodation centres at DSDC (Defence Storage Distribution Centre) Bicester and Royal Air Force (RAF) Newton. A shortlist of three further sites remains under consideration. They are: Sully Hospital, Cardiff; AirWest, Edinburgh; Hemswell Cliff, Lincolnshire. Site searching continues, but details of sites will not be put into the public domain unless or until the site is considered to be a serious prospect for the siting of an accommodation centre.

To date the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) has entered into contracts for the use of hotel beds to support induction processes in Dover and Sittingbourne. NASS is currently considering options for other such accommodation throughout the UK. Details of these sites cannot be released because that information is commercially sensitive.

Mr. Hoban: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what mechanism is in place to track the place of residence in the UK of those who have sought asylum. [93204]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 23 January 2003]:* As part of the initial screening process, asylum-seekers are required to provide proof of residence at a particular address. This address is recorded in their Home Office file and in the databases maintained by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND). Applicants and their representatives are told that they must notify the Home Office of any subsequent change of address, at which point the records are amended. For those subject to a reporting regime, verification of the place of residence is carried out during the reporting event.

Andrew Selous: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether the Home Office will be placing asylum seekers in Quadrant House in Dunstable, Bedforshire. [93663]

Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* There are no current plans to use Quadrant House, Dunstable, Bedfordshire as accommodation for asylum seekers. This should not be taken to mean that the Home Office would not ever consider the property if it was put forward. The property has not been offered to us.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Afghan nationals claiming asylum in Britain have stated that they fought with the Taliban; and how many of these asylum claims have been accepted. [92983]

Beverley Hughes: (Between 1 January and 30 September 2002 6,910 initial decisions were made on applications made by Afghan nationals. Of these 80 were grants of asylum).

All applications for asylum are considered on their merits in accordance with our obligations under the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The UK is under no obligation whatsoever to give asylum to those who pose a threat to our security and national interest. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary requested a full examination of grants of asylum to Afghans as a result of recent press speculation. This process is on-going, but absolutely no evidence has so far been uncovered that anybody with a credible claim to have supported and fought for the Taliban has been granted asylum. All claims of links to the Taliban are investigated and security checks are made on those that give cause for concern.

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Court of Appeal last set sentencing guidelines for benefit fraud; and if he will make a statement. [94009]

Hilary Benn: The Court of Appeal last issued sentencing guidelines for benefit fraud on 24 March 1987 in the case of Livingstone Stewart.

Bioterrorism

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consideration has been made for dealing with domestic pets in drawing up strategies to deal with bio-terrorist attacks. [92524]

Mr. Blunkett: In drawing up contingency plans, consideration has been given to the handling of pets following the deliberate release of biological agents, including infectious diseases. The handling of pets would depend very much on the particular circumstances of the incident. Whatever action is necessary, the authorities do their best to take account of the emotional attachment which all pet owners feel towards their animals.

Crime and Disorder Act

Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 will apply to *(a)* the Planning Bill, *(b)* the Licensing Bill and *(c)* the Local Government Bill; and if he will make a statement. [93880]

Mr. Denham: Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 applies without prejudice to any other obligation imposed on an authority to which it applies. Any new functions proposed under the *(a)* the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill *(b)* theLicensing Bill and *(c)* the Local Government Bill maintains the duty under section 17 for the relevant authority to have due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area.

Cumbria Crime Squad

David Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police hours were lost as a result of the inquiry into the Cumbria force crime squad. [94027]

Mr. Denham: I am informed by Cumbria Constabulary that one police officer was suspended for a period of seven months from October 2000 to May 2001. This equates to approximately 1,104 working hours. Apart from this all officers under investigation have been assigned non-operational duties within the constabulary.

Domestic Violence (Merseyside)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases of domestic assault have been reported to Merseyside police authority in each year since 1996; how many and what percentage of such cases were withdrawn by *(a)* the police complainant and *(b)* the victim complainant before the case was referred to the CPS; how many cases were pursued by the CPS after the victim complainant had withdrawn the complaint; and how many cases were accepted by the CPS where the only complainant was the police complainant. [92174]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* Domestic violence is not identified separately in recorded crime figures: crimes involving domestic violence are recorded in a range of offences, along with offences committed in other circumstances.

The British Crime Survey (BCS) produced data by region for 2001–02. For that year it estimated that there were 97 incidents of domestic violence per 10,000 adults in the north west region, compared with 149 incidents per 10,000 adults in England and Wales as a whole; and that 35 per cent. of domestic violence incidents were reported to the police. The BCS does not provide information on domestic violence for individual police force areas.

The 1996 BCS included a self-completion component on domestic violence to encourage disclosure. Results were published in Home Office Research Study No. 191, copies of which were deposited in the Library.

Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) case records begin when the police refer a file to the CPS, either for pre-charge advice or for prosecution. CPS records do not, therefore, show how many cases of domestic assault have been reported to the police, or how many were disposed of before referral to the prosecution.

The CPS does hold records of case outcomes, but at present these are held in aggregate form, and cannot be provided for particular offences or groups of offences.

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many incidents of domestic violence were reported and how many lives domestic violence claimed in *(a)* the Jarrow constituency, *(b)* South Tyneside, *(c)* the north-east and *(d)* the UK in each year since 1997. [86455]

Mr. Denham: Recorded crime figures are generally collected by legal definitions. Recorded crimes involving domestic violence will be recorded in a range of offences, along with offences which have been committed in other circumstances. Numbers of offences involving domestic violence are therefore not available from recorded crime data.

The British Crime Survey (BCS) produced data by region for 2001–02, on the number of crimes of domestic violence recorded by the survey. However, it does not provide information on domestic violence at a local level nor for individual police force areas.

The BCS estimates that there were 92 crimes of domestic violence per 10,000 adults in the north-east region for interviews conducted in the 2001–02 financial year. This compares with 149 incidents per 10,000 adults in England and Wales as a whole.

The BCS can also provide trend information on the number of incidents of domestic violence for England and Wales.

Number of BCS incidents of domestic violence, 1997 to 2001–02, BCS interviews, England and Wales (thousands)

	Domestic Violence
1997	826
1999	787
2000	514
2001–02	635

The BCS figures are estimates only. They are derived from a sample and so are subject to sampling error. Also, the context of the face-to-face BCS interview means the estimates are certain to be underestimates of the true extent because some respondents may be unwilling to reveal experience of domestic violence to interviewers. Results from the 1996 BCS self-completion module on domestic violence were published in Home Office Research Study No. 191, deposited in the Library. This more confidential approach to measurement revealed that the proportion of women that were victims in the last year of domestic assault was over three times higher than in the main BCS.

Details of homicides by constituency and for the United Kingdom are not held centrally. The available information relates to currently recorded offences of homicide (murder, manslaughter and infanticide) where the relationship of the victim to the suspect includes current or former spouse, cohabitant or lover. Information for England and Wales is as follows.

Number of homicides by current or former spouse, cohabitant or lover, England and Wales

Number

Number of homicides by current or former spouse, cohabitant or lover, England and Wales

	Number
1997–98	131
1998–99	104
1999–2000	112
2000–01	127
2001–02	148

Note:

As at 8 October 2002, figures are subject to revision as cases are dealt with by the police and by the courts, or as further information becomes available.

Drink-driving

Mark Tami: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many first time convictions for drink-driving resulted in custodial sentences in the last three years, broken down by police authority. [91568]

Hilary Benn: Information on the number of first time convictions for drink-driving resulting in custodial sentences is not available.

The table provides information on the numbers of offenders that were sentenced for the first conviction of drink-driving in England and Wales from data samples in 1998, 1999 and 2000 and also the number who were given custodial or other sentences. Due to the small numbers in the samples sentenced to custody it is not possible to give a break down by Police Force Area.

Sentence	*Number of offenders*	*Percentage*
Number of first time drink-drivers sentenced in a four week sentencing sample for 1998		
Immediate custody	307	2.7
Community penalty	1,539	13.5
Fine	9,445	83.0
Other sentence	82	0.7
Total	11,373	100.0
Number of first time drink-drivers sentenced in a four week sentencing sample for 1999		
Immediate custody	137	2.5
Community penalty	721	13.3
Fine	4,518	83.3
Other sentence	50	0.9
Total	5,426	100.0
Number of first time drink-drivers sentenced from April to June 2000		
Immediate custody	140	2.4
Community penalty	830	14.3
Fine	4,803	82.9
Other sentence	24	0.4
Total	5,797	100.0

Drug Abuse

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what initiatives are under way in Hull and the East Riding to tackle drug abuse. [93823]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: The area in question is served by two Drug Action Teams (DATs)—East Riding of Yorkshire and Kingston-upon-Hull. They work very closely and meet as a combined forum. The DATs are served by a comprehensive infrastructure including combined Joint Commissioning Groups, groups working across all sections of the National Drugs Strategy, Drug Reference Groups and 15 locality based Drug Forums. They are supported by senior and assistant DAT Coordinator posts.

Last year (2001–02) the DATs oversaw the allocation of a total budget approaching £15 million pounds, of which nearly 50 per cent. was allocated to treatment services, 25 per cent. on addressing the availability of drugs, 15 per cent. on community involvement and 12 per cent. on young people's initiatives.

The combined DATs have recently produced and published an Annual Report for 2001–02 and a Combined Strategic Plan for 2002–03, copies of which will be placed in the Library. These documents paint a comprehensive picture of initiatives already in place and those planned for the future. In particular, there has been an increase in investment in treatment services.

As part of the Prison Service Drug Strategy, Her Majesty's Prison Hull is actively working towards reducing the supply of, and demand for, illegal drugs among prisoners. Hull offers drug-misusing prisoners a range of drug interventions—including detoxification and counselling, assessment, referral, advice and through care (CARAT) services. The through care elements of the latter are aimed at establishing links to treatment services in the community to ensure that the progress made during custody is consolidated post-release. Prisoners are encouraged to remain drug-free, and to demonstrate this commitment, they can sign Voluntary Drug Testing compacts.

To help deter drug smuggling, the prison can enforce visits bans and closed visits and has access to a drug dog.

Emergency Contingency Planning

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the degree of preparedness of the Government for a chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear incident. [93525]

Mr. Blunkett *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* The recent discovery of traces of ricin, followed by arrests in the United Kingdom and abroad, show there is a continuing interest in using chemical, biological or radiological agents as weapons of terror. While there is no credible, specific threat to targets in the United Kingdom, it is vital that the Government continue to protect the public from any possible threat from terrorism. That is why the Government are making substantial investment to ensure that the emergency services have the equipment and trained officers to enable them to respond to the release of CBRN material.

This is on-going work. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Crime Reduction and Community Safety was appointed Minister for CBRN co-ordination in 2001 supported by a Cabinet sub-committee and a dedicated team of officials at the Home Office. We are continually learning and developing the best way to protect the UK from terrorism and to manage the consequences of terrorism, in whatever form it comes. However the Government do not give detailed information on CBRN capabilities, as this information could be useful to terrorists.

Entitlement Card Consultation

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures have been taken to ensure that responses to the consultation that are against the entitlement card are accurately recorded; and if he will make a statement. [93491]

Beverley Hughes: Since the Government announced in February 2002 that it would be publishing a consultation paper, all correspondence received by e-mail and post has been filed according to the views expressed by the correspondent. Responses received from individuals and organisations have been recorded on a database.

I am aware that in a small number of cases (estimated to be less than 1 per cent. of the total volume of correspondence), the views of the correspondent were incorrectly recorded. These errors were pointed out by the correspondents when they received a reply. They received an apology and the database has been amended accordingly.

Eurobank

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what costs have been incurred by the *(a)* Home Office budget and *(b)* security services budget arising from the collapse of the Eurobank case; and if he will make a statement. [94409]

Mr. Blunkett: None. It is the longstanding policy of successive Governments neither to confirm nor to deny reports or allegations concerning the activities of the intelligence and security agencies.

Gwent Police

Mr. David: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received from Gwent Police concerning its funding allocations for 2003–04. [93249]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* I have received one representation made jointly by the Chief Constable of Gwent and the Chairman of Gwent Police Authority. I visited Gwent on 14 January 2003. During the visit the Chief Constable outlined his concerns to me. These concerns are being considered.

Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what the cost is of placing an offender on the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme; [93359]

(2) whether the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme is being evaluated; [93361]

(3) what funding is available to the Youth Justice Board for the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme; and what funding will be available in *(a)* 2003–04, *(b)* 2004–05 and *(c)* 2005–06; [93358]

(4) what his estimate is of the number of young offenders who are eligible for the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme. [93360]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* The Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme (ISSP) was launched in 2001 to provide the courts with a tough community based programme designed to tackle persistent young offenders. It was extended last year and now provides for approximately 3,500 young offenders a year at an annual cost of £21.5million.

I am pleased to announce that provision has now been made to complete full national coverage by January 2004, providing in total for 4,200 young people annually. The total cost of the programme over the next three years will be £23 million, £27 million, and £27million respectively.

The average cost for each six month placement including bail tagging, is £8,500. The total number of young offenders who could be eligible is difficult to calculate because of the combination of criteria which must be satisfied.

The programme is being fully evaluated by Oxford University: the final report with reconvictions is due in March 2004.

Internet Child Pornography

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he is taking to relieve the backlog of cases concerning internet child pornography. [93598]

Hilary Benn: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave on 10 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 237W.

I have subsequently met with DAC Carole Hewlett of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) to discuss these on-going investigations, and will continue to monitor progress closely.

Iraq

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to intern Iraqi citizens in the UK, including asylum seekers, in the event of armed conflict with Saddam Hussein's regime; and if he will make a statement. [91692]

Mr. Blunkett: As no decision has been taken on whether to take military action in Iraq, this is a hypothetical situation. I have no plans at this stage but plans for dealing with the full range of potential consequences of armed conflict overseas are kept constantly under review.

Landlords (Prosecutions)

Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many landlords were prosecuted by their tenants for breach of contract in *(a)* 2002, *(b)* 2001 and *(c)* 2000. [90998]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not collected centrally by the Home Department.

Lincolnshire Police Force

Mr. Mark Simmonds: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many convicted criminals in the Lincolnshire police authority area were re-offenders in each year from 1997 to 2002. [94224]

Hilary Benn: The information requested is not available.

Missing Persons

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what financial assistance his Department has given to the National Missing Persons Helpline in each year since 1997. [93113]

Mr. Denham: The National Missing Persons Helpline (NMPH) is a charitable organisation and does not receive any direct funding from the Home Office.

However, a joint bid by the police and the NMPH to the Invest to Save Budget, which has been led by the Home Office, has been successful. Funding of £810,000 has been secured for a missing persons project. The aim of the project is the establishment of joint working arrangements between the UK Police Service and the NMPH, together with improved recording and information sharing.

Murders

Stephen Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many murders were committed between 1 April 1996 and 31 March 1999. [93565]

Mr. Denham: Information held centrally on the Homicide Index is in the form of homicides (murder, manslaughter and infanticide) recorded by the police in England and Wales. The number of homicides currently recorded by the police for the period 1 April 1996 to 31 March 1999 is 1,834.

The latest available homicide statistics were published in Home Office Statistical Bulletin No. 01/03, "Crime in England and Wales 2001–02: Supplementary Volume".

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been convicted of committing murders in each of the last 10 years. [94064]

Hilary Benn: The information requested is contained in the table.

Persons convicted of murder, England and Wales, 1992 to 2001

Year	*Number*
1992	182
1993	211
1994	192
1995	214
1996	257
1997	275
1998	256
1999	252
2000	261
2001	285

Figures for 2002 are not yet available.

Official Travel

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the total expenditure of *(a)* his Department and *(b)* its agencies was on official travelling in 2001–02. [84784]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 3 December 2003]:* Total Home Office expenditure on official travelling in 2001–02 was £12,959,000. This includes a small element of subsistence allowance, which cannot be separately identified without disproportionate cost.

The expenditure on travel by the Home Office agencies, in 2001–02 was as follows:

Agency	*Cost (£)*
Forensic Science Service	1,924,000
Her Majesty's Prison Service	8,769,000
United Kingdom Passport Service	2,583,000

The Forensic Science Service and the United Kingdom Passport Service figures also include subsistence costs that could not be separately identified without disproportionate cost.

Overstayers

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications under the Regulation of Overstayers scheme have been *(a)* received and *(b)* approved in each year since its inception; and for migrants from which countries. [93088]

Beverley Hughes: *(a)* 15,315 applications were received by the closing date (revised figure following a full review).

(b) 255 (April 2001); 1,079 (April 2002) and 2,173 (as at September 2002—latest figures available).

Information about countries of origin is not available.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps are taken to verify *(a)* the identity and *(b)* criminal record of applicants under the Regulation of Overstayers scheme. [93089]

Beverley Hughes: Documentary evidence of identity is required on all applications under this scheme. Those applicants who previously applied for asylum will have been through a rigorous screening process. Specially trained caseworkers assess all cases carefully to identify any indication of criminal activity. All such cases are referred to a senior caseworker. Cases where an extant Deportation Order may be evoked or other specifically identified categories will always involve a criminal record check and require clearance by a Senior Officer.

Additionally, applicants with potential security interest are security checked before being granted leave.

Police Authorities

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to change the membership and responsibilities of police authorities. [92689]

Mr. Denham: There are no plans to change the membership or responsibilities of police authorities.

Police Call-centres

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which police forces in the United Kingdom rely on call-centres for handling telephone calls from the public; and if he will make a statement. [92686]

Mr. Denham: Detailed information is not available on this subject as differing systems are in place throughout the UK, using call-centres, switchboards and direct lines.

The recent National Policing Plan sets out the Government's commitment to improving the quality and efficiency of contact between the police and the public and call handling is an important aspect of this. We are working closely with the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and the Association of Police Authorities (APA) to improve standards.

Police Command Units

John Mann: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the 30 basic command units are; and which 30 police stations dealt with the highest levels of *(a)* acquisitive crime and *(b)* crime by drug addicts in the last year for which figures are available. [91132]

Mr. Denham: I refer my hon. Friend to the written statement my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department gave the House on 21 January 2003 about the additional funding being allocated to the 30 basic command units with the highest levels of acquisitive crime. Supporting information on the selection criteria has been placed in the Library.

National recorded crime statistics can be analysed to allow a ranking order at regional (basic command unit) level but no lower.

Police Funding

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many police officers in North Yorkshire he estimates are paid out of police grants, with particular reference to rural funding for police officers; [92823]

(2) what plans he has to increase the amount of rural funding for police officers for the years *(a)* 2003–04, *(b)* 2004–05 and *(c)* 2005–06; [92822]

(3) how many police officers in North Yorkshire are paid from police grants paid by Government; and what specific provision was made in the police pay formula for additional funds to be made available to North Yorkshire to pay the increase. [illegible]821]

Mr. Denham: General gra[illegible]s not paid on th[illegible]asis of supporting a particular number of police officers, but on an overall assessment of relative authority needs and resources.

Specific grant from the Crime Fighting Fund is supporting the recruitment of officers over and above forces previous plans for the three years to March 2003.

Under the Crime Fighting Fund (CFF) recruitment initiative North Yorkshire Police have been allocated an additional 68 recruits.

In 2000–01, the first year of the scheme, the force appointed 64 new recruits, of whom four were funded by the CFF. In 2001–02 the force appointed 100 new recruits, including 37 CFF funded recruits. North Yorkshire will be able to take on 27 CFF funded recruits this financial year.

For 2003–04 the Rural Policing Fund will allocate £30 million in additional funding between the 31 forces that have the most widespread population. North Yorkshire will receive £2,018,029 through the Rural Policing Fund in 2003–04.

It is for the Chief Officer to decide how best to spend this additional money to enhance policing in rural areas.

No decisions about the Rural Policing Fund have been taken for 2004–05 and 2005–06.

Police Helicopter Sorties

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police helicopter sorties were made in each of the last five years, broken down by police force; and what the annual cost was to each police force. [93306]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not held centrally and can be obtained only at disproportionate cost. 39 police forces in England and Wales currently operate an Air Support Unit and the Home Office allocates grant of £4 million a year between forces as a contribution towards the capital cost of this facility. The remaining capital and operating costs are met by the police forces themselves.

Police Numbers

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will make a statement on the numbers of police officers in North Yorkshire in *(a)* 2001–02, *(b)* 2002–03 and *(c)* 2003–04; [92824]

(2) if he will make a statement on policing in North Yorkshire, with particular reference to how many officers he forecasts in the authority for years *(a)* 2004, *(b)* 2005 and *(c)* 2006. [93011]

Mr. Denham: North Yorkshire Police had 1,417 officers on 31 March 2002. This was 112 more than March 2001 and was a record number of officers. Information on strength for 31 March 2003 will not be published until the summer.

Under the Crime Fighting Fund (CFF) recruitment initiative North Yorkshire Police have been allocated an additional 68 recruits over and above the force's previous recruitment plans for the three years to March 2003. Funding for these officers will continue in 2003–04. The CFF will continue in 2003–04 and we will fund 75 per cent. of the cost of new recruits through CFF rather than 100 per cent. as in the past three years. North Yorkshire Police Authority has been allocated £20,000 which on the basis of 75 per cent. funding should be sufficient for the force to recruit a further four police officers through this fund.

Apart from ring-fenced provision for a particular purpose, such as the Crime Fighting Fund, decisions about the police budget and the allocation of resources, including numbers of officers, are matters for the North Yorkshire Police Authority and the Chief Constable (Ms Della Cannings). It is therefore not possible to provide estimates of North Yorkshires police strength in future years.

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers *(a)* are in service and *(b)* were in service in (i) 1997 and (ii) 2001 in Devon. [93379]

Mr. Denham: Devon is part of the Devon & Cornwall Constabulary and information is not collected on a regular basis about the number of officers deployed to Basic Command Units within force areas. I would however refer the hon. Member to my reply of 2 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 589W to the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) setting out police strength for each Basic Command Unit for each force in England and Wales as at 31 March 2002.

The deployment of resources between the four territorial divisions and other specialist operational and support units of the Devon & Cornwall Constabulary is an operational matter for the Chief Constable (Mrs. Maria Wallis QPM).

Police Officer Numbers

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance his Department issues to police forces on the supply of information on officer numbers, with particular reference to the inclusion of individuals *(a)* recruited but not yet receiving pay and *(b)* undergoing basic training. [93307]

Mr. Denham: Published Home Office statistics on police officer numbers include probationer officers who have joined the service and are being paid. The statistics do not include individuals who are recruited but not yet receiving pay. The figures include officers undergoing initial basic training, which is included within the two year probationary period.

Police Discipline

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers in each police force area were disciplined for unauthorised disclosure of information to the media in the last year for which figures are available. [94493]

Mr. Denham: This information is not held centrally and it could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Police Recruitment

Mr. David: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he next expects to review the recruitment procedure for the police; and if he will make it his policy to re-examine the rule within the recruitment procedure relating to epilepsy. [93264]

Mr. Denham: The Government are introducing national standards for police recruitment as part of the Police Reform Programme. We are reviewing the fitness, eyesight and medical standards and eligibility criteria, and introducing a national application form and selection process. The new procedures will be phased in during 2003–04.

The guidelines on medical standards for recruitment (which include epilepsy) are the subject of a study by QinetiQ which will report in the spring.

Police

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of police officers recruited in each year since 1990 were graduates. [93658]

Mr. Denham: Information has been collected by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary only from 1995. The numbers of graduates recruited against numbers of total police appointments is as follows.

Year	*Graduate recruits*	*Total police appointments*
1995–96	794	4,991
1996–97	944	6,410
1997–98	833	6,556
1998–99	673	5,560
1999–2000	767	4,683
2000–01	797	8,612
2001–02	1,306	11,647

Preston Prison

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will construct a hospital wing for Wymott and Garth, Preston prison. [93716]

Hilary Benn: We have no plans to construct hospital wings at either establishment.

Prison Estates

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) where maintenance of the streets, street-lighting, drainage and sewerage systems on the Parkhurst, Albany and Camp Hill prison estates remain the responsibility of the Prison Service of his Department, *(a)* what programmes of planned maintenance are in place, *(b)* how financial responsibility for maintenance is divided between his Department and householders and *(c)* which of his or the Prison Service's managers holds day-to-day responsibility for the delivery of essential maintenance; [91271]

(2) if he will list the residential streets on the Parkhurst, Albany and Camp Hill prison estates, showing for each *(a)* how many housing units have been sold and how many remain in the ownership of the Prison Service or his Department and *(b)* whether, where houses have been sold, (i) ownership and (ii) maintenance of the streets, street-lighting, drainage and sewerage systems remain the responsibility of the Prison Service or his Department. [91270]

Hilary Benn: The Prison Service owns six houses within its former quarters estates adjacent to the prisons at Parkhurst, Camphill and Albany. There is a complex pattern of ownership of boundaries within these estates with the Prison Service also retaining ownership some roads and areas of open space, some with outline planning permission for further residential redevelopment. Responsibility for maintaining all highways, open space areas and services lies with current land owners, except where adopted by utility providers. Where land and premises have been sold by the Prison Service maintenance responsibilities are specified within the sale conveyances. There is no legal obligation on the Prison Service to maintain privately owned highways and services and there is no planned maintenance programme in place. Maintenance of Prison Service owned land and services is organised by the prisons' works departments.

The Prison Service retains the right under the terms of sale conveyances granted to directly recharge the cost of highway and services maintenance it does complete to all private owners, on these estates, benefiting from the works. The Prison Service contributes to such expenditure according to the benefit it derives, if any, from such works. Due to Prison Service funding priorities and strong opposition from many residents to the possibility of recharges being made, only limited maintenance works have been completed in recent years.

The Prison Service has been working closely with the Isle of Wight council and the residents associations to try to reach agreement on proposals for upgrading the highways and services on these estates, to a standard where they can be formally adopted and maintained by the Isle of Wight council and utility providers.

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the progress of his planning applications for the sites of the *(a)* Parkhurst, *(b)* Albany and *(c)* Camp Hill prison estates, stating for each what obstacles remain to the granting of planning permission. [91272]

Hilary Benn: The Prison Service has obtained outline planning consents for residential development of six sites which have or may become surplus to operational requirements. Ecological surveys are being completed in respect of two other sites before further consideration of outstanding planning applications.

Prison Places

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to increase the number of available prison places; and if he will make a statement. [94063]

Hilary Benn: In England and Wales, £60 million has already been made available to provide 740 additional places by March 2004. This is in addition to funding from the 2002 Budget that will provide 2,320 additional places by March of this year, together with 400 places at Birmingham prison, which are funded through the 2000 spending review and are scheduled to open in April 2004.

We have also recently approved Prison Service plans to build two new prisons at Ashford (near Heathrow) and Peterborough in Cambridgeshire. These two new prisons will together provide around 1, 300 places by 2004–05. In addition, a further £140 million has been agreed for the Prison Service, which will be used to build a further 800 places over the financial years 2004–05 and 2005–06.

Information on establishments in Scotland and Northern Ireland is a matter for the Scottish Executive and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland respectively.

Life Imprisonment

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been sentenced to life imprisonment under section 109 of the Powers of the Criminal Courts (Sentencing) Act 2000 in each month during which the Act has been in force. [93965]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* The available information is contained in the table.

Persons sentenced to a mandatory life sentence for a second serious offence under section 109 of the powers of the criminal court (sentencing) Act 2000, England and Wales, December 1999 to December 2001

December 1999 (5)
January 2000 (8)
February 2000 (6)
March 2000 (3)
April 2000 (4)
May 2000 (4)
July 2000 (5)
August 2000 (2)
September (5)
October 2000 (3)
November 2000 (5)
December 2000 (1)
January 2001 (2)
March 2001 (6)
April 2001 (2)
May 2001 (6)
June 2001 (7)
July 2001 (3)
August 2001 (2)
September 2001 (—)
October 2001 (9)
December 2001 (3)
Total 113

Figures prior to December 1999 were not separately notified to the Home Office Court Proceedings Database. Figures for 2002 will be published in the Aututmn.

Racism Register

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if there is a register kept by *(a)* the Home Office and *(b)* the CRE of persons suspected of racism. [93583]

Beverley Hughes: Neither the Home Office nor the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) keep such a register.

Reconviction Rates

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of prisoners released in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999 were reconvicted within two years; and what his assessment is of reconviction rates for prisoners released in (i) 2000, (ii) 2001 and (ii) 2002. [92160]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* The two-year 'un-adjusted' reconviction rate for prisoners discharged from custody in 1997 was 58 per cent. The provisional figure for 1998 was also 58 per cent. These rates are published in "Prison Statistics—England and Wales 2000".

Reconviction rates for offenders discharged from custody in the first quarter of 1999 have also been calculated according to the requirements of the Governments Public Service Agreement (PSA) 10 target. These are adjusted to take out convictions for offences committed prior to discharge, giving a reconviction rate of 55.3 per cent. The equivalent figures for the first quarter of 1997 and 1998 are 56.8 per cent. and 55.7 per cent. respectively.

Reconviction rates for more recent periods are not yet available.

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of offenders completing community sentences in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999 were reconvicted within two years; and what his assessment is of reconviction rates for offenders completing programmes in (i) 2000, (ii) 2001 and (iii) 2002. [92161]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* Reconviction rates for offenders commencing community penalties in the first quarter of 1997 have been calculated according to the requirements of the Government's Public Service Agreement (PSA) 10 target. These are adjusted to take out convictions for offences committed prior to commencement of the penalty and convictions for breach of the penalty where no further offence had been committed.

This gives a reconviction rate for the first quarter of 1997 of 45.7 per cent. The equivalent figure for the first quarters of 1998 and 1999 are 46.0 per cent. and 44.3 per cent. respectively.

Two-year reconviction rates are not available for offenders completing programmes in 2000, 2001 or 2002.

Schools (Crime)

Mr. Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent study he has made into the level of crime in proximity to schools. [90782]

Mr. Denham: Two recently published studies commissioned by the Home Office and Youth Justice Board provide an indication of the level of personal robbery and street crime in the vicinity of schools.

Recently published Home Office research ("The Nature of Personal Robbery", Home office Research Study 254, 2003) which looked at the nature of personal robbery, found that only 1 per cent. of personal robberies actually occurred on or around school or college premises, though this may be an underestimate. However, the study also found that the risk period for school age victims was late afternoon (2 p.m. to 6 p.m.) when more than half (54 per cent.) were targeted and when many were making their way home from school, or similarly socialising with friends.

Similarly, recently published research commissioned by the Youth Justice Board ("Young People and Street Crime: Research into young people's involvement in street crime"), which focuses on street crime in London boroughs in the main, found that offending peaks dramatically after school finishes on weekdays, often in the vicinity of schools or on the main routes taken home by pupils. The research suggested that even if the perpetrators had not attended school during the day, they may well gravitate back there if they have nothing else to do.

As part of the package of measures to tackle street crime and improve behaviour in schools, there are now 100 police officers based in selected schools in areas with high levels of street crime. This is a joint initiative between the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and is called Safer School Partnerships (SSP).

Safer School Partnerships build on previous police involvement in schools where police officers have tended to take an essentially teaching role; as part of an SSP their role is more operational. They provide a much fuller level of resource and will be able to develop a much closer relationship with the school and its community.

Police officers are working with school staff and other local agencies to reduce victimisation, criminality and anti-social behaviour within the school and its local community. SSPs aim to reduce crime in and around schools, so making cost-effective use of police time; helping schools improve, so parents keep sending their children to those schools; and reducing disorder, so heads can spend time improving their school, instead of dealing with behaviour problems.

The specific areas where SSPs are making a contribution to schools and their community include prevention and reduction of crime, anti-social behaviour and related incidents in and around the school, together with any bullying and violence experienced by pupils and staff, truancy and exclusion, damage to school buildings and drug related incidents.

Charity Commission

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Charity Commission's service delivery agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94114]

Beverley Hughes: This is a matter for the Charity Commission. The Charity Commission's service delivery agreement for 2003–06 is currently being finalised in discussion with Her Majesty's Treasury. The Chief Charity Commissioner will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of his reply will be placed in the Library.

Statistics (Publication)

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when *(a)* the British Crime Survey, *(b)* Criminal Statistics, England and Wales, *(c)* Prison Statistics, England and Wales, *(d)* Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System, *(e)* Control of Immigration Statistics and *(f)* the Home Office Annual Report were published in each year from 1992 to 2002. [93333]

Mr. Denham: Within the time frame specified, 1992–2002:

(a) British Crime Survey published November 1993, 24 September 1996, 13 October 1998, 17 October 2000, 25 October 2001.

(b) Criminal Statistics, E & W published December 1993 (1992), November 1994 (1993), November 1995 (1994), November 1996 (1995), November 1997 (1996), November 1998 (1997), March 2000 (1998), December 2000 (1999), December 2001 (2000), December 2002 (2001).

(c) Prison Statistics, E & W published 20 February 1992 (1990), 30 March 02 (1991), 23 June 1994 (1992), 29 June 1995 (1993), 9 February 1996 (1994), 30 August 1996 (1995), 31 July 1997 (1996), 30 July 1998 (1997), 18 October 1999 (1998), 31 July 2000 (1999), 15 August 2001 (2000).

(d) Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System published September 1992, July 1994, March 1996, December 1997, 8 December 1998, 9 December 1999, December 2000, 7 November 2002 on web and 15 November 2002 hardcopy.

(e) Control of Immigration Statistics published September 1992, October 1993, August 1994, August 1995, August 1996, August 1997, August 1998, August 1999, October 2000, November 2001, November 2002.

(f) Home Office Annual Report published 12 February 1992, 10 February 1993, 2 March 1994, 8 March 1995, 20 March 1996, 20 March 1997, 6 April 1998, 26 March 1999, 11 April 2000, 30 March 2001, 13 June 2002.

Terrorism

Mr. Swire: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what further measures have been put in place to protect potentially high-risk areas from terrorist attacks in the last 12 months. [93381]

Mr. Blunkett: Over the last 12 months the Government has enhanced the existing programme providing protective security advice to critical and high-risk sectors aimed at reducing the risks from a range of possible terrorist attack methods. The number of industrial operators receiving advice on counter-terrorism precautions has substantially increased, so as to cover operations critical to the national infrastructure and also a wide range of sites and sectors which could be considered attractive terrorist targets and, if successfully attacked, would potentially cause significant loss of life. Protective security advice is also made available to a broad range of contacts in the business and commercial community which includes the retail sector and operators of major public venues.

Thames Valley Police

Mr. Mackay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on retention in the Thames Valley police force. [91436]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 20 January 2003]:* Thames Valley police has been recruiting strongly in recent years. However, the force has been experiencing retention difficulties including a net outflow of transfers.

I share the chief constable's concern about this. It is important to establish what is causing these difficulties. We are therefore working with the chief constable, police authority and staff associations, to look at all the associated issues and to develop practical solutions.

Tony Martin

Mr. Bellingham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the findings of the recent Parole Board report on the case of Tony Martin, prisoner at HMP Highpoint. [92617]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 21 January 2003]:* Decisions taken by the Parole Board in respect of individual cases are not published.

West Midlands Police Force

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the ethnic composition of the West Midlands Police Force was in each of the last five years. [93472]

Mr. Denham: The following tables are for police officers and all police staff and have been produced from figures supplied by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC).

For the first four years, the figures were collected in four categories. For 2002, the 2001 Census categories of ethnic group were adopted and so there is a break in the series. Figures for 2002 have been affected by the low response rate from staff to self-classify ethnicity based on the 2001 Census classification. This resulted in a number of police staff being classified as 'Unspecified' ethnicity.

1. Police officers

	White	*Black*	*Asian*	*Other*		
31 March 1998	6,859	*132*	123	42	—	—
31 March 1999	7,008	137	131	44	—	—
31 March 2000	6,887	142	142	44	—	—
31 march 2002	7,050	149	176	46	—	—
	White	*Mixed*	*Black/Black British*	*Asian/Asian British*	*Chinese or other ethnic group*	*Unspecified*
31 March 2002	6,674	73	112	170	10	555

2. All police staff

	White	*Black*	*Asian*	*Other*		
31 March 1998	9,694	234	204	59	—	—
31 March 1999	9,716	226	224	62	—	—
31 March 2000	9,575	227	240	61	—	—
31 March 2001	9,789	238	275	67	—	—
	White	*Mixed*	*Black/Black British*	*Asian/Asian British*	*Chinese or other ethnic group*	*Unspecified*
31 March 2002	9,299	97	189	285	16	773

Women Prisoners

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women serving prison sentences gave birth *(a)* in prison and *(b)* in hospital in each of the last five years; and how many were allowed to keep their babies in prison. [93966]

Hilary Benn: *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* All women prisoners who are pregnant are transferred to local hospitals to give birth where normal National Health Service (NHS) care applies. No figures are held centrally on the number of prisoners who have given birth or the number of women who have been in Mother and Baby Units in the last five years.

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women prisoners have children who are *(a)* under five years old and *(b)* under 18 months old. [93967]

Hilary Benn *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* There is no routinely collected data on the number of women prisoners with children in these age ranges. However, a Chief Inspector's survey in 1994 found that over a third of the mothers had one or more children under five years old. Studies published in 1997 and 2000 found that 60 per cent. and 66 per cent. of women prisoners respectively had dependent children under the age of 18.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 31 January 2003

CABINET OFFICE

Terrorism

Mr. Swire: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what preparations have been made outside large urban conurbations for responses to a terrorist attack; and what procedures are in place to cope and assist with the likely exodus of people from large cities in the event of an attack taking place there. [93380]

Mr. Alexander: The UK has robust plans in place for the protection of the public and of national security interests. The Government's preparations include a series of classified contingency plans for responding to a wide range of terrorist threats. These plans are regularly tested, reviewed and updated as circumstances change. Much of the response is based on generic, multi-agency, local emergency arrangements, developed within the clear guidelines set out by the Home Office.

Evacuation planning is currently undertaken at local level, by the police and local authority emergency planners. This includes ensuring routes to and from the site of the incident remain viable, and planning for the reception and re-housing of evacuees. We are also taking steps to strengthen the regional level of co-ordination, to ensure compatibility and cohesion of local evacuation and reception plans for large-scale incidents.

Departmental Communications

Mr. Allen: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans he has to to improve the quality of English used by departments in their communications with the general public. [93390]

Mr. Alexander: The Cabinet Office has issued guidance for departments on the Handling of Ministerial and Other Correspondence which emphasises that appropriate arrangements should be in place to ensure that the quality of all replies is high. It has also issued guidance on Plain Written English.

In addition, the Centre for Management and Policy Studies (Civil Service College) located in my department offers a comprehensive suite of courses in writing. These aim to help civil servants to write clearly, concisely and correctly, and to tailor their writing to particular circumstances.

Fraud and Theft

Mr. Laws: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how much money has been lost by his Department and its agencies and non-departmental public bodies through *(a)* fraud and *(b)* theft for each year since 1996–97. [92429]

Mr. Alexander: The cost of theft and fraud to my Department, its agencies, and non-departmental public bodies in each of the last five years, is shown in the table. Figures for 1996–97 can be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

£000s

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Department	15	48	32	34	35
Agencies	—	—	—	—	—
NDPBs	—	1	—	1	—
Total	15	49	32	35	35

Government Car Service

Norman Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how much has been spent in each year since 1997 towards the running of a car for Lord Sainsbury. [94993]

Ms Hewitt: I have been asked to reply.

Lord Sainsbury runs and finances his own car. But on a few occasions he uses cars from the Government Car Service for official engagements.

Special Advisers and Press Officers

Mr. Laws: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many *(a)* special advisers and *(b)* press officers have been employed by his Department in each year from 1994–95 to 2002–03; and at what cost in each year. [92428]

Mr. Alexander: As has been published on previous occasions, the overall number and cost for Special Advisers across all Departments is:

£ million

	Number	*Cost*
1995–96	38	1.5
1996–7	38	1.8
1997–8	70	2.6
1998–9	74	3.5
1999–2000	78	4.0
2000–01	79	4.1
2001–02	81	5.1

In order to protect the privacy of the individuals concerned it would not be appropriate to break down the cost by Department. As at 21 January 2003 there were 81 special advisers across all Departments. The cost for 2002–03 is not yet available.

The number of press officers employed from 1997–98 to 2001–02 and their costs in each of these years are as follows:

£000s

	Number of press officers[1]	*Cost per financial year*
1997–98	11	453,636
1998–99	14	512,255
1999–2000	20	752,560
2000–01	16	781,817
2001–02	18	798,015

[1] Employed in the Cabinet Office press office in January of each year.

Financial and Human Resource information for periods prior to, and including 1996–97 is not held on the Cabinet Office's new databases and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

The figure for 1999–2000 includes press officers specifically employed to manage the genetically modified foods communications unit which operated from the Cabinet Office from July 1999 to March/April 2000.

The Cabinet Office currently has nine press officers. The relocation of resource on reduction in numbers is due to the creation of the new Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The cost for Cabinet Office press officers in 2002–03 is not yet available.

DEFENCE

Friendly Fire

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what techniques and procedures are in place to reduce friendly fire incidents among the allied forces currently being deployed; and if he will make a statement. [94607]

Mr. Ingram: Standard techniques and procedures have been developed in consultation with coalition partners and would be used by deployed forces to reduce the risk of friendly fire incidents. They include the management of friendly assets in both time and space and the widespread dissemination of orders, such as the Air Tasking Order, in order to ensure that all friendly assets are aware of the location and movement of own forces. As I stated in my answer to the hon Member on 18 December 2002 *Official Report*, column 807W, tactics, techniques and procedures complement situational awareness and target identification to form a triad of measures designed to achieve Combat Identification and minimise the risk of fratricide.

Gulf Task Force

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether the task force sent to the Gulf includes a capability to help deal with *(a)* a major oil spill and *(b)* other environmental damage. [95025]

Mr. Ingram: All Royal Navy and Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessels have the capability to deal with small and localised oil spills. HM ships are not however, equipped to respond to major oil spills or after significant environmental damage.

Iraq

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish the names of British-registered companies found by UNMOVIC or the IAEA inspection teams in Iraq to have provided proscribed military equipment and material to Iraq. [93906]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have been asked to reply.

I am advised neither UNMOVIC nor the IAEA have informed us of any such discoveries to date. It is up to UNMOVIC and the IAEA to decide on the level of detail to be provided publicly about any goods that they uncover.

Mr. Goodman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the cost of military action against Iraq. [94427]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 30 January 2003]:* The information requested is not yet available. I shall write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Royal Navy and Royal Marines Operational Welfare Package

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the facilities which will be available to Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel on deployment to the Gulf as part of the Operational Welfare Package. [94538]

Mr. Ingram: The facilities which form the Operational Welfare Package available to Royal Navy and Royal Marine personnel deployed to the Gulf are as follows:

Personnel will be entitled to 20 minutes worth of free phone calls each week.

All units will have access to satellite TV in port.

Ships have been fitted with as much operational fitness equipment as economically feasible.

Ships have a selection of magazines which will be delivered on stopovers.

Ships have a selection of videos and DVDs.

E-mail facilities will be available to personnel at sea.

Personnel will receive double the usual laundry allowance.

Personnel will be entitled to free airmail during the deployment.

A combined services entertainment show will be arranged for as many personnel as possible if the deployment lasts longer than four months, and if operationally feasible.

NAAFI services will be provided by the naval canteen services.

Books are being provided by the Fleet Libraries Office.

The availability of some of these facilities will vary depending on the type and role of ship.

HEALTH

Ambulance Services

Dr. Evan Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his Answer of 7 January 2002, *Official Report*, column 180W, on ambulance turnaround times, what information he collates on ambulance turnaround times. [93195]

Mr. Lammy: The Department collects some fast track management information on aspects of emergency care performance. This data is unvalidated and not necessarily accurate or complete and as such is not suitable for publication.

Chernobyl

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to his answer of 4 December 2002, *Official Report*, column 896W, on Chernobyl, if he will place in the Library copies of the Eclis and Eurocas studies to which reference is made. [87560]

Ms Blears: The European Childhood Leukaemia-Lymphoma Study (ECLIS) has produced two publications. Copies will be placed in the Library. The European Childhood Abnormality Study (EUROCAS) has yet to report.

Child Protection

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many children who died of *(a)* abuse and *(b)* neglect in each of the last 10 years had been removed from the local authority child protection register within 12 months prior to their death; [94031]

(2) how many children who died of *(a)* abuse and *(b)* neglect in each of the last 10 years were named on the local authority child protection register. [94030]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is not held centrally.

However, in April 2002, the Department of Health introduced an enhanced computerised database of serious case notifications. The database records information such as details of the incident, the child and family concerned, any criminal proceedings, whether a serious case review has been, is being or is expected to be conducted into the incident, and whether the child was on the child protection register at the time of the incident or had been at any time in the past.

Clive Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average length of time taken in the last five years to complete a Part 8 Review following the death of a child is; and how many have taken longer than *(a)* six months, *(b)* 12 months, *(c)* 18 months and *(d)* 24 months. [94088]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is not held centrally.

Reviews will vary widely in their breadth and complexity, but in all cases lessons should be learned and acted upon as quickly as possible. They are expected to be carried out in accordance with "Working Together to Safeguard Children (1999)" guidance. This expects that the area child protection committee will determine, within one month of a case coming to light, whether to conduct a review. The review should be undertaken and completed within a further four months. Exceptionally, the complexity of the case or other factors may necessitate a longer timescale, which should be discussed and agreed with the Social Services Inspectorate.

Clive Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the purpose is of undertaking a Part 8 Review following the death of a child. [94089]

Jacqui Smith: The purpose of serious case reviews carried out in accordance with "Working Together to Safeguard Children" (1999), the Government's child protection guidance (known widely as part 8 reviews') is to:

> establish whether there are lessons to be learned from the case about the way in which local professionals and agencies work together to safeguard children;
>
> identify clearly what those lessons are, how they will be acted upon, and what is expected to change as a result; and as a consequence,
>
> to improve inter-agency working and better safeguard children.

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what care arrangements are made for children who are victims of child prostitution to ensure they are placed in a safe care environment and receive treatment. [93553]

Jacqui Smith: Children involved in prostitution and other forms of commercial sexual exploitation are likely to be in need of welfare services and—in many cases—protection under the Children Act 1989.

Where there is a risk to the life of a child or a likelihood of serious harm, an agency with statutory child protection powers, for example, the police or councils with social services responsibilities, should act quickly to secure the immediate initial safety of the child. In some cases, it may be necessary to ensure either that the child remains in, or is removed to, a safe place. Under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, a local authority may provide accommodation for any child within their area if they consider that to do so would safeguard or promote the child's welfare.

When a child is identified as involved in prostitution or other commercial sexual exploitation, or at risk of being drawn into it, an assessment of the child's needs will be undertaken in accordance with "Safeguarding Children Involved in Prostitution" (2000), "Working Together to Safeguard Children" (1999), the Government's child protection guidance, and the "Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families" (2000). This assessment should be followed by consideration of how best to address the identified needs of the child and development of a care plan for the child who is in need. The plan could include a range of services, for example, mentoring to assist a return to education or employment, and help to secure appropriate health services.

Delayed Discharge

Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his policy is on the distribution of delayed discharge funding, with particular reference to those local authorities which are affected by the ceiling on grant increase for services spending. [93099]

Jacqui Smith: The Access and Systems Capacity Grant 2003–04 is being distributed according to the new older people's formula for social services. We have not yet made any decisions on the distribution of the additional £100 million per full year, related to the Community Care (Delayed Discharges etc.) Bill. The distribution formula is not affected by the system of general grant expenditure increases.

Diagnostic and Treatment Centre, Yeovil

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans are being drawn up by *(a)* East Somerset NHS trust and *(b)* Dorset and Somerset health authority to establish a new diagnostic and treatment centre in Yeovil; and if he will make a statement. [92559]

Ms Blears: Dorset and Somerset strategic health authority in their capacity plan have set out a range of proposals to meet local targets for access.

Among their proposals was a development at Yeatman hospital in Sherbourne, which sought to expand capacity in the area served by east Somerset national health service trust. This scheme has many of the features of the national diagnostic treatment centre (DTC) programme as it seeks to create dedicated elective capacity for a modern, patient focused, high productivity clinical service. The trust is currently producing a business case for this development, which will require approval by local primary care trusts and the StHA before it proceeds.

A proposal to create a new provider DTC in Somerset delivered through the local procurement route has been agreed. It is not currently envisaged that this DTC will be in Yeovil. A further proposal was to explore whether a new provider DTC may be required to serve an area in eastern Dorset and western Hampshire. It is not currently envisaged that this DTC will be in Yeovil.

Maternity Units

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many proposals there are *(a)* to convert and *(b)* to establish maternity units as midwife-only centres. [85789]

Jacqui Smith: This information is not collected centrally.

Mental Disorders (Children)

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of children with a mental disorder in *(a)* Haltemprice and Howden and *(b)* the UK; and if he will make a statement. [93841]

Jacqui Smith: Information is not collected centrally in the format requested. However a survey of the mental health of children and adolescents in Great Britain was carried out in 1999 by the Office of National Statistics on behalf of the Department of Health, Scottish National Executive and National Assembly for Wales. Prevalence rates were produced for five to 15 year olds in the three main categories of mental disorder, i.e. conduct disorder, hyperactivity and emotional disorder.

The key findings on prevalence were:

about ten per cent, of children aged five to 15 years in Great Britain had a mental disorder in 1999

five per cent., had conduct disorders (e.g. aggressive and antisocial behaviour), four per cent., had emoional disorders (e.g. anxiety, depression) and one per cent, were hyperkinetic (inattention, overactivity)

mental disorders were significantly more common in boys than girls in both the five to ten year and the 11–15 year old age groups.

Recruitment of Ambulance Staff

Chris Grayling: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS ambulance trusts have stopped recruitment of ambulance staff. [85787]

Mr. Hutton: The recruitment of ambulance staff is a local matter and, as such, the Department does not hold this information centrally.

The Department does, however, collect data on the total numbers of ambulance staff recruited. There has been an increase in the total numbers of ambulance staff from 15,280, or 14,480 whole time equivalents employed in 1995, to 16,920 or 16,320 whole time equivalents, employed in 2001.

Residential Care (Children)

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children there were in residential care in *(a)* England and *(b)* Haltemprice and Howden in each year since 1997 for which figures are available. [93839]

Jacqui Smith: The information available on looked after children in residential care is shown in the table. Figures for East Riding of Yorkshire council have been provided, as data for Haltemprice and Howden are not available.

Number of children in residential care[1] in England and East Riding of Yorkshire at 31 March 1997–2002

	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*
England	7,900	8,500	8,300	8,900	8,500	8,600
East Riding of Yorkshire	25	45	35	45	35	[2]—

[1] Includes children in secure units, children's homes and hostels, residential schools and other residential settings.

[2] 2002 figures for East Riding of Yorkshire are not yet available.

Note:

All figures are rounded—national figures to the nearest 100 and local authority figures to the nearest 5.

Waiting Lists (Hull Royal Infirmary and Castle Hill Hospital)

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people were on in-patient waiting lists for *(a)* Hull Royal Infirmary and *(b)* Castle Hill hospital in the last month for which figures are available. [92851]

Jacqui Smith: At the end of November 2002 there were 9,913 patients waiting for in-patient treatment at Hull and east Yorkshire hospitals national health service trust.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

International Atomic Energy Agency

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will increase the United Kingdom's donation to the International Atomic Energy Agency to assist the international inspection and safeguards regime. [93886]

Nigel Griffiths: In addition to its assessed contributions to the regular budget of the IAEA, the

UK makes a number of voluntary contributions to it for specific activities, including those carried out by the Agency's Safeguards Department.

The agency is now discussing with member states proposals that it has put forward for the regular budget for 2004 and 2005. These proposals include a significant increase in funding for safeguards. The UK has welcomed the proposal that the budget be increased to enable the agency to better carry out its statutory and other obligations. We believe that, if a convincing case is made for an increase in the safeguards budget, member states must ensure that the extra resources are made available.

Ammunition Manufacturing

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry whether her Department regulates the manufacture of ammunition. [93584]

Nigel Griffiths: DTI has no specific responsibility for regulating the manufacture of ammunition.

BNFL

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list assets and liabilities of BNFL which will be *(a)* transferred to the Liabilities Management Authority, *(b)* retained by BNFL and *(c)* shared between each. [94973]

Mr. Wilson: Paragraph 5.5 of The White Paper 'Managing the Nuclear Legacy—A Strategy for Action' (Cm5552) sets out the aims and basic framework for restructuring BNFL and transferring assets and liabilities to the LMA. Those aims remain unchanged. Details of the restructuring will be finalised in due course.

Business Link

Mr. Prisk: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many telephone inquiries the Business Link national 0845 telephone number received per week in *(a)* September 2002 and *(b)* December 2002; how many inquiries per week led to appointments for Business Link advisers; and if he will make a statement about the different categories of enquiries received between September and December 2002. [93106]

Nigel Griffiths: The information requested is as follows:

(a) September Weekly Telephone Inquiries to Business Link 0845 number

Date	*Total*
1—7 September 2002	*1,061*
8—14 September 2002	*1,120*
15—21 September 2002	*2,053*
22—30 September 2002	*1,924*
September	*6,158*

Note:

Active Publicity campaign in progress throughout September, hence higher call volume.

(b) December Weekly Telephone Inquiries to Business Link 0845 number

Date	*Total*
1—8 December 2002	1,061
9—15 December 2002	1,159
16—22 December 2002	909
23—31 December 2002	267
December	3,570

Callers are directed via the 0845 link to their local Business Link Operator (BLO) who then treats each case individually. Adviser support is provided where the BLO judge that course best fits customer need. SBS does not require BLOs to retain detailed, constant monitoring information on such referrals.

Call Centres

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many call centres are contracted or operated by her Department and its agencies. [93798]

Ms Hewitt: My Department and its agencies have a number of call centre operations in place as well as specific inquiry number helplines which will vary in number at any given time to reflect particular initiatives we are engaged in.

The number of call centres currently in use across the Department and its agencies is 11. These involve a mix of 0800, 0870, 0845 and STD (e.g. 020) numbers and are either operated direct by the Department or its agencies or as a managed service on our behalf.

Information is not available centrally on the current number of inquiry helplines but at the last review in 2001 some 33 departmental and 25 agency helplines existed. These generally utilise STD numbers but some 0800 and 0845 numbers are also used.

Car Sales

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1)what recent study she has made of new car prices in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* other EU countries; [92814]

(2) whether her Department monitors the regulations designed to ensure that private buyers receive the same level of discounts on new car purchases as fleet buyers; and what research she has undertaken as to whether the regulations are ensuring that private car buyers do not subsidise fleet buyers. [92756]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Office of Fair Trading is responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of the Supply of New Cars Order 2000. The Order is one of several factors influencing car prices. These include a renegotiated block exemption from EU competition rules for vehicle supply and servicing introduced on 1 October 2002.

The EC publishes a six-monthly study of list prices of new cars, across a range of countries and across a range of models. In the UK, the Alliance & Leicester in conjunction with What Car?, publishes a monthly survey of new car prices.

The DGFT has a statutory duty to keep the Order under review. At the beginning of last year the DGFT published a report on an investigation into alleged breaches of the Order by three major car suppliers following a complaint from the National Franchised Dealer Association and the Consumers Association. This concluded that the anti-discrimination rules of the Order covering sales to fleet customers and sales to dealers had not been broken.

Debt Taskforce

Norman Lamb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much the Task Force on Tackling Over-Indebtedness cost *(a)* to establish and *(b)* to run in each year since its establishment. [92713]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 22 January 2003]:* The members of the Task Force have not been remunerated. DTI staffing costs, have amounted to a total of 119,900. (October 2000 to January 2003).

Energy White Paper

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the Energy White Paper will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. [94412]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 30 January 2003]*: The White Paper will be published shortly.

Estate Agents

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will take measures to establish an independent regulator of estate agents; and if she will make a statement. [94055]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The conduct of estate agents is independently regulated by the Director General of Fair Trading, who has powers under the Estate Agents Act 1979 to ban persons he considers unfit to carry out estate agency work.

The Office of Fair Trading is currently investigating the market for estate agents in England and Wales, including the effectiveness of the Act. I will consider carefully any recommendations the Director General of Fair Trading makes about future regulation of this market.

Financial Advice

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures she plans to take to improve the availability of independent, free financial advice to consumers. [91835]

Miss Melanie Johnson: There are currently a number of providers of independent, free financial advice to consumers including that provided by the Citizens Advice, Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS), and the Federation of Information and Advice Centres (FIAC). In addition there is a large amount of information available on the internet, including through the Financial Services Authority's website.

There are also a number of organisations such as National Debtline, Consumer Credit Counselling Services and Payplan which, while primarily focused on providing independent, free debt advice, will offer consumers contacting them general financial advice where relevant.

We are reviewing Government policy on debt advice in response to recommendations in the PIU report "Lending Support: Improving Government's Use of Loans" published March 2002.

Fossil Fuel (Morecambe)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on fossil fuel reserves near Morecambe. [94127]

Mr. Wilson: The sea adjacent to Morecambe includes a number of gas fields that have significant remaining reserves which continue to provide a major source of swing gas during times of high demand. A small onshore gas field is in production to the south of Morecambe, and there is some possibility of further small gas developments.

MOD Spectrum

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment she has made of whether the spectrum allocated to the Ministry of Defence is being used in a manner which best serves the public interest. [94932]

Ms Hewitt: There are effective mechanisms in place to ensure effective use of MOD spectrum, which will be further strengthened as a result of the recommendations of the independent Review of Radio Spectrum Management.

My Department's Radiocommunications Agency has a close working relationship with the Ministry of Defence and the use of the spectrum allocated to defence is kept under constant review, balancing the needs of national defence against the requirements of other spectrum users, this process is overseen by the United Kingdom Spectrum Strategy Committee, a Cabinet Office committee, jointly chaired by the Radiocommunications Agency and the Ministry of Defence.

Over the years, much defence spectrum has been made available for commercial services, either on a shared or exclusive basis. The Ministry of Defence also pays an annual charge to the RA for its spectrum use. This is calculated on a comparable basis to civil users and provides an important incentive to efficient spectrum use.

The independent Review of Radio Spectrum Management has made a number of recommendations designed to promote the optimal use of defence spectrum. These include an audit of defence spectrum, the continued application of spectrum pricing in parallel with non-military users on a comparable basis and the introduction of trading to provide incentives for effective spectrum use. The Government have accepted these recommendations and their implementation is now being taken forward by the Radiocommunications Agency with the Ministry of Defence.

Nuclear Industry

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the reactors of origin were of the plutonium used in the MOX fuel sent to Japan and Switzerland from Sellafield; and what safeguards arrangements apply to this plutonium. [93904]

Mr. Wilson: It is not possible to identify definitively the individual reactors in which specific batches of plutonium allocated to the ownership of specific customers might originally have been produced. Reprocessing customers receive back separated plutonium based on that contained in the fuel they originally supplied. This is assessed before the fuel is reprocessed. The nature of commercial reprocessing in large-scale bulk chemical processing facilities means that the plutonium contained in the fuel becomes blended with that contained in fuel from other reactors.

International safeguards arrangements for MOX fuel assemblies include measurement of the nuclear material content of the fuel before its shipment from the fabrication plant and then the application of seals to the transport flasks into which the assemblies have been loaded. On receipt at a reactor facility seals are checked and removed before the fuel is placed in storage or loaded into the reactor. Such fuel storage and reactor loading is monitored by safeguards inspections combined with the use of containment and surveillance equipment (e.g. cameras and seals). Safeguards measures continue to be applied after MOX fuel has been loaded in a reactor.

Street Traders

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many pedlar's licences were issued in each month since 2000; and if she will make a statement. [94560]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 30 January 2003]:* This information is not held centrally by the Department.

Brian Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate she has made of the number of street traders who are operating illegally; and if she will make a statement. [94561]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 30 January 2003]*: None.

Peru (UK Investment)

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what advice her Department issues on UK investment into Peru; when and for what reason this advice was last updated; and if she will make a statement. [94256]

Nigel Griffiths: Advice on direct investment into Peru, including reference to the legal framework governing foreign investment in the country, is available on the Trade Partners UK website www.tradepartners.gov.uk which is regularly updated.

For all markets, Trade Partners UK advises companies to base their decision on whether and where to invest on a sound knowledge and understanding of local conditions.

Trade Partners UK, a joint DTI/FCO body, has the objective of enhancing the competitiveness of companies in the UK through overseas sales and investments.

Plutonium

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which international agreements cover the arrangements permitting the swapping of plutonium batches between that material owned by British Nuclear Fuels, British Energy or the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority and that owned by foreign customers as held at Sellafield. [92305]

Mr. Wilson: In the European Union, the ownership of nuclear materials is governed by the Euratom provisions that deal with the supply of nuclear materials (essentially Chapter 6 of the Euratom Treaty). These provide that exchanges of material—which are basically a commercial matter for the companies concerned—require the approval of the Euratom Supply Agency on a case-by-case basis.

External obligations, for example limiting the use of such material to peaceful, non-explosive purposes are, however, a feature of some international nuclear co-operation agreements, such as those between, Euratom and the United States, Euratom and Australia and Euratom and Canada. In some cases where there are no Euratom agreements in place, there are bilateral agreements which contain comparable provisions. The owners of nuclear material can request that external obligations attached to one batch of material can be exchanged or swapped for different obligations on another equivalent batch of material. Each such request for a swap involving material that is subject to Euratom co-operation agreements must be approved by the Services of the European Commission, whose assessment takes account of the characteristics of the nuclear material concerned, (i.e. to ensure that the swap would not diminish the obligations involved) and the reasoning behind the request.

Service Delivery Agreements

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when *(a)* the Postal Services Commission's, *(b)* Ofgem's and *(c)* the Office of Telecommunications' service delivery agreements for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94211]

Ms Hewitt: None of these bodies is required to produce a service delivery agreement for the period 2003 to 2006. However, they all publish information on their targets and objectives and how they will aim to achieve them, elsewhere.

The Postal Services Commission produces a yearly business plan, which is published on its website (http://www.psc.gov.uk). The plan for 2003–04 is due to be published by mid-February 2003.

Each year Ofgem publishes a three-year corporate plan. The plan for 2002–05 is currently available on its website (http://www.ofgem.gov.uk/public/pubframe.htm) and the plan for 2003–06 is due to be published by April 2003 and a copy will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

The Office of Telecommunications produces an annual report and a management plan, both of which contain information on targets and delivery. The annual report for 2001 is currently available on its website (http://www.oftel.gov.uk/publications/about—oftel/index.htm) and the 2002 annual report is being drafted. The management plan for 2002–03 is published on the website and the management plan for 2003–04 is due to be published shortly.

Telephone Services

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will list the telephone services operated by her Department and its agencies; and how many calls have been made to each service in the last 12 months. [93800]

Ms Hewitt: My Department and its agencies operate a range of telephone services in support of their work, in particular:

> Direct Dialling In, which is used extensively throughout the Department and its agencies, giving direct access to customers to individual members of staff or to advertised call centres and inquiry points.
>
> Call Centres, with 11 currently in use, offering advice and guidance on a range of issues.
>
> General Inquiry Points, put in place to handle specific areas of help and information. Numbers will vary at any given time but at the last review these totalled some 33 DTI and 25 Agency Inquiry Points.

Numbers of calls made to each of these services are not held centrally but the numbers are significant. For example, ACAS, who run two call centres, received 750,000 calls in the last 12 months and the main DTI Inquiry Point received 304,800 calls during 2002.

UN Convention on International Sales

Ross Cranston: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if she will make a statement on the UN Convention on International Sales. [91088]

Nigel Griffiths: Primary legislation will be needed to implement United Nations Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods. The United Kingdom intends to ratify the convention, subject to the availability of parliamentary time.

TRANSPORT

Central Railway

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will publish the recent SRA report on the Central Railway project that responded to the consultant report to the SRA of 23April 2002. [94133]

Mr. Jamieson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 11 December 2002 *Official Report*, column 351W to the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley).

A63

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many *(a)* minor, *(b)* serious and *(c)* fatal injuries there were at the A63 Melton junction in each year since 1997. [94303]

Mr. Spellar: The number of *(a)* minor, *(b)* serious and *(c)* fatal injuries from road traffic accidents at the A63 Melton junction in each year since 1997, are shown in the table.

Casualties by severity at the A63 Melton junction, 1997 to 2001

Severity	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Fatal	0	1	3	0	0
Serious	0	3	1	0	0
Slight	2	27	16	10	9
All	2	31	20	10	9

David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport for what reason his Department did not issue a definitive response to the inspector's report on the A63 Grade Separated Junction proposal from the Highways Agency. [94426]

Mr. Spellar: The Inspector's Report on the A63 Melton Public Inquiry contained conclusions that supported the Highways Agency's proposals in all respects apart from one element of the Side Roads Order. This related to an alternative proposal for a junction at Corby Park, submitted by East Riding of Yorkshire Council (ERYC). The Inspector concluded that further work should be carried out to check the feasibility of ERYC's alternative. That is why it was not possible for the Secretary of State to issue a definitive response on the outcome of the Public Inquiry.

The Highways Agency is currently working with ERYC to identify the optimum solution and reach agreement on the way forward. It is hoped that an announcement will be made soon.

Correspondence

Joyce Quin: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when his Department will reply to the letter of 22 July 2002 from the right hon. Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West relating to Railtrack and CalSolutions Ltd. [94436]

Mr. Spellar: I wrote to my right hon. Friend on 30 January 2003.

Road Scheme Blight

Gregory Barker: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) if he will list road schemes proposed by his Department which will have effects on *(a)* sites of special interest, *(b)* areas of outstanding natural beauty and *(c)* national parks; and if he will make a statement; [93816]

(2) which *(a)* sites of special scientific interest and *(b)* areas of outstanding natural beauty stand to be affected by trunk road and motorway schemes in England and Wales for which preferred routes have been announced. [93819]

Mr. Jamieson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Tim Matthews, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Tim Matthews to Mr. Gregory Barker dated 31 January 2003:

I have been asked by the Transport Minister, David Jamieson, to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking him to list the road proposals which will affect sites of special interest, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and National Parks, and which Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and AONBs are affected by trunk road and motorway schemes for which preferred routes have been announced.

Please see the attached table giving this information in respect of trunk roads and motorways in England. Roads in Wales are the responsibility of the National Assembly for Wales. We have interpreted sites of special interest to be the same as SSSI.

I am unable to comment on the effect of any potential schemes yet to come out of the Multi Modal or other studies that are currently in progress.

Road Schemes

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when decisions were made to approve each of the road schemes listed in the Targeted Programme of Improvements. [94845]

Mr. Jamieson: The dates on which schemes were added to the Targeted Programme of Improvements following decisions taken by Ministers are as follows:

31 July 1998	
M25	J12–15 Widening
M60	J 5–8 (formerly M63 J6–9 Widening)
A1 (M)	Ferrybridge to Hook Moor
A1 (M)	Wetherby to Walshford
A1	Willowburn-Denwick Improvement
A2	Bean-Cobham Widening Phase 1
A2	Bean-Cobham Widening Phase 2
A2	A2/A282 Dartford Improvement
A5	Nesscliffe Bypass
A5	Weeford-Fazeley Improvement
A6	Rothwell—Desborough Bypass
A6	Rushden and Higham Ferrers Bypass
A6	Great Glen Bypass
A6	Clapham Bypass
A6	Alvaston
A10	Wadesmill-Colliers End Bypass
A11	Roundham Heath-Attleborough Dualling
A14	Rookery Crossroads Grade Separated Junction
A21	Lamberhurst Bypass
A27	Polegate Bypass
A34	Chieveley/M4 J13 Improvement
A41	Aston Clinton Bypass
A43	Whitefield Turn-Brackley Hatch Improvement
A43	Silverstone Bypass
A43	M40-B4031 Dualling
A46	Newark-Lincoln Improvement
A63	Selby Bypass
A66	Stainburn and Great Clifton Bypass
A120	Stansted Braintree
A249	Iwade—Queenborough Improvement
A303	Stonehenge
A421	Great Barford Bypass
A500	Basford, Hough, Shavington Bypass
A500	City Road/Stoke Road Junctions
A650	Bingley Relief Road
A1033	Hedon Road Improvement, Hull
24 March 2000	
A74(M)	Carlisle—Guardsmil upgrading to motorway
A11	Fiveways to Thetford Improvement
A11	Attleborough Bypass Improvement
A47	Thorney Bypass
17 October 2000	
A63	Melton Grade Separated Junction
28 March 2001	
M62	Junction 6 Improvement
A1	Peterborough—Blyth Grade Separated Junctions
A3	Hindhead Improvement
A14	Haughley New St.—Stowmarket Improvement
A30	Bodmin-Indian Queens Improvement
A38	Dobwalls Bypass
A46	Newark—Widmerpool Improvement
A595	Parton—Lillyhall Improvement
16 August 2001	
A483	Pant—Llanymynech Bypass
27 February 2002	
A5117/A550	Deeside Park Junctions Improvement
10 April 2002	
A417	Blunsdon Bypass
A66	Temple Sowerby Bypass and Improvements at Winderwath
25 June 2002	
A1(M)	Bramham to Wetherby
A1(M)	Dishforth to Leeming
A1(M)	Leeming to Barton
2 July 2002	
A64	Rillington Bypass
19 August 2002	
M40/A404	Handy Cross Junction Improvement
22 August 2002	
A47	Blofield to North Burlingham Improvement
A66	Greta Bridge to Stephen Bank Improvement
A66	Carkin Moor to Scotch Corner Improvement
28 August 2002	
A428	Caxton Common to Hardwick Improvement
16 October 2002	
A1	Stannington Junction
A30	Merrymeet Junction
A66	Long Newton Junction
10 December 2002	
M4	Junction 18 Eastbound Diverge
M5	Junction 17 to 18A Northbound Climbing Lane (Hallen Hill)
M5	Junction 19 to 20 Southbound Climing Lane (Naish Hill)
M5	Junction 19 to 20 Northbound Climbing Lane (Tickenham Hill)
A69	Haydon Bridge Bypass
A419	Commonhead Grade Separated Junction

The A23 Coulsdon Inner Relief Road was originally included in the TPI on 31 July 1998 but subsequently became the responsibility of the Mayor for London.

Strategic Rail Authority (External Consultants)

Mr. Don Foster To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) if he will list the *(a)* technical consultants and *(b)* financial consultants used by the Strategic Rail Authority since 3 July 2001 on a call-off basis, the total amount paid to each consultant; and the nature of the projects; [93223]

(2) if he will list the technical and financial consultants awarded contracts by the Strategic Rail Authority between 3 July 2001 and 31 March 2002, the nature of the assignment for each consultant, and the value of each contract; [93224]

(3) pursuant to his answer, 7 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 108W, on Strategic Rail Authority (Consultants), if he will list *(a)* the total amount spent, *(b)* the technical and financial consultants awarded contracts of £25,000 and less by the Strategic Rail Authority since April 2002, *(c)* the nature of the assignment for each consultant, and *(d)* the value of each contract. [93225]

Mr. Jamieson: Information on contracts worth less than £25,000; and those awarded prior to April 2002 could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The information on call-off contracts is in the table.

Consultant	Project	£ Value
Booz Allen and Hamilton	Rolling stock strategy definition	>25,000
EC Harris	Managing costs and estimates during infrastructure and development projects	>25,000
Franklin and Andrews	Managing costs and estimates during infrastructure and development projects	>25,000
Mott McDonald	Technical consultant for the specification and the measurement of project outputs	>25,000
Nichols	South Central replacement project	>25,000
Nichols	Felixstowe-Nuneaton gauge project	>25,000

Thames Valley Multi-modal Study

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the cost has been of the Thames Valley multi-modal study. [93613]

Mr. Spellar: The Thames Valley Multi-Modal Study is expected to cost £1,250,300.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Higher Education

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the evidential basis was for the description by the Minister for Lifelong Learning and Higher Eduction of some higher education courses as Mickey Mouse; and to which courses she was referring. [93942]

Margaret Hodge: I was referring to any course where the content is not intellectually rigorous and where there is not a clearly designed purpose. I made the comment in the context of ensuring that the expansion of higher education is both relevant and appropriate to meet the needs of learners and employers, particularly when we are seeking a contribution towards the cost of tuition from students.

Scottish Universities

Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what discussions he has had with *(a)* the Scottish Executive and *(b)* Scottish university representatives as to the possible implications for Scotland of the changes for English and Welsh universities announced in his statement of 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 301–09. [93741]

Margaret Hodge *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* My right hon. Friend meets members of the Scottish Executive from time to time in the course of normal business, as indeed do I. There have also been specific discussions during the higher education review, including the possible implications for Scotland.

The White Paper, "The Future of Higher Education", identified the need for further discussions with the Devolved Administrations to consider the impact of our proposals for student and institutional funding on flows of students between UK countries.

Training

Mr. Phil Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what the maximum values of Learning and Skills Council training allowance are *(a)* by region and *(b)* by sector within each region. [90918]

Margaret Hodge: We do not set a maximum value on training allowances paid by the Learning and Skills Council. The minimum training allowance is 40 per week, although even here, local Learning and Skills Councils have discretion to increase this minimum depending on local circumstances, such as wage rates for unskilled employment.

Mr. Phil Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what research the Department has carried out on the relationship between the level of Learning and Skills Council training allowance and the rates of young people entering full-time training. [90920]

Margaret Hodge: We have not undertaken any specific research on the relationship between the level of the minimum training allowance and the numbers of young people entering full-time training. The majority of young people in full-time Modern Apprenticeships are employed and receive a wage rather than the allowance.

University Tuition Fees

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills how he defines the meaning of his phrase 'fair access' in higher education. [94072]

Margaret Hodge: As set out in "The Future of Higher Education" (Cm 5735), fair access means that the opportunities that higher education brings are available to all those who have the potential to benefit from them, regardless of their background.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Import Declarations

Sir Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs whether it is her Department's policy *(a)* to introduce manufacturer/importer declarations on products manufactured outside the European Union stating that an article does not contain and release chemicals restricted in the EU and *(b)* to increase the use of animal testing in order to produce the test information required by the European Union's chemicals management system REACH; and if she will make a statement.[Transferred] [87024]

Mr. Meacher: The Government supports the overall aim and approach set out in the Commission's White Paper of February 2001 on a Strategy for a Future Chemicals Policy. As part of the process of developing its position in preparation for negotiations on the resultant legislation (expected in 2003) the Government published a Position Statement on 9 December, copies of which have been placed in the Library of the House. This is not a definitive statement of the Government's negotiating position, not least because the Commission has still to publish proposals for legislation. The Statement focuses on the main elements of the system itself and how it might function.

In negotiating the legislation when it emerges, the Government will have three overarching objectives:

Creating a fast, efficient and workable process of testing, screening and assessing chemical substances to provide the information necessary to control those substances of concern, starting with the most harmful, because of their impacts on human health or the environment;

Keeping animal testing to the minimum necessary to protect human health and the environment; and

Maintaining or enhancing the competitiveness of the chemical industry.

In addition, we also want to see a system that is transparent to all interested parties in its operation and that provides consumers, workers and users of substances with the level of information they require about the substances with which they come into contact.

In practical terms we believe it would be difficult to enforce a requirement where every substance that had gone into the manufacture of an article was registered in accordance with the proposed new regulations. However, it may be possible to place a requirement on importers of articles to make a declaration that the imported article did not contain any labile substance of high concern which was likely to be released.

On animal testing, as stated above, the Government wishes to ensure that vertebrate animal testing is kept to the absolute minimum necessary to provide sufficient information for decision-making on health and environmental protection. For example, one early estimate of the number of extra animal tests necessary to meet the system described in the White Paper came to 12 million, whereas the ideas outlined in the Government's Position Statement would require far fewer (around 1.3 million).

The Government and Devolved Administrations position statement on the New European Chemical Strategy, a copy of this is in the House Library and can be found on the Defra web site at *www.defra.aov.uk*

Common Agricultural Policy

Tony Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what her policy is on the inclusion of a specific objective in the European Commission's Mid-Term Review that CAP reform should work in the interests of poverty reduction and food security. [87567]

Mr. Morley: We estimate that the Common Agricultural Policy costs the average family of four in the United Kingdom between 8 and 9 per week through higher food prices and taxes. We believe reform is necessary to reduce this cost and contribute towards our wider poverty reduction objectives. Similarly, reform of the CAP would assist objectives of poverty reduction in developing countries, by increasing access for their agricultural produce to EU and third country markets.

The CAP was originally introduced in 1962 to address a strategic need for food security in Europe. However, as production responded, surpluses became chronic and required increasingly heavy expenditure. Food security is now less of a policy driver, and we would prefer to see producers rewarded for delivering public benefits focussed on the environment and wider rural economy, rather than over-production.

Mr. James Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what reform of the Common Agricultural Policy has taken place since 1997; what recent discussions have taken place with European colleagues on this matter; what proposals she has for future reform; and when they will be submitted to the EU. [93577]

Mr. Morley: The Agenda 2000 reform package, agreed at the March 1999 Berlin European Council, brought EU cereal, milk and beef prices closer to world levels, and gave member states some flexibility to use CAP money for environmental schemes. It represented a significant shift from price support to direct payments and it reduced some of the economic distortions of the CAP, enabling the formulation of an integrated EU rural development policy.

On 22 January 2003 the Commission issued its draft legislative proposals for the 'Mid-term Review' of Agenda 2000. The Government has welcomed these proposals, believing further reform of the CAP to be necessary for both domestic and international reasons. In particular, we were pleased to see formal proposals to break the link between subsidy and production ('decoupling'), which will give producers greater flexibility to exploit market opportunities. However, we also have concerns over some elements of the proposals. For example, the proposed mechanism for transferring funds to support rural development is complex, would be hard to administer and would unfairly impact on larger farms; and we are disappointed at the proposed extension of milk quotas.

The first formal discussion of these proposals took place at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council meeting on 27 and 28 January. Further Council discussions are planned for the coming months. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State regularly meets her EU counterparts bilaterally to discuss this issue. Since the start of this year she has met both the French and Greek Agriculture Ministers.

Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the reform of CAP. [92003]

Mr. Morley: The Government welcomed publication on 22 January of the European Commission's formal legislative proposals for reform of the CAP. In particular, we were pleased to see formal proposals to break the link between subsidy and production (decoupling), which will give producers greater flexibility to exploit market opportunities. However, we have concerns with some elements of the proposals. For example, the proposed mechanism for transferring funds to support rural development is complex, would be hard to administer and would unfairly impact on larger farms; and we are disappointed at the proposed extension of milk quotas.

Environment Agency

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the Environment Agency budget has been in each year since 1994. [93680]

Mr. Meacher: The Environment Agency became operational on 1 April 1996.

The total annual budget of the agency for each year since then, ending 31 March, is as follows:

Total annual budget for Environment Agency

	£ million
1997	581
1998	610
1999	612
2000	640
2001	655
2002	707
2003	[1]760

[1] Forecast.

Norman Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time staff have been employed at the Environment Agency in each year since 1994. [93706]

Mr. Meacher: The Environment Agency became operational on 1 April 1996.

The numbers of staff employed by the agency in each year since then, ending 31 March, are as follows:

Number of staff employed by Environment Agency

	(a) full-time	*(b) part-time*
1996	8,325	522
1997	8,502	621
1998	8,586	487
1999	9,163	544
2000	9,699	597
2001	9,862	614
2002	10,372	445
2003	10,195	[1]698

[1] At 31 December 2002

Farm Statistics

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the average annual direct subsidy receipts were for farmers in each EU member state from *(a)* 2000 to 2002, *(b)* 1997 to 1999 and *(c)* 1994 to 1996. [93571]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 29 January 2003]*: Based on available data, the following table gives the average level of CAP direct subsidy paid by EU member state.

Average level of CAP direct subsidy paid by EU member state

	2000–02 (f) *€ million*	*1997–99* *€/ecu million*	*1994–96* *ecu million*
Belgium	320	270	230
Denmark	745	670	550
Germany	4,215	3,520	2,830
Greece	2,295	2,290	2,050
Spain	4,190	3,670	3,055
France	6,710	6,085	5,150
Ireland	900	785	605
Italy	3,580	3,265	2,600
Luxembourg	20	15	15
Netherlands	245	215	175
Austria[1]	515	450	250
Portugal	440	370	325
Finland[1]	365	250	120
Sweden[1]	540	445	215
UK	3,325	3,270	2,245
EU	28,405	25,575	20,130

[1] The 1994–96 average for Austria, Finland and Sweden covers only 1995 and 1996.

Note:

Figures are rounded to the nearest 5 million €/ecu.

Source:

Commission data.

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many farms in each member state are *(a)* under 50 hectares, *(b)* between 51 and 150 hectares, *(c)* 151 to 250 hectares, *(d)* 251 to 350 hectares, *(e)* 351 to 450 hectares, *(f)* 451 to 550 hectares and *(g)* 551 hectares and over. [93572]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 29 January 2003]:* The most recent results available on farm sizes across member states are from the 1997 Farm Structure Survey, are shown in the table. Results from the 2000 survey are expected to be released by Eurostat later in 2003.

Holdings by size classes of agricultural area

	Size classes of the holdings (hectares agricultural area)								
	<2ha	*2-<5ha*	*5-<10ha*	*10-<20ha*	*20-<50 ha*	*30-<50 ha*	*50-<100ha*	*>=100ha*	*Total*
	Number of holdings (1,000 holdings)								
EU 15	2,376.8	1,524.9	929.2	757.7	386.9	415.1	372.2	226.3	6,989.1
Belgium	12.1	9.5	935	11.5	8.4	9.4	5.6	11.1	67.2
Denmark	1.2	1.1	10.3	13.5	8.6	11.0	12.0	5.6	63.2
Germany	85.1	82.9	77.9	90.4	57.4	65.0	53.3	22.3	534.4
Greece	382.4	244.3	116.1	53.8	13.4	8.1	2.7	0.5	821.4
Spain	329.1	318.1	197.8	149.3	59.7	55.5	51.5	47.3	1,208.3
France	96.6	85.8	61.8	75.0	60.5	98.4	125.7	76.1	679.8
Ireland	2.1	9.0	18.4	40.1	29.1	28.2	16.6	4.2	147.8
Italy	1,187.0	566.7	273.2	151.0	53.5	42.5	27.4	14.1	2,315.2
Luxembourg	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.9	0.2	3.0
The Netherlands	18.0	16.5	17.3	19.3	14.3	14.9	6.6	1.1	107.9
Austria	33.1	46.6	39.4	46.8	21.4	14.5	5.7	2.8	210.1
Portugal	207.1	110.0	48.7	26.5	8.5	6.3	4.2	5.4	416.7
Finland	2.2	5.7	14.5	27.4	17.8	15.9	7.0	1.1	91.4
Sweden	3.4	9.4	15.9	18.2	10.9	12.7	13.1	6.0	89.6
United Kingdom	17.1	19.0	28.4	34.7	23.2	32.3	39.9	38.6	233.2

Source:

1997 EU Farm Structure Survey

Flooding

Patrick Mercer: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what measures are in place to prevent the flooding of properties along the Trent in Nottinghamshire; and what financial provision has been made for flood defence in Nottinghamshire in 2003–04. [92858]

Mr. Morley: This Department provides grants for flood and coastal defence capital works, and associated studies, which meet essential technical, economic and environmental criteria and achieve an appropriate priority score Operational responsibility for flood management measures rests with the local operating authorities, normally the Environment Agency (EA) and local councils, who decide which projects to promote and their timing.

I understand that there are approximately 250 km of flood defences along the Trent and its tributaries which have been constructed by the Environment Agency and its predecessors. The Agency spends some £1.5million per year on the maintenance of these flood defence systems.

Defra encourages operating authorities to take a strategic approach to flood and coastal defence problems and to consider the need for schemes and develop proposals within an overall strategy for catchment areas so as not to create problems elsewhere. The Agency has commissioned consultants to prepare a strategy which will inform flood defence options for the River Trent between Stoke-on-Trent and Newark. Defra is providing grant aid for related studies. It is expected that the strategy will be published this Autumn. The Agency then plan to prepare a strategy for the tidal reach of the River between Newark and the Number Estuary. Defra will consider any capital works emerging from these strategies against the criteria above.

Fly-tipping

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on changes in the rate of fly-tipping in the last three years. [93709]

Mr. Meacher: Data on the level of fly-tipping is not currently collected centrally. Anecdotal evidence suggests that fly-tipping may have increased recently, but the Government have no firm evidence. We intend to carry out some further work in this area to ensure that we have a firm data base to inform future policy development.

Future of Farming and Food Report

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has to review the recommendations laid out in the Report on the Future of Farming and Food and her Department's response to it in the light of the recent proposals for common agricultural policy reform. [93742]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 29 January 2003]*: The European Commission's proposals for reform of the common agricultural policy (CAP), published on 22 January 2003, are based closely on proposals in their discussion document of 10 July 2002. Therefore, we see no need to review the Government response to the independent Policy Commission, published alongside the Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food for England on 12 December 2002.

The Commission's proposals are a positive step towards reform and will benefit farming. The Government will engage positively in negotiations, working to ensure a fair package for the UK.

Recycling

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how much farm waste was used in recycling across the UK in 2002. [93126]

Mr. Meacher: Agricultural waste is currently excluded from waste management controls in Great Britain by section 75(7)*(c)* of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. No data are therefore held centrally of either the total amount of agricultural waste produced annually in the UK or the amount recycled. The same position applies under Northern Ireland legislation.

Waste Disposal Plants

Mr Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what control she has over the operation of waste disposal plants. [93121]

Mr. Meacher: The Department controls the regulation of waste disposal and recovery sites through a licensing system that is set out in legislation. The Environment Agency must have regard to the legislative framework and to any statutory guidance provided by my Department when discharging its functions as the Government's regulator and when fulfilling the requirements of the European Directives on waste.

The operation of waste disposal plants is largely in the hands of the private sector. The Environment Agency prescribes the nature of the operations through waste management licences and pollution prevention and control permits and it supervises compliance with the relevant terms and conditions.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the maximum permitted levels of smell from a waste plant are. [93124]

Mr. Meacher: The Environment Agency regulates odour emissions from waste facilities with the objective of achieving "no reasonable cause for annoyance". The level of odour from a waste facility that will result in annoyance will depend on factors such as the type, strength and duration of odour. Guidance for Environment Agency officers in determining unacceptable levels of odour from waste facilities is provided in "Internal Guidance for the Regulation of odour at waste management facilities" and "IPPC Horizontal guidance note H4—external consultation". Both of these documents are available on the Environment Agency's website at *www.environment-agency.gov.uk*.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what work has been done on assessing the effect of waste treatment plants on livestock. [93125]

Mr. Meacher: No work has been done specifically relating to the effects of waste treatment plants on livestock.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Council Housing Finance

Mr. Austin Mitchell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he plans to take into account the National Audit Office report, "Improving Social Housing Through Transfer", in his forthcoming statement on council housing finance; and whether he contributed to the NAO report during its preparation. [93694]

Mr. McNulty: The National Audit Office worked closely with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in researching their report on "Improving Social Housing Through Transfer". This has been helpful in the broader review of the vehicles for the delivery of the decent home target.

Firefighters' Dispute

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many armed forces breathing apparatus rescue teams and rescue equipment support teams were on fire cover during the strike by members of the Fire Brigades Union on 21 January 2003. [94219]

Mr. Raynsford: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett) on 30 January 2003, *Official Report*.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what measures he will take to lift the ceiling on local authority funding in order to allow more resources to be directed towards the police. [94868]

Mr. Raynsford: Local authorities are split into three groups for the purposes of the floor and ceiling calculations. These are:

authorities with responsibility for education and social services;

shire district councils; and

police and metropolitan fire authorities, including the Greater London Authority.

The total amount of grant for each of these groups is unaltered by the application of floors and ceilings. Therefore, lifting the ceiling would not direct more resources to this group. In order to pay for the increased level of the ceiling, either the level of the floor would need to be lowered, or the authorities between the floor and the ceiling would need to contribute more money to help pay for the floor via the scaling factor. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister believes that it has set the level of floors and ceilings at an appropriate level to ensure a reasonable increase in grant for all authorities.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Dr. Francis: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on how the development of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy has been influenced by lessons from the Adult and Community Learning Fund. [94466]

Mrs. Roche: The development of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy was influenced by the Adult and Community Learning Fund in that Department for Education and Skills officials provided the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit with the findings of the independent ACLF evaluations and impact studies as the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy was being devised.

Waste Disposal

Harry Cohen: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will impose, as an additional requirement upon the City of London Corporation, as part of the local government grant allocation settlement, provision for the effective removal from forest and other open space land, for which it is responsible, rubbish which has been fly-tipped, obsolete tyres and refrigerators and abandoned cars, from its own resources; and if he will make a statement. [94518]

Mr. Raynsford: Under section 59 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, the local authority (or the Environment Agency) has the power to remove fly-tipped waste from private land and to recover the costs of doing so from the perpetrators, where they can be traced. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is responsible for the policy on fly-tipping. There are no plans to require local authorities to remove fly-tipped waste as such a requirement would provide an incentive for unscrupulous operators to fly-tip waste in the knowledge that it would be removed at no cost to them. Local authorities are already required to remove abandoned vehicles. It would therefore not be appropriate to impose additional requirements on the City.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what estimate he has made of the differing regional take ups of working families tax credit before deciding that it would be appropriate for working families tax credit to be used in the education formulae of the local government grant. [94636]

Mr. Raynsford: Ministers are aware of the difficulties caused by differential take-up rates and that, as a new scheme, the working families tax credit might be particularly affected. They considered, however, that the benefit to the education formula of broadening the measurement of social need considerably outweighed any drawbacks.

WALES

Bmibaby (Cardiff)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had regarding the services offered by the airline Bmibaby from Cardiff airport. [90751]

Peter Hain: Services at Cardiff airport frequently arise in my discussions. The growing range of destinations now being offered by Bmibaby represents a substantial improvement in local customer choice, as well as a welcome contribution to the economy of South Wales.

Computer Misuse

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many cases of computer misuse there were in his Department in each of the last five years, broken down by each category of misuse; and how many of those cases resulted in disciplinary action. [93048]

Peter Hain: One, since the establishment of the Wales Office on 1 July 1999. The individual concerned was given a formal warning.

Departmental Running Costs

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what the running costs were of the Department in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* the most recent year for which figures are available. [90753]

Peter Hain: The net running costs of the Wales Office in 2001–02 were £2.4 million. The Department was established in 1999.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many full-time equivalent staff are employed in the Department; and what the figures were for 1997. [90667]

Peter Hain: Since the establishment of the Wales Office on 1 July 1999, it has been staffed entirely by secondees mainly from the National Assembly for Wales. As at 1 January 2003, the number of full-time equivalents seconded to the Wales Office was 42 staff.

Higher Education Funding

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he had with the Secretary of State for Education and Skills on devolving to the National Assembly for Wales powers over tuition fees and maintenance grants over the weekend prior to the launch of the White Paper on Higher Education. [95229]

Peter Hain: I have regular discussions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, including, most recently, the question of further devolution in this area to the National Assembly for Wales.

Industrial Action/Illness

Mr. Roger Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many working days have been lost in his Department owing to *(a)* industrial action and *(b)* illness in each year since 1997–98. [94282]

Peter Hain *[holding answer 30 January 2003]*: My Department was created in July 1999 and has lost no days to industrial action. In respect of illness I refer the hon. Member to the answer my predecessor gave to the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) on 23 May 2002, *Official Report*, column 514W.

Job Sharing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the extent of job sharing in his Department. [90864]

Peter Hain: Job sharing is only one of a number of alternative and flexible working patterns that staff at the Wales Office are welcome to take up. The flexibility of the pattern is decided in consultation with management to suit an individual's need and the needs of their work. At the present time, the Wales Office has eight staff out of 49 who work a flexible pattern; none of these job-share.

Media Briefings

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what briefings he provided to the media in advance of the statement made by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills on higher education, 22 January 2003, *Official Report*, columns 301–19, in respect of reports that the National Assembly for Wales was to be given additional powers over student support in higher education. [93720]

Peter Hain: I gave no such briefings. However, my Department did field media calls on the issue. After the statement to the House by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, I gave on the record interviews and issued a press statement.

Special Advisers

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many special advisers there are in his Department; what their cost was in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [90099]

Peter Hain: I have two special advisers. Special advisers are paid on national salary scales that apply to all Government Departments; the basic scale currently ranges from £34,851 to £45,760.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Bank Accounts

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what identity verification requirements there are for the opening of a basic bank account; and if he will make a statement on the measures being taken to minimise fraud in relation to the payment of benefits into basic bank accounts. [94896]

Malcolm Wicks: When a customer opens a basic bank account of their choice, under the money laundering regulations, they will need to provide proof of who they are and where they live. The bank will tell them which documents they will accept as proof—typical things are a passport, full current driving licence, order book, utility bill and council tax bill.

The move to payment directly into basic bank accounts uses tried and tested technology already chosen by over 42 per cent. of benefit recipients to access their benefit payments via bank accounts.

Benefit Payments

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what safeguards are in place to ensure *(a)* that the automated payment of benefits to bank accounts is to accounts in claimants' own names and *(b)* that such accounts are genuinely opened and operated by the claimant in question; in what circumstances he allows benefits to be paid to an account in the name of a person other than the claimant; and if he will make a statement. [94895]

Malcolm Wicks: Benefits are paid into the account nominated on the claim form by the claimant. The claims and payments regulations allow payment into accounts in the name of the person entitled to benefit, or their spouse (or partner), or a person acting on their behalf, or in the joint names of the person entitled to benefit and their spouse (or partner), or the person entitled to benefit and a person acting on their behalf. These are the options listed on claim forms or other relevant literature.

Correspondence

Mr. Gerald Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when he intends to reply to the letter to him dated 11 December from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Mr. A. Ali. [94696]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 30 January 2003

Empty Homes

Mr Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many empty homes his Department *(a)* had five years ago and *(b)* has now, by region; if he will establish an empty homes strategy within his Department; and if he will set a target for reduction in empty homes. [92921]

Malcolm Wicks: This Department occupies approximately 1,800 buildings. Of those, only 6 contain living accommodation. One of the two flats which form a sub-lettable part of a DWP building in the London region is vacant at present. All such sub-lettable space is actively managed by the department's property advisers to minimise vacancies. We are currently looking at options for the future of the building as a whole.

In view of the numbers involved I do not believe the Department needs either a strategy or a target for reduction. Records that are available indicate that there were no unoccupied homes five years ago.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH

Afghanistan

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent progress has been made in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. [93013]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given her by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State at the Department for International Development, 27 January 2003, *Official Report*, column 574W.

China

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Chinese Government about the treatment of female prisoners in Drapchi prison, Tibet. [93949]

Mr. Rammell: We raised our concerns specifically about the treatment of both nuns and monks in Drapchi prison in the UK/China Human Rights Dialogue in 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2001.

An EU Ambassadors Troika delegation, led by the UK, as President, visited Tibet, including Drapchi prison in 1998.

Egypt

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received concerning a court case challenging the constitutionality of the Hamayouni Decree, governing the construction of Christian places of worship in Egypt, which is due to open in Cairo on 28 January 2003; and whether he will be sending a human rights observer to monitor the trial. [93852]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Our officials at the British Embassy in Cairo have been monitoring the case challenging the constitutionality of the Hamayouni Decree in Egypt. The trial session on 28 January was the first trial hearing since the case was referred from the State Commissioners court. Our officials have learned that the case has been adjourned until 28 February for further examination of the case by the authorities. Our officials in Cairo will continue to monitor the trial.

Embassy Security

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much has been allocated to the increased protection of British embassies and consulates since 11 September 2001; and what general improvements have been made. [93616]

Mr. Rammell: The FCO embarked on a programme of physical security enhancements following the 1998 attacks on US missions in East Africa. After the attacks in the US on 11 September 2001, the FCO accelerated its investment in further securing both staff and missions. Over £25 million has been invested in physical security enhancements for British missions overseas. This work has included the installation of bomb blast windows, reinforcement of perimeter security and a variety of other physical security enhancements at a number of posts.

Gibraltar

Mr. MacDougall: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last met the Chief Minister of Gibraltar; and what issues were discussed. [93557]

Mr. MacShane: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary last met the Chief Minister during his visit to Gibraltar on 3 May 2002. They discussed a wide range of issues.

Visa Centres (India)

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the new visa centres will open in *(a)* Gujarat and *(b)* the Punjab. [93879]

Mr. Rammell: We plan to open a visa application centre in Jalandhar (Punjab) on 3 February. New application centres will also open that day in New Delhi and Chandigarh. The new application centre in Gujarat will open on 24 February in Ahmedabad, as will the centres in Mumbai and Pune. We also plan to open application centres in Chennai, Bangalore and Hyderabad on 10 February and in Kolkata on 17 February.

The establishment of this network of 10 application centres is part of our continuing effort to improve visa services for our customers in India. Many will no longer need to make the often long and difficult journey to make a visa application, but instead can visit one of the conveniently located application centres closer to their home.

India/Pakistan

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent steps he has taken to encourage *(a)* India and *(b)* Pakistan to sign up to (i) the Test Ban Treaty and (ii) the Non Proliferation Treaty. [93426]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The UK supports the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1172, adopted on 6 June 1999, which calls upon both India and Pakistan to cease nuclear testing, to stop their programmes for the development of nuclear weapons and systems for delivery of such weapons, and to enter into dialogue to reduce (and ultimately remove) tensions between them. It also urges both states to accede to both the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty without delay and without conditions.

We regularly press both countries to abide by all the obligations placed upon them by this resolution.

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last made representations to his counterparts in *(a)* India and *(b)* Pakistan on their nuclear weapons programmes; and what the response was. [93899]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The issue of the nuclear weapons programmes of both India and Pakistan has been discussed at many meetings at both ministerial and official level, particularly since the crisis last September.

Iraq

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what the country of manufacture is of the gas canisters discovered by UN inspectors in Iraq on 16 January; and if he will make a statement. [94148]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer of 30 January 2003]*. UNMOVIC have not yet disclosed to us the origin of the goods discovered on 16 January.

Israel

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy to present to the United Nations a proposed resolution to require Israel to destroy its weapons of mass destruction. [93895]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We regularly urge Israel to resolve international concerns about its nuclear status by acceding to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear weapons state and to enter into a full safeguards agreement with the IAEA. We also use our bilateral contacts with them to raise the issue of Israeli accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention.

The UK has consistently supported a number of resolutions at the UN calling for the establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction.

Malta

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he voted in the Council of Ministers to allow the shooting of migratory birds in Malta for five years after the Maltese join the EU. [93580]

Mr. MacShane: As part of the package agreed during the EU accession negotiations, Malta was granted one transition period until the end of 2008 in order to phase out the trapping of seven types of finch and establish a captive breeding programme. Malta is also entitled, like existing member states, to apply a derogation under Article 9 of the Birds Directive which will allow the practice of the taking of quail and turtle dove in spring to continue. The Copenhagen European Council agreed, unanimously, to the global package on enlargement, including for Malta.

North Korea

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on how many occasions since 1990 the UK has raised its concerns in the UN about the North Korean missile development programme. [93425]

Mr. Rammell: The United Kingdom, as a permanent member of the Security Council, has raised the issue in informal and private consultations with other member states at the UN and with the UN Secretary-General on a number of occasions. The number of such representations made is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, the UK, as a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council, has been party to statements made by the President of the Security Council and a resolution in connection to North Korea's nuclear programmes since 1990. These include a statement to the media made by the President of the Security Council following consultations by the Council on 8 April 1993; Resolution 825 adopted by the Security Council on 11 May 1993, and three further statements made by the President of the Security Council on 31 March 1994, 30 May 1994 and 4 November 1994.

Publicity and Advertising

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much *(a)* his Department and *(b)* each agency and non-departmental public body sponsored by his Department spent on (i) publicity and (ii) advertising in each year from 1995–96 to 2002–03 (estimated); and if he will make a statement. [92229]

Mr. Rammell: The separately identifiable expenditure by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on the categories listed by the hon. Member are:

Expenditure by category

£

	Publicity	*Advertising*
1995–96	16,768,873	0
1996–97	14,104,569	0
1997–98	14,627,831	54,038
1998–99	11,919,392	1,029,850
1999–2000	13,545,306	54,498
2000–01	13,233,690	51,950
2001–02	10,682,233	49,581
2002–03[1]	10,061,313	14,926

[1] Estimated outturn.

The figures provided represent the expenditure of the FCO and not of Wilton Park, our only agency, or our 10 NDPBs; these details are not held centrally and cannot therefore be compiled without incurring disproportionate cost.

The figures in the table include expenditure on consular publicity but exclude expenditure on advertising for recruitment. The advertising figure for 1998–99 includes £1 million spent on a consular advertising campaign in the run-up to the 1998 World Cup held in France. In addition to the expenditure identified, there was minor additional expenditure in the United Kingdom and overseas during the years specified. This cannot be ascertained without incurring disproportionate cost. The Government are committed to using only cost effective channels to deliver the publicity necessary to support policy implementation. Paid advertising is only resorted to after careful consideration of the cost-benefits.

Saudi Arabia (British Detainees)

Dr. Pugh: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what advice is being given to British subjects travelling to Saudi Arabia about terrorist threats to their safety; and what precautions they are being advised to take following the recent bombing. [93704]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Foreign Office's travel advice for Saudi Arabia warns British nationals that "Saudi Arabia is one of a number of countries where there is an increased threat to visible British institutions and organisations from global terrorism." It explains that "given the heightened tension in the Middle East region and the increased threat from global terrorism, UK nationals in Saudi Arabia should be vigilant, particularly in public places frequented by foreigners such as hotels, restaurants and shopping malls. Visitors and residents should follow political developments in the region; and observe the British Embassy's advice on personal and vehicle security." The travel advice also alerts British nationals to the recent series of bombings in Riyadh and Al Khobar where British nationals were among the victims.

Our travel advice is kept constantly under review. It is available on the Foreign Office website www.fco.gov.uk and the website for the British Embassy, Riyadh www.ukm.org.sa. The British Embassy in Riyadh also provides regular advice to British residents in Saudi Arabia through its wardens' network.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the rate of staff *(a)* absenteeism and *(b)* sickness was in his Department and each of its agencies and non-departmental public bodies in each year from 1990–91 to 2002–03; what the target set is for his Department; and if he will make a statement. [93503]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office sickness absence figures are listed in the table. Absentee rates and information on FCO non-departmental public bodies absences are not stored centrally so it is not possible to provide this information without incurring disproportionate costs. However all the FCO's 10 NDPBs are small, with virtually no full-time staff.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has set a Service Delivery Agreement to reduce sickness absence to 5.6 days by the end of 2003.

Year	*Average number of days per officer*
1997	8.9
1998	8.0
1999	N/a
2000	6.3
2001	6.6
2002	5.7

1. Figures for 1997 to 1998 have been uplifted to account for different recording practices in different parts of the Department and its overseas posts.
2. Figures for 1999 could be provided only at disproportionate costs, the method of recording changed part way through 1999.
3. FCO figures are recorded as total days (not working days).
4. It is not possible to provide figures prior to 1997 without incurring disproportionate costs.

United Nations (Global Terrorism)

Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library a copy of *(a)* the text of the Security Council Resolution and *(b)* a transcript of the Security Council Debate, on the International Community's response to Global Terrorism, held at United Nations Headquarters on 23 January. [94038]

Mr. Rammell: I have placed in the Library a copy of Security Council Resolution 1456 (2003) and the transcript of the Security Council Debate, on the International Community's response to Global Terrorism, which actually took place at United Nations Headquarters on 20 January.

TREASURY

Capital Modernisation Fund

Ann McKechin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 21 January, Official Report, column 246W, what his Department's priorities were for funding under the Capital Modernisation Fund in 2001; and which of those priorities the application from Citizens Advice Scotland failed to meet. [95160]

Mr. Boateng: The criteria for the Capital Modernisation Fund include innovation, the improvements to the efficiency and effectiveness of the service delivered to the end-user, and the need for additional funds to deliver the service above normal departmental allocations. However, as the Fund is limited and is generally considerably oversubscribed, it is necessary to judge bids not just on their own merits, but on their relative priority against other bids.

Ann McKechin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 21 January, Official Report, column 246W, how many applications from Scotland were made to the Capital Modernisation Fund in 2001; and how many of those applications were successful in obtaining funds from his Department. [95161]

Mr. Boateng: As explained in my Answer of 21 January, the devolved administrations automatically receive a share of allocations made from the Capital Modernisation Fund for devolved matters, calculated according to the Barnett formula. There is no need for the Scottish Executive to submit bids to receive this funding.

Customs and Excise

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will place in the Library the information on release of posts from support for redeployment which was the basis of the report in the Customs and Excise Spring 2002 report, column 5427, on PSA 2000 target 7; and if he will make a statement. [90981]

(2) if he will place in the Library the formula for aggregating the underlying data into the performance indicator of the Customs and Excise Spring 2002 report; and if he will make a statement. [90982]

John Healey: The Customs target to release posts from support to activities which directly contribute to PSA/SDA outcomes covers the three years of the SR2000 period. It therefore applies until 31 March 2004. The Spring 2002 Report was based on support activity remaining at around 17 per cent. of total activity, even though additional support posts had been added to baseline to begin implementation of the Department's e-Business programme. An update on the target was provided in the Department's "Annual Report and Accounts" for 2001–02 (Cm5671). I am placing the formula for aggregating underlying output and input data in the Library.

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of total public spending on HM Customs and Excise in each year from 1990–91 to 2004–05 (planned) in real terms using 2000–01 prices; and if he will make a statement. [91725]

John Healey: Information on past total public expenditure on HM Customs & Excise is in the Department's Annual Reports (specifically—in the Financial Statements until 1998–99, and from 1999–00 in the Departmental Resource Accounts) covering each year 1990–91 to 2001–02. Copies are available in the Library. Planned out-turn for 2002–03 and 2003–04 was published in June 2002 in the Department's Spring Report. High level data for the period through to 2005–06 was published in the 2002 Spending Review White Paper. Prices can be adjusted to 2000–01 levels by applying the GDP deflator, which can be found on the Treasury's website under Economic Data and Tools. More up to date and detailed information on the Department's spending plans will appear in the Departmental Spring Report 2003.

Mr. Nick Hawkins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the cost to the public purse will be, including compensation payments, of the collapsed prosecutions by Customs and Excise referred to in the Economic Secretary's statement of 23rd January, including cases to be withdrawn in the immediate future. [93960]

John Healey *[holding answer 28 January 2003]:* Following the decision of the prosecution to offer no evidence in the London City Bond abuse of process hearing in November last year, the Commissioners of Customs & Excise and the Prosecution Group of Customs' Solicitors Office (who are now accountable to the Attorney General) commenced a review of the safety of the convictions in all LCB- connected cases. The decision of the prosecution not to oppose the appeal in the case of R v Grant and others (known as the 'Stockade' case) in the Court of Appeal was the outcome of part of that review.

As I explained to the House in my Statement of 23 January, twenty further cases are being reviewed, and there have been eight in which no evidence was offered against defendants, or in which convictions have been overturned by the Court of Appeal. The cost of instructing Prosecuting Counsel in these eight cases was 4.3m, out of the total prosecution legal costs in all the LCB cases of £7.4million.

Estimates are not available for other costs, such as legal aid costs for defendants. Claims for compensation under the statutory miscarriage of justice scheme are for the Home Office, and it is not known whether any such claims will be made, or whether they will be successful. Claims for common law damages against Customs will be resisted, and are not expected to be successful.

Financial Services

Mr. Steve Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what basis, and on what date, the value of the assets of a financial institution are valued for purposes of calculating the level of compensation available under the Financial Services Compensation Scheme; and if he will make a statement on the way in which the scheme would apply to policy holders of a life assurance and pensions provider in the event of the company becoming insolvent. [93357]

Ruth Kelly *[holding answer 27 January 2003]:* The valuation of assets of a financial institution does not affect the level of compensation available under the Financial Services Compensation Scheme (FSCS). The FSCS can pay compensation when an authorised financial institution is unable, or likely to be unable, to meet the claims against it and the valuation of the assets of the institution may be a relevant factor in the FSCS's decision.

The basis on which claims against a financial institution are valued are set out in the Financial Services Compensation Scheme's Rules.

How the Scheme would apply to policyholders of an insolvent life insurer is also covered in the Scheme's Rules.

The Rules are written by the Financial Services Authority (the FSA), and form part of the FSA Handbook under 'Redress, Compensation'. The Rules are readily available, and can be viewed by accessing the FSA website, *www.fsa.gov.uk.*

Inland Revenue

Mr. Laws: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many Inland Revenue computers have been *(a)* lost and *(b)* stolen in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [91718]

Dawn Primarolo: The following totals of PCs and Laptops that have either been lost or stolen come from the Inland Revenue's Security Incident Reporting database.

	Laptop		*PCs*		
	Lost	*Stolen*	*Lost*	*Stolen*	*Total*
1998	1	6	0	26	33
1999	0	29	0	51	80
2000	3	43	0	56	102
2001	3	56	0	201	260
2002	2	32	0	52	86
Total	9	166	0	386	561

The Inland Revenue operates a proactive security risk management system. All office managers are required to carry out regular security reviews of their buildings and report annually through line management to the Chairman of the Board. The Department has it's own team security advisors to assist managers and audit the process.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what plans he has to hold an overall review of the Private Finance Initiative process; [92770]

(2) what reforms *(a)* he has made and *(b)* he intends to make to the procurement process of the of the Private Finance Initiative [92773]

Mr. Boateng: The Government keeps all aspects of procurement policy under review in order to ensure that high quality public services are delivered on the basis of value for money.

Starting with the abolition of compulsory testing and the development of Treasury Taskforce guidance on PFI, the Government has introduced a number of reforms to spread best practice, including revised guidance on standardised contracts; the launch of a new Green Book on project appraisal; the launch of a Code of Conduct on the refinancing of early PFI projects; and the piloting of batched procurement.

Public Services Productivity

Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to his answer of 22 January, Official Report, column 420W, on Public Services Productivity, if he will list the members of the Public Services Productivity Panel that attended each meeting since January 2000; and if he will make a statement. [94375]

Mr. Boateng: The Public Services Productivity Panel is a small group of senior business people and public sector managers that meets occasionally to assist with the development of policy. The Panel have met nine times since January 2000. All of these meetings were well attended.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Assaults on NHS Staff

Tim Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions took place last year against people who assaulted NHS staff; and what range of penalties was imposed. [92618]

Hilary Benn: As the hon. Member will be aware, a cross-Government NHS zero tolerance zone campaign was launched in October 1999 to tackle violence against staff working in the NHS. The campaign aims to get the message to both NHS staff and members of the public that violence against NHS staff is unacceptable and the Government are determined to stamp it out.

The specific information requested is not collected centrally by the Home Office.

Departmental Running Costs

Mr. Andrew Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the running costs of *(a)* the Department and *(b)* each of its sponsored agencies were in (i) 1997 and (ii) the most recent year for which figures are available. [90710]

Mr. Blunkett: The Home Office running costs are set out in the Departmental Annual report and placed in the Library.

Departmental Secondments

Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many staff from his Department are on secondment elsewhere; and where they are seconded. [93300]

Mr. Blunkett: Secondments are part of the Interchange initiative, which promotes the exchange of people and good practice between the civil service and other organisations. All sectors of the economy are involved: voluntary, education, health, public and private. Interchange provides opportunities for civil servants to learn new skills, widen their experience and develop ideas. It also brings in skills and experiences from other sectors.

A total of 539 members of staff are seconded outside the Home Office, including 429 to Centrex (formerly National Police Training) which used to be part of the Home Office.

Details of organisations are set out in the following table.

Number of staff	*Name of organisation*	*Type of organisation*
UK		
1	Lincolnshire health authority	NHS
1	Cambridgeshire health authority	NHS
1	County Durham and Darlington health authority	NHS
1	Hull	University
1	Oxford	University
1	Taunton School	Education
1	Kent county council	Local government
1	National Association for the Care and Rehabilitation of Offenders	Voluntary sector
1	Bromley-by-Bow	Voluntary sector
1	Parent Line	Voluntary sector
1	Westminster Volunteer Bureau	Voluntary sector
1	Vineyard Charity	Voluntary sector
1	People's Dispensary for Sick Animals	Voluntary sector
1	Oasis Trust	Voluntary sector
1	Barnet Citizen Advice Bureau	Voluntary sector
1	Runningmead Trust	Voluntary sector
1	L'Arche Lambeth	Voluntary sector
1	Southwark Mind	Voluntary sector
2	Hospice in the Weald	Voluntary sector
1	Princes Trust	Voluntary sector
1	CLINKS	Voluntary sector
3	Butler Trust	Voluntary sector
2	Jill Dando Institute	Voluntary sector
1	Commission for Race Equality	Public sector
1	Audit Commission	Public sector
1	Postal Services Commission	Public sector
1	Thames Valley Partnership	Public sector
2	Security Services	Public sector
1	Cartwright Pickard Architects	Private sector
1	Banks Hoggins O'Shea FCB	Private sector
1	KPMG	Private sector
1	COCA COLA	Private sector
1	Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations	Private sector
16	PITO	NDPB
10	Youth Justice Board	NDPB
429	Centrex	NDPB
29	NCIS	NDPB
2	Broadcasting Standards Commission	NDPB
Overseas		
1	Department of Justice, Australia	Public sector
6	European Commission	Public sector
2	ENA Business School Strasbourg	Education
1	Australian Institute of Criminology	University
1	Lausanne University	University
1	British Embassy Washington	Public sector
1	Bulgarian Government	Public sector
1	Department of the Solicitor General Canada	Public sector
1	Citizen and Immigration Canada	Public sector

Drug/Alcohol Addiction

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the change in real terms in spending on drug and alcohol addiction was over the three years to 2005–06. [94012]

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Allowing for inflation, the Government's annual planned expenditure on proactively tackling drugs is:

2003–04—£1,216 million: a 19 per cent. increase on the current year;

2004–05—£1,281 million: a 25 per cent. increase on the current year; and

2005–06—£1,383 million: a 35 per cent. increase on the current year.

The majority of the funding for alcohol treatment is spent via the general budgets of primary care trusts and local social service departments, which is consistent with provision being determined following a local consideration of need. This method of funding means that it is not possible to give details of spending on alcohol treatment, but latest estimates indicate that around £95 million is spent each year on treatment in England, and that most of this funding is provided by the Government.

Prison Budgets

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the relationship between the budget of individual prisons and the number of educational and vocational qualifications obtained by their inmates. [94490]

Hilary Benn: From 2001, the core budget for prison education has been ring-fenced and is administered jointly by the Home Office and the Department for Education and Skills, through the Prisoners' Learning and Skills Unit. At the time of ring-fencing, education budgets were historically based, but from 2002–03, part of the education budget has been linked to achievement of basic skills qualifications. We will develop further the links between funding and educational and vocational qualifications as we increase funding for prison education to £125 million by 2005–06. The recent review of prison education funding and procurement also identified opportunities for introducing other relevant achievement measures and we are considering these.

Prison Governors

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those prison establishments in which there have been changes at governor level, including changes involving those acting as governor for one month or more, in the last five years; when each such change took place; and who *(a)* the governor leaving and *(b)* the replacement was in each case. [91370]

Hilary Benn: The information requested has been placed in the Library.

Prison Officers/Police Officers

Dr. Murrison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the *(a)* prevalence and *(b)* causes of occupational stress (i) among prison officers and (ii) in the police. [93666]

Hilary Benn: The Prison Service carried out an audit into the causes and extent of stress among prison officers and other staff in 2001–02. The audits were conducted at a number of representative prisons and at headquarters. The results suggest that stress is common among prison staff and is due to a wide range of causes. As a result of this work, the Prison Service is developing a policy for preventing stress together with a range of initiatives aimed at supporting those who may be suffering from stress.

Figures for police sickness absence showed an average loss of 11.5 working days per officer in 2001–02 and an average of 12 working days per support staff member. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary has not previously recorded exact figures on what proportion of that absence relates to stress, although stress and musculo-skeletal disorders are unofficially recognised as the two main contributors.

From April 2003, all forces will have begun measuring sickness absence according to new data collection arrangements. This was released in June last year by the Police Numbers Task Force and will ensure that sickness absence is broken down into categories, including stress-related illness. The new data collection arrangements will enable forces to target the types of sickness absence that have the most effect on them.

There has been much discussion by occupational health professionals both inside and outside the Police Service regarding the causes of stress. As yet there is no one prevailing view on the subject. Some forces have already conducted internal stress audits/and begun to target the causes of stress at local level.

Probation Service

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent representations he has received concerning *(a)* workloads and *(b)* resources in the Probation Service. [94486]

Hilary Benn: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, through the National Probation Directorate, has received representations as follows:

(a) In respect of workloads, representations were made by the Trade Unions and staff representative bodies which led in January 2001 to a Joint Agreement on Priorities and Employee Care between the Home Office, probation employers, Trade Unions and staff representative bodies. This agreement identified the areas for concern raised by all signatories and a joint framework for improvement. The National Probation Directorate is leading the project to design and implement a Workload Measurement Tool, and has provided a Workload Prioritisation Framework.

The National Association of Probation Officers is undertaking a campaign in respect of workloads which has led to a formal dispute. Local agreements to settle this dispute have now been reached in 34 of the 42 areas of the National Probation Service for England and Wales, and negotiations continue in the remaining eight areas.

(b) In respect of resources, 16 Probation Boards have expressed views about their budget for 2003–04.

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the *(a)* pay and *(b)* career development rewards available to probation officers for personal success in reducing re-offending by offenders assigned to them; and what plans he has to change them. [94492]

Hilary Benn: Probation officers are paid on a range in accordance with a nationally negotiated salary spine as part of the national agreement on pay and conditions of service.

(a) The current salary spine for probation officers is from a minimum of £19,443 to a maximum of £26,226.

(b) Probation officers are eligible for merit increases when they reach the maximum of the pay spine with a current maximum of £28,686.

The National Probation Directorate, in conjunction with the Probation Boards Association and the trade unions representing staff in the National Probation Service (NPS), is currently reviewing the structure of pay and reward for staff in NPS, including probation officers. The objective of this re-evaluation of the current system is to see that the NPS has an appropriate pay and reward strategy that properly rewards staff for high performance and ensures the recruitment and retention of a highly skilled and motivated work force.

Restriction and Restraining Orders

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many travel restriction orders have been made by the courts under the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001; [91016]

(2) how many restraining orders for sexual offenders have been made by the courts pursuant to the provisions of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000. [91017]

Hilary Benn: Restraining orders for sexual offenders were introduced on 1 June 2001, but none was reported to the Home Office Court Proceedings Database as having been made in the period to 31December 2001.

The orders were introduced alongside a wide range of other measures. We expect the number of orders to increase as the courts become more familiar with the orders and how they can be applied.

Travel restriction orders were brought into force on 1 April 2002, and statistics for 2002 are not yet available.

Information for 2002 is due for publication in the late autumn of 2003.

Service Delivery Agreement

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when his Department's service delivery agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published. [94120]

Mr. Blunkett: The Home Department's service delivery agreement for 2003 to 2006 will be published in the next few days.

Special Branch

Mr. Nigel Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to create a national special branch co-ordination unit; [94130]

(2) what plans he has to create a single UK special branch; and if he will make a statement. [94129]

Mr. Blunkett: We welcome plans being considered by the police service to strengthen special branch along regional lines. Even closer co-operation between neighbouring special branches will build on and improve effective working relationships.

The form that such re-organisation might take-including whether there is a need for a national co-ordinator of special branch-is currently the subject of discussions within the police service, and between my Department and the police service.

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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 398**

SESSION 2002–03

20th January—31st January 2003

Printed indexes to Hansard

The volume index is one of three printed indexes to Commons Hansard produced from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Indexing Service (POLIS). It contains references to material in the bound volumes of Hansard. The other indexes produced are:

- The fortnightly index to Hansard. This covers the same date range as the volume index but references are to the column numbering in the daily parts and weekly edition of Hansard.
- The sessional index to Hansard. This contains references to material in the bound volumes for a whole session.

Indexes on the Parliamentary website

Fortnightly, volume and sessional indexes covering material from the beginning of the 1999/2000 session will also appear on the Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk with links to the full text of Hansard.

SCOPE

The indexes include entries covering:

- The content of all material recorded in Hansard, including debates, procedural motions and questions.
- The names of all Members contributing to the Parliamentary business recorded in Hansard.
- The names of some types of Parliamentary business whenever they occur in Hansard. These are 'Ministerial statements', 'Business statements', 'Opposition days' and 'Estimates days'.

ARRANGEMENT

- All headings are in one word-by-word alphabetical sequence, with Members' contribution entries distinguished from other entries by italics.
- Where a Member contributes to Parliamentary business and is the subject of Parliamentary business there are separate contribution and subject entries, the subject entry coming first.
- Entries beginning 'Mac' and 'Mc' are sorted in one sequence as 'Mac'.
- 'St', when abbreviated for Saint, is filed as 'Saint'.
- Numbers are filed as if spelt out, e.g. '10 Downing Street' as if 'Ten Downing Street'.

HEADINGS

Choice of headings

- *Specificity*—Entries summarise the overall content of a debate or question as specifically as the various POLIS thesauruses allow. For example, Education, Higher education, Universities or the name of a particular university is used depending on the breadth of the item.
- *Name headings*—Specific entries are included for the names of people, places, institutions, organisations, committees, programmes, initiatives, publications and legislation when these constitute the overall subject of an item.
- *Organisations and subjects*—Organisation entries are preferred for material about the general performance, administration and staffing of an organisation (for example, United Kingdom Passports Agency, Standards). Subject entries are preferred for what organisations do as part of their duties (for example, Passports, Fees and charges).

Geographical coverage

- *Subject headings*—Subject headings are assumed to refer to the whole of England, Great Britain or the United Kingdom unless otherwise stated.
- *Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales*—Material relating to the whole of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales is indexed under these headings.
- *Places within the UK*—Material about specific towns, areas and institutions is entered under the name of the specific town, area or institution.
- *Foreign countries*—Most material relating to foreign countries is collected under the name of that country. Some additional material may be found under the names of—groups of countries, areas within countries, geographical features, place names associated with particular issues, politicians and heads of state, international bodies, and institutions and companies operating in those countries.
- *EC/EU material*—General material about the European Communities and European institutions as bodies is entered under 'European Communities' and 'EC institutions'. Organisational material about specific communities and institutions is entered under the name of the body, for example 'European Coal and Steel Community' or 'European Parliament'. Material about what the Communities and institutions are doing or propose to do is entered under various subject headings beginning 'EC' such as 'EC environmental policy'.

Parliamentary material and business

- *Material about Parliament*—This is indexed under 'Parliament', the names of the two Houses, the 'Palace of Westminster' and parts of the Parliamentary estate (such as 'Portcullis House').
- *Committees*—Material about committees is indexed under 'Committees', types of committee (such as 'Select committees') and the names of individual committees (such as 'Home Affairs Select Committee').
- *Parliamentary proceedings/procedures*—Material discussing these is indexed under the specific type of proceeding (such as 'Parliamentary questions' or 'Oral questions'), procedure (such as 'Calling of Members') or issue (such as 'Unparliamentary expressions').
- *Legislation*—Entries for Parliamentary proceedings on bills and statutory instruments are entered under their titles. Where the lead word of the bill or statutory instrument does not provide a full or clear indication of the subject there are additional subject entries when the bill or instrument is debated. For example, debates on the 'Child Support Pensions and Social Security Bill' have entries under 'Pensions' and 'Social security benefits' as well as under the title of the Bill.
- *Members' names*—These are given in the form by which the Member prefers to be known.
- *Speaker and Chair*—Contributions by the Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker and deputies'. Contributions from the chair during Committees of the Whole House are brought together under 'Chairman of Committee of the Whole House'. Significant rulings and statements (as opposed to routine comments) are indicated by the sub-heading 'Rulings and statements' in both cases.

Guidance on headings

- *Cross references*—'See' references indicate all the material has been entered under another heading. 'See also' references indicate that additional information may be found under another heading.
- *Concept thesaurus*—A copy of the subject thesaurus to POLIS, listing the concept entries used in the index, is available on the Parliamentary website. A hard copy is available from the Head of the POLIS Unit, House of Commons Library, 1 Derby Gate, London, SW1A 2DG (020 7219 6456).

REFERENCES

- References in the indexes are to columns rather than pages.
- References to debates, but not questions, are accompanied by the date of the item.
- There are separate sequences in Hansard for the material taken on the floor of the House, Westminster Hall sittings and written questions:
    - References consisting of a number by itself indicate material taken on the floor of the House.
    - References ending in 'wh' indicate Westminster Hall sittings.
    - References ending in 'ws' indicate written statements.
    - References ending in 'w' indicate written questions.
- References under all headings except the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in one numerical sequence irrespective of whether the material is taken on the floor of the House, is discussed at a Westminster Hall sitting, is a written statement or is a written question.
- References under the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in numerical sequence under the following headings:
    - *Chamber Debates* (which includes interventions and points of order as well as significant contributions to debates);
    - *Debates Westminster Hall Debates* (covering all debates held as part of the Westminster Hall sittings); and
    - *Written Statements* (consisting of ministerial statements issued in writing); and
    - *Questions* (which includes all written, oral and private notice questions).

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in connection with the progress of bills:

- 1R=First reading
- 2R=Second reading
- Com=Committee stage
- Rep=Report stage
- 3R=Third reading
- res=resolution
- amendt(s)=amendment(s)
- *=matter taken formally without debate or division
- (HL)=Bill starting in House of Lords
- (SP)=Bill in Scottish Parliament.

Parliamentary background

- The Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk contains a range of information about Parliament and the full text of some Parliamentary papers and proceedings including Hansard.
- Information on current Parliamentary business is provided in the House of Commons Information Office *Weekly Information Bulletin*, available on the website and from The Stationery Office (020 7873 8499).
- Further information on Parliamentary proceedings and procedures is available from the House of Commons Information Office (020 7219 4272).

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